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**THE DRAMA OF J. M. SYNGE A CHALLENGE TO THE
IDEOLOGY AND MYTHS OF IRISHNESS**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph. D. at the
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to the memory of my Father
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source of hope

... it needs time to bring about psychic changes that have any prospect of enduring. Insight that dawns slowly seems to me to have more lasting effects than a fitful idealism, which is unlikely to hold out for long.

Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vi
Abbreviations	vii
Summary	viii
Chapter One -Introduction	1
Criticism since 1960	3
The Identity of Ireland and the Question of Unity	6
Medieval Scholar and Modern Writer	16
Ideological and Aesthetic Difference, Political Transgression	21
Chapter Two -From The Kingdom of God Into The Kingdom of Ireland	30
Severance from family tradition	34
"When the Moon Has Set"	48
Nationalism in the Dublin of the 1890s	54
"A Landlord's Garden in Wicklow"	59
The 1890s and The Literary Revival	65
Political Stalemate	66
The Origins of The Abbey	68
Subsidized Theatre	75
Chapter Three -Maternity and Necessity in <u>The Shadow of the Glen</u> and in <u>Riders to the Sea</u>	82
<u>The Shadow of the Glen</u>	88
Ideological Challenges of <u>The Shadow of the Glen</u>	101
<u>Riders to the Sea</u>	112
The Nature of Maurya's Story	119
Cosmologies	122
Survival Strategies	130
Chapter Four -The Fool as Outcast <u>The Well of the Saints</u> and <u>The Tinker's Wedding</u>	133
<u>The Well of the Saints</u>	137
"The Women of Sligo"	137

La Moralité de L'Avoué et le Boiteux	140
Challenge of <u>The Hall of the Saints</u>	146
The Fool as Outcast	150
<u>The Tinker's Wedding</u>	155
Sources of the Play and its Changing Fortunes	156
"Nomad and Civilized Tribes"	159
The Outsider as Observer	163
The Voice of "The Pride of Women"	177
Chapter Five - <u>The Playboy of the Western World</u> Or the Pose and Purpose of the Theatre	192
Synges Aesthetics	194
The Comic Tradition and the <u>Playboy</u>	201
Synges and the Controversary	204
The Drafts and the previous Story of Christy	207
Ideological Challenges of the violent Scenes	222
Final Marriage Pairing	227
Chapter Six -Representation of Women in Synges's plays compared with Tennyson, Ibsen and Strindberg	232
The Anguish of the Obscure	233
Liberation of the Male Bourgeois Artist	238
Synges and Mythical Thought	245
The Modern Heroines in Synges's Plays	249
Chapter Seven - <u>Deirdre of the Sorrows</u> : From Mythical Legend to Tragic Choice	254
Sources or Influences	258
Rewriting the Past or Reviewing the Present	261
Fate of the Sons of Usnach	265
AE's Reverie of Deirdre	269
Yeats' Deirdre	272
<u>Deirdre of the Sorrows</u>	277
Synges Conception of Historical Plays	277
Creation of Character	280
Synges Manipulation of the Legend	291
Old Women and Madmen: Grotesque Wisdom	294
Deirdre's Choice	300
To Rave and Rend before the Grave	308
Deconstructing the Myth	318
Chapter Eight -Conclusion	321
Bibliography	334

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SUMMARY

Opinions about Synge's work vary from redundant noise to vanguardist art, or the embodiment of the spirit of the Nation. The literary mask created by Yeats and the disparaging caricature his opponents publicised, have barred access to the unbiased study of his work documents. Synge's plays changed the course of the emerging National Theatre. Yeats's plays were attacked for not serving well enough the nationalist cause, but Synge's were seen by nationalists as working completely on the other side of the fence. This argument and the postical fallacy of Synge's political inactivity are here reappraised. For the nationalists both his witting silence and his social and family background caused aggravation which found opportunity to be voiced at each production of his plays. What still disturbs in the plays is the interaction between individuals and social groups. The exchanges between characters, the progress or stasis of individual characters through the play, the continual change of perspective forced on the audience, these are the features that still strike a controversial note today.

Synge is here seen as a "colonizer who refuses" as he frees himself from family strict rules. The first two chapters analyse the historical and personal evolution towards a native Irish Theatre in English. The following chapters study the process by which each play diverts the expectations it arouses in the audience, following the genesis of each play through its source material when possible, to see how some controversial images and dialogues were arrived at, where they acquired their polemic weight. This part of the study focuses on the writing methods of Synge, and the "reading formation" of the public. The grotesque style of the plays and prose is found to be similar in tone to the Rabelaisian grotesque: both share the hope of regeneration in life's forces and nature, as opposed to a strict Christianity. Synge's use of grotesque shattered aesthetic and philosophical expectations in his intellectual audience, causing the anger among the nationalists and the literary coterie. The particular depiction of women's roles in his plays are compared with Victorian and modern patterns of female behaviour.

In the plays Nature is seen not as the bucolic "locus" for philosophical self-contemplation, but as nurturer and threat for its original dwellers. The knowledge of and closeness to the forces of Nature elicit respect for outsiders as possessing a valuable culture, either in isolation or organised in marginal societies. The outcasts in Irish society are given an articulate voice in Synge's plays: beggars, vagrants, tinkers, the blind and women. In all plays strong female characters assert themselves in unorthodox ways, defying custom and legend. The use of legend in his last play shows Synge as heralding the end of a mythologising era, presenting legendary events issuing not from fate but personal heroic decision, that of a woman who chooses her life and death, following her own values.

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used for the more frequently cited works. After the first complete mention, Synge's plays will be referred in shortened form. The identification of passages will follow the quotation, in brackets, with the volume in Roman numerals and page number in Arabic, separated by a comma.

C W I J. M. Synge: Collected Works, I (Poems), edited
by Robin Skelton, London, Oxford University Press, 1962.

C W II J. M. Synge: Collected Works, II (Prose), edited
by Alan Price, London, Oxford University Press, 1966.

C W III J. M. Synge: Collected Works, III (Plays, book
I), edited by Ann Saddlemyer, Oxford University Press, 1968.

C W IV J. M. Synge: Collected Works, IV (Plays, book
II), edited by Ann Saddlemyer, Oxford University Press, 1968.

Shadow The Shadow of the Glen

Riders Riders to the sea

Well The Well of the Saints

Wedding The Tinker's Wedding

Playboy The Playboy of the Western World

Deirdre Deirdre of the Sorrows

Letters The Collected Letters

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Every age has its own norms of official speech and propriety. . . . All peoples . . . have enormous spheres of unpublished speech, nonexistent from the point of view of literary, written language.¹

The present study of John Millington Synge's plays approaches the contribution of the Irish dramatist to a National drama, searching for the deeper causes of the resentment it produced among Dublin audiences.

One of the first Abbey authors to be translated, Synge's work remains easily inscribed in the narrow parameters of Irish peasant drama or provincial literature in the European Drama of the twentieth century. None of these categories are wrong, it is their usefulness that needs questioning. Synge's works have encouraged comparative studies with authors as Lorca and Thoreau and has been performed and studied by scholars all over the world.²

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, translated by Hélène Iswolsky, M.I.T. Press, London, 1968, p. 421.

² Work like Serafino Riva's La Tradizione Celtica e la Moderna Letteratura Irlandese and Katherine Worth's The Irish Drama of Europe study Synge's drama in the context of the Irish contribution to European Drama. In Germany, Canada, France, Spain and Portugal the

To a reader who has no Irish and who uses English as a foreign language much of the heated linguistic controversy in which Synge's work became involved remains an area of documentary value only. Similarly many of the controversial plot situations have ceased to be shocking almost a century after their first production. Nevertheless a reading of these plays still surprises a few well-guarded prejudices in the modern reader. If dated, they cannot be passed as innocuous. Even after the political and social conditions have changed since they were written, Synge's plays still unsettle. Looking for the sources of this perennial challenge one should look preferentially, as will be done in this study, to the audience's reactions to them. It is my contention that the stridency and violence of the reaction to the plays were the effect of a much stronger offence/challenge than was ever admitted. The critics's reaction was prompted by a challenge, which they could not fully grasp at that time, but cried foul at another one instead which was easier to isolate. The uneasiness they felt was caused by a disturbance of much larger values than merely decorum and piety. What is to be explored in this work is how exactly the plays challenge the ideological structure of Irish society at the beginning of the century.

Different generations of critics have looked into the dramatic work of Synge finding in it links to an older tradition, a search for Christian and Christological correlatives that would

Lorca see Jean Smoot, A Comparison of Plays by John Millington Synge and Federico Garcia Lorca: The Poets and Time. Madrid, *Studia Humanitatis*, 1978, and with Thoreau, William Daniels, 'Thoreau and Synge: The Cape and the Island', Esire 1983 Winter 18 (4): 51-71.

somehow preclude the attacks of decadence and paganism. Some of this criticism was an obvious rehabilitation exercise, trying to conciliate the mentors of the eventually successful struggle for an Irish independent country with a voice it so stridently denounced as alien. Other areas of such scholarship have provided a considerable amount of new insights into the work of Synge which have reassessed the importance of powerful testimonies and opinions from Yeats and other less sympathetic contemporaries.

CRITICISM SINCE 1960

The critic's task is not to range works upon an evaluative scale but to achieve scientific knowledge of the conditions of their historical possibility. Whether the work in question is to be approved or censured is irrelevant to that end; evaluation is thus evacuated from the realms of literary science.³

The last thirty years of Synge studies have brought up major new issues in the reading of his work. Two editorial efforts stand as immediate practical causes of these developments: the edition from 1962 till 1968 of J.M.Synge: Collected Works by Robin Skelton and Ann Saddlemyer, and *The History of the Abbey Theatre* by Hogan and Kilroy. The wealth of erudition and minute comparative notation in the edition of the plays by Prof. Saddlemyer facilitated and reduced the need to consult the manuscripts. The painstaking collection and edition of contemporary material closely following the development of the Abbey Theatre Company from its origins, makes the work of Hogan

³ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*. London, Verso, 1976, (1978), p. 103.

and Kilroy an invaluable source of material for a more detached and impartial appreciation of the tumultuous existence of this company in its early days.

The more recent publication of the correspondence of J M Synge, also edited by Professor Saddlemyer, opens a new window into the private individual, allowing a more intimate view of the quiet man at the corner of the Abbey Theatre stage.

The corpus of Synge's work has been enlarged and enriched by the addition of material previously only partially available. The Greene and Stephens biography, revised in 1989 is one of the most accurate studies in search of Synge the man, avoiding romanticising and honestly acknowledging the absence of information in some areas of Synge's private life and opinions. Because of his personality and various misadventures affecting some of his personal manuscripts, mainly his letters, these areas will always remain obscure.⁴ The change, however, has not only been concerned with the object of study but also with the methodological approach to the literary texts, and to the dramatic texts in particular.

The re-thinking of literary criticism by the structuralist school has helped shed light on the way meaning is constructed within and across language in dramatic and theatrical texts. Deconstructivism and feminist studies have helped breaking down hegemonic critical relationships to identify the author and critic as dynamic parts of the ideological apparatus. In this

⁴ See David N Greens, and Edward M Stephens, *J.M. Synge, 1871-1905*. Revised Edition, New York and London, New York University Press, 198, pp. 58-61 for the explanation of the disappearance of Synge's letters to Charrie.

fashion the approach to a work of art is made to include the ideological viewpoint implicit in the critic' judgement, as an important feature of the subject under review.

New insight into the politics of literary production, and the aftermath of the post-colonial crisis of identity has brought a re-defined subject to the literary forum, a subject more realistically framed to the proportions of late twentieth century consciousness. The role of the critic is no longer the same, the political equation of power has changed in Ireland (though not the overall balance) since the time of Synge.

One might say that since the political, social and cultural circumstances, within which Synge's plays became a source of heated debate have been superseded, those plays would have easily become staid, dated pieces. However, his plays still disturb in a way difficult to characterise. This alone justifies the approach of this thesis, because it is clear to us that the challenging quality of the plays runs deeper than the debate which their first production generated. They bring a smile but never ingratiate themselves with the audience; for all the intimacy the production may create between stage and audience the effect of the plays is never to immerse the audience in sympathetic emotion but rather to create the discomfort of following a story with the parallel sensation of being watched.

During his lifetime and for the next twenty years, Synge's work was accused of being an insult to the Irish peasant, as immediately after Independence all the attention was focused on those who had engaged actively in the struggle for independence.

Authors like Ganz, Worth and Kilroy frame their analysis in terms of a larger European perspective where Synge has his place as a modernist writer, each of them offering relevant approaches to the question of the obvious difference between Synge's modernism and other more central figures of the movement. He was read and acknowledged as contributing to the Modernist movement by contemporaries such as Pound, Eliot and Wyndham Lewis. These were also breaking the mould of conventional aesthetic experience in different ways from Synge.⁵

In his essay *Synge and Modernism*, Kilroy justifies the claim of T S Eliot that Synge's plots and language are relevant only to the place in which they are set by his determined choice to favour above all the creation of a regional drama, eventually a national drama; yet the sensibility behind the writing of the plays "evokes the kind of aesthetic values that inform the best of modern writing."⁶

This regional collocation of the author in the modernist sphere is seen by Seamus Deane as a vital feature of twentieth century literary reality; referring to Marshall McLuhan, he endorses the opinion that "only from backward oral areas had any resonance to inject into the language", naming Yeats,

⁵ The Bloomsbury group however despised Synge and his plays as too parochial. Obviously the incapacity to communicate was reciprocal as Synge himself found exception even in the way they spoke. Wasefield comments, "He was puzzled by the talk of the clever young men from Oxford. 'That's a queer way to talk. they all talk like that. I wonder what makes them talk like that? I suppose they're always stewing over dead things'", in J. M. Synge: A Few Personal Recollections. Churchtown 1915, p. 8.

⁶ Kilroy, "Synge and Modernism", in J. M. Synge Centenary Papers 1971. Dublin, The Dolmen Press, 1972, p. 170.

Synge, Joyce, Faulkner, Dylan Thomas.⁷ Culturally it is the fringe that brings a new élan to the literary medium; as the centre becomes void of innovative issue, the cultural "backward areas", the periphery, the Other becomes articulate in writing, using the cultural medium of the metropolis, the center, the Subject.

At a time when Modernist drama faces and proclaims the virtual exhaustion of the classical models, provincial writers still use them. This is not to be seen as a refusal of Modernist principles, "but a particular circumstance of time in which that literature entered into existence". Referring to the literature of the Southern American States and Ireland, Kilroy sees this as the classical form of a modernist sensibility,

In the great writers, like Synge, Yeats and Faulkner, this is never deployed as an escape out of the modern condition, it becomes rather another version of Modernism but one which begins with a particular place, at a particular point in time.(...) Synge turned to a premodern aesthetic as a groundwork of his plays⁸

The isolation caused by this restricted choice of themes did not cause Synge any qualms for he was aware of the long process involved in the maturing of a language as a vehicle for a national literature, as a medium for a culture to articulate itself. This particular awareness of the stage of development of the English language in Ireland made him very sceptical towards the endeavours of the Gaelic League with their aim of reinstating Irish as the literary language. This sense of the evolution of a

⁷ Seamus Deane, "Synge's Poetic Use of Language", in J.M. Synge Centenary Papers 1971. Dublin, The Dolmen Press, 1972, p. 131.

⁸ Kilroy, p. 178.

language as a literary medium involving closeness and a particular sensibility to the quality of the language is clearly expressed by Synge in an article on "The Old and New Ireland":

With the present generation the linguistic atmosphere of Ireland has become definitely English enough, for the first time, to allow work to be done in English that is perfectly Irish in its essence, yet has sureness and purity of form. A generation or two ago a few writers (...), wrote of Ireland with a certain easiness and grace, but writers who lived close to the soul of their country were kept back by the uncertainty of her linguistic sense, and nearly always failed to reach the finer cadences of English.

... If Gaelic came back strongly from the west the feeling for English which the present generation has attained would be lost again. (...) Modern peasant Gaelic is full of rareness and beauty, but if it was sophisticated by journalists and translators (...) it would lose all its freshness, and then the limits, which now make its charm, would tend to prevent all further development.⁹

Using traditional forms whose expectations he does not fulfil, writing in a language that is labelled as "stage-Irish" or "quaint idiom", bringing alive characters that are not "typical" but seen as insults to a noble ideal, Synge's work is produced under the sign of transgression.

This transgression is at its most controversial as it disrupts the symbolic representations of the nationalist intelligentsia. It is difficult to ascertain if Synge's attitudes were motivated by a higher and larger concept of nationalism. According to his mother his attitude towards the independence of Ireland did not take first priority as he believed in a larger social movement that would change the overall balance of power, giving Ireland its freedom as a consequence. On this issue the

⁹ "The Old and New Ireland", in The Academy and Literature, 6, Sep. 1902, and Notebook 30.

often quoted statement that Synge was incapable of political thought is denied by some evidence given by Professor Saddlemyer when she refers to the fact that he canvassed in February 1893 for an anti-Home Rule petition.¹⁰ He had a strong belief in the Irish identity, but as a part of the oldest civilization in Europe and not as a mere opponent of Britain.¹¹

THE IDENTITY OF IRELAND AND THE QUESTION OF UNITY

As one reads through the controversy over the Abbey Theatre, it becomes clear that the issue is not just a matter of personal denigration of an author, however heated and rabid the attacks on Synge were by the nationalist press. Reasons for the clash between the Abbey directors and the nationalist groups have been found on political, artistic, sociological and strategic grounds. Others try to put it down to the pugnacious character of W B Yeats or to Synge's intellectual and social background. The Gaelic League and Sinn Fein thought they could smell a rat in the motives and commitment of Ascendancy artists to the nationalist cause. Their strong criticism was voiced in The Independent and The United Irishman. In general terms they may have been right. The authors of the Irish National Theatre, even if declared

¹⁰ See The Collected Letters of John Millington Synge. 2 volumes. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983-1984. Professor Saddlemyer presented this information on page 29, in an editorial footnote to a letter written in French to an unidentified correspondent. The subject of the letter is the immediate effect of Home Rule if implemented at such troubled times, "Pour pouvoir introduire sans danger un parall changement il faut attendre un moment plus tranquille."

¹¹ Greene and Stephens, J.M. Synge. pp. 52 and 62-3.

nationalists, were only so on their own poetic terms, and as far as the leaders of the movement were concerned, they would not stoop to write propaganda plays as a result of external pressure.

Yeats proposed a larger concept of National Unity, as a revival of the heroic age and noble virtues of Ireland, which a section of the Anglo-Irish intelligentsia tried to identify among the most remote peasantry. Yeats would play a key role in this process as the leading spirit, the new Bard. His hopes of a 'Unity of Image' through the medium of an art that congregated all arts - the theatre - would achieve the 'Unity of Culture', the political step towards the totality of 'Unity of Being'.

A movement for unity based on these premises could not have come at a less propitious time for its development. For the modernist intelligentsia the heroic past of Ireland sounded a very "passé" note, if not a reactionary one. As for political unity of the Irish national spirit, many aspired to the role of leader. Among these was also Arthur Griffiths.

Lions in his study of Irish culture offers an insight into the failure of these movements.¹² The three basic issues concerning the identity of Irish culture were whether an Irish literature in English was possible, whether a separate Irish cultural identity could be achieved, detached from England where all the Irish could feel at home, and whether an artist could be allowed to put his artistic freedom above the interests of a cause, however noble. The answers to these questions Lyons also

¹² F S L Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939*. chp. 2, "After Parnell", Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978.

finds to be streamed according to three different perspectives, the cosmopolitan, the Anglo-Irish and that of Irish Ireland.

The cosmopolitan view refused the imperative to write and speak in a national rather than a personal capacity. Joyce, for example, saw the compromise with the multitude and the "Irishness" in the Abbey as a debasement to the level "of the most belated race in Europe". Lyons gives as an articulate example of this view the argument of Jhon Eglinton: "Ireland had to decide if it was still in the fifth or 12th century".

For the nationalists Anglo-Ireland was not Ireland, and on those grounds they even criticised the Gaelicism of Thomas Davies. The work of the Abbey was seen as mere Anglo-Irish, and from the first negative reaction to Countess Cathleen it was clear they would resist anything that failed to square with their idealised national stereotype. On this issue, Griffiths claims that "nationality is the breath of art". The continued pursuit of the aristocratic independence of the artist, would estrange W B Yeats and the Abbey from militant nationalists first (Maud Gonne) and pacifist Gaelicism later (Douglas Hyde), who ceased collaboration with the theatre.

W B Yeats's hopes of a 'Unity of Image' in the Theatre as a way to forward 'Unity of Culture' would find the opposition that the Ascendancy class faced in general. In other fields of Irish society the clash of incompatible interests was even more blatant. Lyons offers the land-reform issue as an adequate image of the situation:

... to liberate a spirit of conciliation, seemed impossible for two opposing reasons. On the one hand, the ascendancy at large could not be persuaded that

change was their own salvation. On the other hand, those with whom the progressive unionists might have wished to cooperate were never really convinced that 'progressive unionism' was not a contradiction in terms...¹³

Yeats's aspirations to gather a patriotic audience around his theatre were jeopardized first as he changed the status of the company, with Miss Horniman's subsidy, from an amateur, democratic group, into a professional company, with directors, shareholders and employees. This in effect made the Abbey an elitist English institution in the eyes of many nationalists. The support of Synge's work, and the refusal to compromise their position on censorship, alienated the Abbey from the more moderate nationalists on grounds of morality, and the image of Irish peasant life presented, which was itself a major political and ideological issue.

Dublin Theatres in the 1890s

To appreciate the need for novelty and change in the mood and quality of plays and their ideological contents, it is well advised to take a brief look at theatre houses and the productions offered in the 1890s and 1900s. According to Hogan and Kilroy, besides the halls belonging to various associations that could be hired for productions of amateur companies, such as the Antient Concert Rooms or Molesworth Hall, there were three licensed theatre venues, The Theatre Royal, the Gaiety and The Queen's Theatre¹⁴. The Theatre Royal depended on English touring

¹³ Lyons, p. 75.

¹⁴ Hogan and Kilroy, The Irish Literary Theatre: 1899-1901, pp. 5-25.

companies, and the repertoire hardly ever included material with an Irish interest. Frank Fay in his reviews for The United Irishman criticises both this house policy and its audience as well:

A very large audience ... intensely uncritical and ignorant ..., the class who will madly applaud a singer or an instrumentalist ... provided they finish with the conventional bluster.¹⁵

The Gaiety offered more often a more selected fare and some celebrities, but in essentials followed the Theatre Royal's policy of using English touring companies "given over to crowd pleasing entertainments". The Queen's was a second class house managed by Whitbread, a writer of "very broad and very bad melodrama".¹⁶ The Queen's presented Boucicault's plays and Whitbread melodramas attempting Irish subjects. If this stage seemed "made for the wedding scene in the barn" as Holloway mentioned in 1895, and if some overdone and badly acted imitations of Boucicault could still please a public, this was "the last twitch of a dying convention. A new drama which would truly reflect contemporary Ireland would have to be different and would have to be acted differently."¹⁷

Early Irish Nationalist Productions

¹⁵ Frank Fay, 'Irish Drama at the Theatre Royal', The United Irishman. (29 July 1899) as quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, p. 12.

¹⁶ Hogan and Kilroy, p. 14.

¹⁷ Hogan and Kilroy, p. 20.

Against this backdrop of traditional English fare rose the nationalist groups like the Gaelic League and Daughters of Erin, besides the Irish Literary Theatre. For the former groups what really mattered in Irish Art was that it would be Irish, and perceived as Irish by all, friends or enemies. Therefore one should not look for literary or theatrical innovations in nationalist plays, rather the opposite: they use the most easily recognised forms for more immediate impact. Let us say that it is the policies that are new in the plays of nationalists, not the ideology nor the aesthetics. Looking at some plays of this period, one can see how the themes are so similar to those used by Synge, but used in a different way. They promoted resistance to and final subversion of the political power. At the same time they tried hard to reinforce ideological structures and contain any possible causes of disruption of these structures.

The Irish Literary Theatre produced three plays in 1900: Maeve a historical play by Edward Martin, The Bending of the Bough, a political satire by George Moore and another historical play, The Last Feast of the Fianna by Alice Milligan who had been writing plays for amateur Irish groups for some time.

With the revival of the Irish language a few playlets were performed in Irish too. The very first one of which there is some record was produced in Letterkenny in 20 November 1898 and was mentioned in The United Irishman as "The Tara Scene".

In Dublin the first Irish production was in August 1901 by the Daughters of Erin, a one act play by P T MacGinley, Elis Agus an Bhean Deirce, at the Antient Concert Rooms. But the play that

is taken as the land mark in the progress of Irish revival is the play by Douglas Hyde Casadh an tSugain (The Twisting of the Rope), performed in October 1901. It was produced by the Keating branch of the Gaelic League and produced for the Irish Literary Theatre at the Gaiety.

The story centers around the means to keep a troublesome outsider away. He is a poet and it is an ill omen for a house to refuse hospitality to a bard. To get him to leave the house of his own accord the Munstermen flatter the arrogant poet into teaching them how to twist a hay rope. Once he steps outside pulling the rope, the door is closed on his face. The stability of the community is maintained without breaking any larger rules.

In such a small play the patterns of social identification and adherence are very clear: the community closes ranks to defend themselves from an external threat, the domineering poet. The stress therefore is on the power of the group to find solutions for their problems, and threats here are clearly identified in an outsider. There is no breach in the community, the women are kept safely beyond the reach of grasping strangers. In political terms this play reinforces all the principles upon which a nationalist ideology of resistance and struggle should be based: Ireland is to be seen as a community which can successfully overcome the powers of arrogant intruders by closing ranks.

The poet is the outcast, inspiring admiration and repulsion. He is recognised as possessing a force that usually commands respect and praise, but in this case it has grown wild. As a

vagrant, he also represents the unruly forces of desire and in this quality he constitutes a threat to the stability and propriety of the community. The traditional reverence for poetry does not prevent the peasants from disposing of him in the most expedient way.

The language and the high political profile of the author and leading actor, Douglas Hyde, made this all-Irish playlet stand out next to the other play presented with it, "Diarmaid and Grania", a legend that involves the courting of a married woman (its representation was considered by people like Standish O'Grady a degradation of the Irish heroic image). It becomes perfectly clear from the onset that there are very strict rules which cannot be bent if an author is looking for the support of a nationalist Irish audience.

Padraic Colum followed closely Synge's steps in creating peasant drama. He wrote four plays of some interest. He left the Irish Literary Theatre over the change of policy from democratic amateur group into a company with directors and employees. Colum's plays were well accepted. The Saxon Shillin won a prize in a nationalist competition. It was an anti-recruiting tract: a young man betrays the land as he joins the British army but is redeemed through his own blood as he deserts and runs to defend his father from eviction. Fay would only produce this play with revision of the final scene, and it was not produced.

His first play performed by the group, Broken Soil, was well received and praised by Oliver Gogarty in The United Irishman: "The play is built on the catastrophe produced from circumstances

arising out of the temperament, religion, and tradition peculiar to the Irish people".¹⁸ Colum was an Irish Catholic speaking of Irish life as he had experienced it without the detached view that came from class, religion and education differences. Broken Soil had a theme common to Synge's plays, "the call of the road". But here the reasons that lead a woman to the road are different from those that drove Nora Burke out of her house. This play was revised and changed name:

It became "The Fiddler's House" when a real conflict was seen as developing in it, the conflict between father and daughter in which reconciliation came when Maire Hourican becomes aware that she, too, has the vagrant in her. . . . Her recoil from her lover is due to her fear of masculine possessiveness - a recoil not extraordinary in a girl brought up in the Irish countryside.¹⁹

Colum explains how "an unexpected kind of play", "In The Shadow of the Glen" made nationalists leave the group: "They felt the play let the Irish people down. In those days it was an article of faith that the country people were the heart , soul and voice of Ireland."²⁰

In Shadow, Synge presents a tramp that is well received by all and leaves in the end with the wife. The community is not seen as an homogeneous entity but as a result of negotiations of interests and tacit contracts. The hearts of the public go with the outsider, but in the end they stay with the community and are made to look at it in a more critical way. Colum trained as a dramatist with the Irish Dramatic Theatre but his political

¹⁸ Stephen Gwynn, Irish Literature and Drama in the English Language: A Short History. London Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1936, p. 176.

¹⁹ Padraic Colum, p. 7. Three Plays. Dublin, Allen Figgis, 1963,

²⁰ Colum, p. 4

allegiances had been formed elsewhere, which made his plays ideologically acceptable.

The Land, his most famous play, presented two generations and their relation to the land. The fathers had fought the land war and succeeded in taking possession of the land, moving from tenant farmers to land-owners, but the strong daughter and son of both families cannot be tied to the despotic family rule and leave; the long fought for property was then left to the less enterprising children. In Colum's own words:

It pleased an audience who wanted a theatre that would have political orientation: as the people who fought the Land War were shown as coming into their own, this was felt as a chapter in the re-conquest, as it had the approval of the hundred per cent nationalists.²¹

In 1963 when he wrote these lines he acknowledged The Land as an historical piece, because none could experience the emotions attached to the possession of the land as it was felt when the evictions and oppression of landlordism were an everyday threat. On the other hand the arbitrary parental possessiveness would force their children to make a living abroad. Two young pairs of lovers, one strong and determined, the other submissive and simple-minded, face their fathers (there are no mothers). Martin Douras is a relatively educated man and a respected speaker, has high hopes for his daughter Ellen, whom he wants to become a school mistress. Her sweetheart Matt is the last son remaining tending the land with Murtagh Cosgar. Old Murtagh will soon gain possession of the land and on those grounds opposes the match. Matt is almost ready to leave all for his love, but for the strong call of the land. Ellen has an equally strong desire

²¹ Colum, p.6

to see the world, and to teach. Their diverging interests separate them. Matt who never wanted to leave the land goes to America, because Ellen refuses to become a farmer's wife.

The imperatives of desire have no currency when not backed by property and submission to the parental will in the view of the peasant farmer patriarch. This is the crux of the land issue. The father has the power to pass on the land to the offspring he finds will serve him and the land best, disinheriting all the others. To these the only solutions are to become cottier labourers or to go abroad, most of the time to America.

Cosgar chooses as his heir a son-in-law rather than his own son, for Cornelius and Sally are the most easily led and the only ones left. The suffering of those who have to leave to survive elsewhere is toned down as they all seem to accommodate themselves in better situations. The final words are given to Cornelius, the one who profits from the system:

Cornelius (enthusiastically): And we're the ones for each other, Sally and me! (Holding Sally's hands). Is it true that Matt's going to America, and that Ellen will wait for him for a year at the school? I met them together and they told me that.

Murtagh Cosgar: What they say is true, I'm sure. The land is yours and your children's.

Cornelius: Aren't they foolish to be going away like that, Father, and we at the mouth of the good times?²²

²² Colum, p. 47.

These are some of the more well known nationalist plays. Most of them had only a very immediate and local interest, and were soon forgotten. The attacks to Synge's plays often came in form of parody, "In a reel Wicklow Glen", is a parody of Shadow and was written presumably by Griffith; "The Mists that be Rolling on the Bog" is a parody of The Playboy. These plays have interest as one follows the repartee in the controversy, but were soon replaced by other arguments.

Synge's own attitude concerning the defense of noble Irish qualities had little to do with the practicalities of party politics. He suspected the political cliques of Dublin, which he seemed to group together with the better-off, as those who have lost all trace of ancient Irish nobility and have only managed to acquire a downgraded imitation of English materialistic attitudes and values.

IDEOLOGICAL AND AESTHETIC DIFFERENCE, POLITICAL TRANSGRESSION

The producer may in terms of (s)ay class-position inhabit an ideological sub-ensemble with conflictual relations to the dominant ideology, but by an overdetermination of other biographical factors (sex, religion, region) may be rendered homologous with it. The converse situation is equally possible.²³

In the following chapters we will offer a reading of the plays and sometimes compare them with other works to stress some point of ideological confrontation. This will try to show that the work of Synge, beyond the Wordsworthian love of nature, and his other alleged decadent sympathies, is informed by a text ideology that is much more advanced than that we can find elsewhere in the political and literary production of this period.

A useful way of looking at ideology in this context and for the purpose of this study, is to see it as the way the exchange between the literary /theatrical and the social /political is structured.²⁴ This traffic between different domains follows rules that are not written down or expressed openly. This concept can also be applied to the text itself. Synge's

²³ Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 59. It is not our objective to theorise in this dissertation over the concept of ideology. The theoretical references used in this thesis are mainly those of Terry Eagleton, as quoted, Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, first edition Paris, 1966, trans. Geoffrey Wall, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, and Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*. Most of the various definitions of ideology have a strong negative bias. Although at present attempts are being made to alter the state of the art, the concept as used here still has this characteristic, as we look in the unsaid, the silently acknowledged as the location of the ideological traffic. An example of the changing trend of ideology studies is Eagleton's new book which looks at the various definitions of ideology, to review the history of the concept and propose further developments on a more positive perspective.

²⁴ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London, Methuen 1986.

challenges to the ideology of his compatriots are not apparent in the text. They are rather to be found in what the text takes for granted, and what is assumed by the author to be common knowledge (taken for granted in such a way it need not be stated).²⁵ What is not said in a literary work is not a gap to be filled, or a weakness that needs reinforcement. These areas of the unsaid in a literary work are the uncharted ground in which to look for the ideology of the text, and in the case of Synge, for what disrupts and challenges the ideology of the groups who reacted to his plays.²⁶ In a manner similar to Eagleton, Clark and Holquist claim in the biographical study of Bakhtin, that ideology must be seen in a text's holes, in what it has felt it could leave unuttered.²⁷

.... Ideology pre-exists the text; but the ideology of the text defines, operates and constitutes that ideology in ways unpremeditated, so to speak by ideology itself. The 'ideology of the text' has no pre-existence: it is identical with the text itself.²⁸

To produce his text the author works on a given pre-existent set of cultural codes over which the dramatic codes are written. The dramatic /theatrical text elaborates its own codes, rearranging fictional reality in a sometimes unexpected way.²⁹ It is this particular articulation of the ideology in the text or

²⁵ Katerina Clark, Michael Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1984 chp. 14 'Rabelais and his World'.

²⁶ See Pierre Macherey, "The Spoken and the Unspoken", For a Theory of Literary Production. pp. 85-87.

²⁷ Clark, Holquist, pp. 298-299.

²⁸ Eagleton, p. 80.

²⁹ See Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics. London, Macmillan, 1977, pp. 133 ff. and Keir Elam, Semiotics of Theatre and Drama. London, Methuen, 1980, pp. 52-55.

'text ideology' in Synge's plays that comes as a shock to his audience. The more the structure of the plays were based on common assumptions and conventions broadly accepted by the Irish community at large, the deeper the frustration of the spectator who came to see representations on stage of conventional nationalist Irishness, which are nowhere to be found there.

As Eagleton implies, much of the function of ideology is to ensure that it does not stand out 'independent of the material it organises'; if the fictional worlds created in Synge's theatre were to meet his society's ideological expectations they would present realities fashioned by representational modes that were acceptable for his contemporaries/ Irish spectators. However this is not the case. What he seems to be doing in his plays is superficially similar in ideological content to other dramatic attempts, as it does not propose strikingly different modes of representation, for instance, no vanguardist cut with theatrical conventions; but it is deeply different in the sense that under the external guise of commonly accepted forms, the ideological content is unexpectedly novel, and challengingly so.

What Synge seems to be doing in these terms is to create fictional worlds that are identical at most levels of cultural codes to the expectations of the audience and therefore can be more easily be identified. That done, the cosy familiar images - the Wicklow cottage, the heath, the shebeen- articulate with a language both familiar and new gradually instill a totally new system of values. In this sense the text ideology in Synge's plays challenges the great certainties of Irish culture. As ideology is the cement used by power to give cohesion to the

social body of a society, it must perforce be "always extremely conservative in its effects".³⁰ In terms of the definition of the female subject, and in a certain way the broader concept of the Other, we clearly see that in Synge's plays we can find a text ideology that is more progressive and libertarian than can be found in the work of any of his contemporaries referred to in this work.

A striking instance of this variation of ideological value within a recognizable structure is Synge's use of the comic.

As Vivian Mercier points out Synge's comic runs counter to traditional Irish satire: he does not take the side of the established society, as the traditional bard or the old file, by the simple fact of giving a platform for the outsider to put forward an articulate apology of "otherness". Fitz-Simon also points out that the Irish had no tradition of popular comedy, in as much as the Irish authors wrote for an English audience. As these facts prove to be well documented, it is clear they make up part of the matter for controversy.

The place, the group and the particular body Synge writes about in many ways transgress the bourgeois middle class morality of Dublin society in the philosophy of life, character, language and actions he presents in plays and prose. These transgressions can be mapped out following a specific set of rejections of society's cultural imaginary.

³⁰ Clark and Holquist, p. 299.

Stallybrass and White in their study of the limits and transgression of middle class cultural imaginary, concentrate on the contradictory nature of symbolic hierarchies within the dominant construction of literature, the body and the social formation. The place for these conflicting desires and incompatible representations is the lower strata, be it of the body, literature, place or society. Using Bakhtin and Freud as sources and critical references, they analyse this conflict of the attraction and rejection of the lower-other.

Edward Said had earlier phrased this conflict as the ambivalence of the colonial and neo-colonial relationship. Stallybrass claims this is not exclusively an instance of colonial representation.

The same process will be observed in relation to the slum and the domestic servant, popular carnival festivities and abject animals such as the rat and the pig. Stallybrass and White's study is concerned with the centre of imperial colonial thought, as it observes the London middle class mental attitude towards its various realms of otherness, its periphery in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The colonial situation creates a dual and inverse sense of identity. In the specific case of Ireland, this is due to the particular pattern of its colonisation, in which a portion of the population reproduces and identifies with the dominant colonial ideology. All the Irish are looked upon by England as the peripheral low-other: unruly, repugnant and dangerous. This is the widely publicised image which the nationalists fight and have

to counter-attack with another ideological image of opposing signification.

Permanently observed by the colonial Subject, this peripheral other is itself a divided subject. The intellectuals, the Dublin bourgeoisie, Ascendancy or nationalist reproduce the homogeneous core of a "classical bourgeois reason", outside of which stand the mad, the criminal, sick, unruly, and the sexually transgressive.

These are observed from the perspective of the classical body, which constructs them as elements of the grotesque body.³¹

In the course of this work it will be observed that the Dublin Anglo-Irish and Nationalist bourgeoisie shared the same disgust and phobias for the Irish lower-other, and that these attitudes permeated all of the middle class intelligentsia.

In their struggle to defend the peasant as their national hero image, or at least to raise him to a moral stature capable of opposing the debased image created by the British press, the nationalists nonetheless reproduced the same symbolic hierarchies of the coloniser, even if this signification was intended to be positive.

The controversial difficulty for this study will be to position Synge in the realm of Protestant middle class Dublin.

³¹ Referring to Foucault's study *Discipline and Punish*. Stallybrass sees the nineteenth century classical bourgeois reason as the result of the "great age of 'institutionalising'", the eighteenth century in England. The classical body defines itself as high, inside and central as against the exclusions which are then seen as the grotesque, low, outside and marginal. Cf pp. 22-23.

He is not an organic intellectual, in the Gramscian sense. He stands aloof from his own class, while still keeping a strict observance of evangelical decorum, except for the fact that he engages himself in literature instead of a pious or profitable occupation as his relatives did. If he had been an organic intellectual, he could hardly have afforded to have that equidistant position to the subject he so devotedly treated and to his own background. For they are in fact distinct.

Sean O'Tuama claims that there were no links between the Ascendancy culture of Dublin and the peasants of Ireland. In the mid-nineteenth century the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy somehow withdrew from English mother-culture and tried to identify in the newly-found old Irish ancestry.³² He makes the probably extreme claim that it was Synge's morbid interest with death that drew him towards the Aran people who were always living in a permanent struggle against death. O'Tuama does not see Synge as reporting sympathetically on this almost medieval life, but contrary to what he expects from the Anglo-Irish writer par excellence, he finds that Synge responded to the basic values underlying that life; and managed to recreate it unerringly in artistic form in the two classic pieces Riders to the Sea and Playboy of the Western World.³³

³² Cairns and Richards give a very detailed account of the aligning of Ascendancy nationalist movements in Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988.

³³ Sean O'Tuama, "Synge and the Idea of a National Literature", in J. M. Synge Centenary Papers 1971, ed. by Maurice Harmon, Dublin, Dolmen Press, p. 4.

O' Tuama's point is that empathy alone could not account for the way Synge captured the deep resonances of the traditional mind and language of the Gaelic soul; it is rather a case of method: as W B Yeats, and Joyce debated whether to identify with aspects of Irish culture, for Synge

the effort to identify never assumed the proportions of a problem: he merely went through the process simply, rigorously and successfully³⁴

Partisan, Anglo-Irish, methodical scholar, modernist, all labels seem to miss the point when applied to Synge. He was detached and critical of his social background to the point of being objective about other cultural influences. Devoted to the Aran islanders he always felt an outsider when in their company. He involved himself thoroughly in the Abbey as a potential native National Theatre, sharing hopes and supporting its causes. Synge is in that particular location in place and time when Ireland stopped being a source of reinforcement to English letters, reproducing and perpetuating the colonial ideology by assuming this language as its own, using the language as Britons.

It was not the time for national unity under literary design, as W B Yeats hoped, but it was the moment to begin using the English language as an appropriate medium for Irishness, now that for some writers (at least for Synge) this had already become the medium in which they could make the periphery speak itself in a language of its own, that is rich, fluid, and offered an immense range of possibilities to the author.

³⁴ O'Tuama, p. 15.

Indeed T. S. Eliot is right when he says Synge's idiom can only be used well in that location and with those types. This idiom is, together with those developed by a few other Abbey writers at the time, the first genuine utterance of a self-confident Irish voice which speaks its fine modulation of the English language disregarding the traditional public to which Irish gigs were usually addressed and appealing to another one, which was slow to recognise in this strange idiom its own native voice.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM THE KINGDOM OF GOD INTO THE KINGDOM OF IRELAND

The emotions which pass through us have neither end nor beginning, are a part of eternal sensations, and it is this almost cosmic element in the person which gives all personal art a share in the dignity of the world.

Biography, even autobiography, cannot give this revelation, for the deeds of a man's lifetime are impersonal and concrete, might have been done by anyone, while art is the expression of the abstract beauty of a person.¹

The biographical data of John Synge's life can be placed together through his attempts at writing a biography which was not finished, and also the two early pieces 'Vita Vecchia', and 'Etude Morbide', thinly disguised biographical stories. His travelling notes which he often took in the language of the country he was visiting, his diaries and the biographies available all give a wide range of views on the life of the author, from his childhood to his professional involvement with the Abbey Theatre.²

¹ From Item 51, typescript of Act I of "When The Moon has Set", an earlier version in two acts, quoted in Collected Works III, 174, note 3.

² The Greens-Stephens J. M. Synge, 1871-1909. Edward Stephens My Uncle John, Edward Stephens's Life of J. M. Synge, and the manuscript from which the latter has been abridged which is kept in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin. Samuel Synge's Letters to my Daughter: Being Intimate Recollections of John Millington Synge offer yet

For the period concerning his artistic career there is a wealth of correspondence between Synge and the other Abbey directors, Lady Augusta Gregory and W B Yeats. Lady Gregory's Our Irish Theatre devotes one chapter to Synge in particular. Yeats writes often about Synge as the man he knew in the theatre and outside, and of the strong influence that Synge had upon the poet's work. He pays tribute to his friend and the theatre in Autobiographies, Essays and Introductions and in Explorations.

In her well researched study The Drama of J M Synge. Mary King finds The Aran Islands to be a continuation as it were of Synge's earlier biographical essays.³ There she invokes Northrop Frye's notion of autobiography as a work in which "nearly always some theoretical and intellectual interest in religion, politics or art plays a leading role".⁴ The reasons she invokes are that the notes on the islanders come after his long stays in Paris, therefore constituting a mark of the next period of his life, including in it his social and political reflections and opinions on religious and artistic issues. These observations on the islander's life would also constitute the journal of an interior personal journey. King goes even further to claim that he would have found there an identity with location and people after his

other view of the earlier years of John's life as seen by his missionary brother with whom he was for some time able to confide in matters of religious doubt.

³ Mary King, The Drama of J. M. Synge. London, Fourth Estate, 1985, chapter two.

⁴Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, Princeton, New Jersey, P University Press, 1957, p. 308, as quoted by Mary King, op. cit., p. 20.

long stay in Paris. What King calls "the dialectical movement between integration and alienation", never finds a synthesis in real life except for its recurrent statement in his work.⁵ It is symptomatic that his moments of closest identification with the islanders are on journeys in a curragh between the islands when he and the men are at the mercy of the elements and their seamanship.

The second reason for considering his first important piece of work as part of the autobiography is the structural conformity of The Aran Islands to some of his artistic precepts as expressed in the Notebooks or in When the Moon Has Set. For Mary King, The Aran Islands employ structural and thematic features which derive from music. Once these are recognised "the apparent diffuseness of the work vanishes, its discontinuities appear as functional and its modernist character, and experimental use of imagetic syntax, begin to reveal themselves."⁶

Synge's thoughts on life and art as expressed in musical terms help support her contention that the chapters are arranged as if it were a piece of music.⁷ The identification with people and location referred to above should be qualified, as Synge never identified totally with location

⁵ King, p. 21.

⁶ King, p. 20. This point had already been raised by Robin Skelton in The Writings of J. M. Synge, but Mary King also invokes the serious knowledge of music and study of composition to reinforce her argument.

⁷ Mary King refers here to the words by Sister Eileen in When the Moon Has Set. "Every life is a symphony and the translation of this sequence into music and from music again (...) into literature (...) is the real effort of the artist", C W III, p. 174, n 3.

or social group. In The Aran Islands Synge observes the life of the peasants, evaluates its economy in an appreciative way. He notes the almost medieval relation they have to the various work they perform, how they are skilled in many crafts and through their work establish a link with the objects they produce. These crafted objects are also the stories, songs and ballads he heard from the vagrants and villagers. One might refer here to the case of a 'theoretical' identification with the peasants and their world: he felt content among them but also felt 'isolated', cut off from the outside world, his world. There is never any thought of identity with a common feeling or fact. He plays for them, talks with them, but is always removed from total identification with those he most appreciated for their society, poetry or kindness. Synge's upbringing which he critically observed and adopted in the outward social demeanour cast him as a social stock role, the benevolent *avourneen*.

The achievement of an identity, of being with nature, with family, class, or country was never attained in his lifetime. One can find in his life many critical moments at which he found it impossible to identify with his peers, family or hosts. One would be tempted to see in this almost vocational detachment, respectful or sympathetic, from the people he observed or lived with, a trait of his own personality. Still, at this particular time Ireland may not have had a more able interpreter of its peasant voice in its full maturity.

To confront Synge (what we know of his life and experience) with the life and times of his contemporaries brings us closer to the difficulty of the many to accept the difference of the isolated man.

SEVERANCE FROM FAMILY TRADITION

Although I had my usual affection for my relations I began while I was still very young to live in my imagination in enchanted premises that had high walls with glass upon the top where I sat and drank ginger beer ... with some companion, usually some small school-fellow (CW II, 6)

Synge's progress away from his family and family piety towards an Irish identity and nationalism follows a pattern common to many men and women of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, particularly in the sense that they saw their questioning of the religion, social attitude and politics shared by their closest acquaintances as an individual defection, a challenge that interpellated them individually.⁸ Although clearly detached from some forms of nationalism W B Yeats had a different progress. His family surroundings were open to the arts, to a life of artistic expression and imagination, where he could follow in the footsteps of his father and become a painter. Synge was the solitary wandering among the crowd, determined to pursue an impecunious career as a musician or later to join the less

⁸ See Edmund Gosse's biography Father and Son, which clearly portrays the loss of faith as a fall into the abyss of doubt and nothingness, to which science and positivism could not provide a concerted reassurance. These free-thinkers were moving away from religion with a sensation of existential anguish and loss, while strongly believing in their power both on the social and individual level.

than holy company of actors, actresses, nationalists and Roman Catholics.

John Edward Millington Synge was born on the 16 of April 1871 at Rathfarnham near Dublin. After his father's death in 1872 the family moved house to 4, Orwell Park, where Mrs Synge lived closer to her mother. Synge's family lived on the rents collected from their estates spread through the counties of Wicklow, Connemara, Mayo, and they would spend their Summer months at one of the family estate houses or by the sea at Greystones, County Wicklow. As a child he was timid, weak, and often ill. His ill-health later led him to decide against ever marrying "I am unhealthy and if I marry I will have unhealthy children. But I will never create beings to suffer as I am suffering, so I will never marry." (CW II, 9)

Being a sickly child, John attended school irregularly. The school training he got at Mr Harrick's Classical and English School had to be complemented by private tutors, while his mother and grandmother provided the necessary instruction in religious faith. In this world of austere adults, the child created a world of his own with its own landscape, a mixture of fantasy and nature worship. Before his school years he:

was a worshipper of nature. I remember that I would not allow my nurses to sit down on the seats by the [River] Dodder because they were [man-]made. (CW II, 5)

As Lanto Synge notes, in 'Autobiography', Synge's main topics are nature religion and music.⁵ The autobiography ends probably around the age of twenty-one, before Synge had contemplated pursuing a career as a writer.

From the age of seven his interest in nature became a fascination which he developed into persistent study and devotion. This study brought him to his first crisis of faith.

In his young years before college he had been confronted with Darwin's theory of evolution. Having never entertained any religious doubts before, such questions were going to throw him in the despair of eternal damnation, as if he had become "the playfellow of Judas". That moment according to Synge himself marked the point at which the whole body of his mother's religious construct was shaken by severe doubt. It was a painful process of growth, from family piety into "a sort of credulous belief":

I flung the book aside and rushed out in the open air ... My studies showed me the force of what I read, [and] the more I put it from me the more it rushed back with new instances and power. (CW II, 11)

A strong belief in the literal word, a reinforcement of fact over and above opinion or imagination was the cornerstone of his family's faith. Once the theory of the evolution of species was accepted, and his collection of fact and study of insects which he had pursued systematically as a child would encourage him to believe that, then the entire

⁵ Lanto M Synge, 'Synge's Autobiography', in Sunshine and the Moon's Delight. pp. 121-140.

book of Genesis as interpreted by his mother would be no more than another legend, the same as the others which she refused as false or dangerous.¹⁰ To all purposes it would not 'be true', and with that all the evagelic literal approach to the Bible would founder as a hopelessly inadequate *weltanschauung*.

Impossible as it was to prove his mother wrong, it proved as difficult to convince young John that he had to deny the facts that appeared before his eyes as true. His conversations with his mother made her aware that her son's faith was faltering. For this grief she had the solace of permanent prayer for his illumination. In her letters to her other children and in her diary she expressed sadness and anxiety but remained confident of a reversal of events. In a letter to her son Robert on John's seventeenth birthday she mentions his spiritual health:

He is very reserved and shut up on the subject and if I say anything to him he never answers me so I don't know in the least the state of his mind ... I long so to be able to see behind that close reserva.¹¹

For Synge there was not the consolation of faith, nor that of sharing with his family his doubts or his cultural progress. He was aware of the finality of this separation and all his moral education rebelled against it, "Incest and

¹⁰ "My study of insects had given me a scientific attitude - probably a crude one - which did not and could not interpret life and nature as I heard it interpreted from the pulpit." in CW II, part One, p. 11.

¹¹ My Uncle John, p. 42.

parricide were but a consequence of the idea that possessed me."(CW II, 11)

This isolation from a shared family creed was compensated by strong family links. These kept the family together, not the least Mrs Synges character and concern for her flock (she regularly corresponded with her sons in Argentina and China). Close to his family life, sharing their life-style, he kept his thoughts to himself making of the childhood dream world a regular refuge where his imagination was fed by the keen observation of everything that surrounded him. Separated as he felt from his family he would find company in his scientific readings and in music, freeing his imagination on vaster horizons. Christianity as it offered itself to him was of little help in his search for truth:

Soon afterwards I turned my attention to works of Christian evidence, reading them at first with pleasure, soon with doubt, and at last in some cases with derision. (CW II, 13)

In December 1885 Synges joined the Dublin Naturalist's Field Club. Its members were mostly scientists, much older than John. He was too young to contribute actively in the society but attended lectures and joined in field trips. A large number of the members were eminent Quakers and neither they nor guest speakers tackled controversial issues on faith that their study might raise. Although he must have found the company enlightening there was no room for arguing

serious honest doubt on matters of faith and in that he felt still alone:¹²

Till I was twenty-three I never met or at least knew a man or woman who shared my opinions. (CW II, 11)

His progress from a child's love of nature to his chosen love for Ireland and things Irish follows a particular route. The keen observer of nature - birds, insects and the country he was allowed to cover as a child - took all the facts and factual evidence from his dedicated hours of watching so seriously that the family encouraged his interest in natural history.

In 1888 John Synge entered Trinity College, Dublin. The changes that this event might have caused were slow to materialise. He did not make any close friends among his fellow students; his main interests were in literature. His serious doubts on religious issues did not seem to be shared by the other students at that bastion of Anglican Ascendancy:

Compared with the fellows of Trinity, I seemed a presumptuous boy yet I felt that the views which I had arrived at after sincere efforts to find what was true represented, *in spite of my immediate surroundings, the real opinion of the world* (CW II, 11, *my italics*)

In spite of the lack of empathy with the life at the University, this opening of doors to the world outside his family circle helped Synge strengthen his will and his determination to search his own truth. In his second year at Trinity he decided to make "an open declaration of his unbe-

¹² My Uncle John, pp. 38-40.

lief". In this way there would be no more cause for his family to "indulge in the polite excuses they were beginning to fabricate to explain his absence from church."¹³

His upbringing favoured the idea that search for truth was available to every one and was within reach of those blessed with faith. Sygne's almost pathological incapacity to lie, or to sidestep unpalatable facts brought him up against some bitter controversies throughout his life. The problem of how to express the opinion that his different perspective of life gave him without conflicting with his family lead him often to silence:

For a while I denied everything, then I ... made myself a sort of incredulous belief that illuminated nature and lent an object to life without hampering the intellect. ... By it I laid a chasm between my present and my past and between myself and my kindred and friends. (CW II, 11)

There were therefore large areas of feeling and character development that could not find expression in the Victorian English attitudes of his family. A way of expressing feeling and emotion freely was through music. "The stage ... would not regenerate - or for the matter of that un-regenerate - Ireland any more than the symphonies of Beethoven can regenerate Germany", he commented later advocating the independence of theatre from didacticism.¹⁴ On the other hand music gives expression to everything that is too light or intense for words, especially when one has been deprived

¹³ David H Greene, Edward M Stephens, J. M. Synge, 1871-1909. Revised edition, New York and London, New York University Press, 1989, p. 22.

¹⁴ Letters, I, p. 76.

of the use of emotional expression in everyday language. Music also offered patterns of thought that are not rational or logic, carries the emotions of the composer and the interpreter to fruition, individually performed or in the added emotional experience of the orchestral ensemble.

As referred to above, Mary King compares the structure of The Aran Islands to that of a symphony score, a subject on which he received some training during his Music Academy years. John studied composition under Sir Robert Stewart while at Trinity College, with satisfactory results.¹⁵ Achieving some mastery of the medium not only influenced the structure of his works but the way he regarded language as well. His relative ease with music as a means of expression coupled well with the musicality, poetry and raciness of the idiom of the peasants he chose to reproduce.

Literature, music and nature are entwined in his works. His characters speak with a musical lilt, using highly poetical language. The repetition of certain sounds within the phrase increase the melodic sense of the speech:

Soon after I had relinquished the Kingdom of God I began to take a real interest in the kingdom of Ireland. My politics went round from a vigorous and unreasoning loyalty to a temperate Nationalism. (Notebook 15)

From the Collected Works edition of 'Autobiography', it is clear that Synge jotted his notes on his feelings about

¹⁵ "The last day [he] ... put AI on Johnnie's composition which greatly pleased John - poor boy." Letter from Mrs Synge to her son Robert, quoted in My Uncle John, p. 57.

music and his feelings about nationalism in the same notebook, Notebook 15, written between 1896 and 1898.

One can associate the totally individualistic approach to nationalism with his simultaneous interest for music. As he liberated himself from the constraints of his class's strategic position he chose his own medium of expression, never again to be constricted by any set of rules or allegiances, political or artistic, friendly or critical, that tried to determine for him what would be proper or improper in the subjects he chose to deal with.

His nationalistic feelings found expression at the same time he was studying music. This passage through music can be seen as a step in the progressive alienation from his family. His awakening towards nationalism was another, which implied a more radical schism, even if a natural move after his religious disaffection. He gradually found other interests and means of expression.

Music was just the first of these steps. There is a perceivable deepening in the ideological gap between Synge and his family as he moves from writing music scores or attempting a career as a musician to writing controversial peasant plays which his landlordist family never acknowledged. As part of a gentleman's education, music was well thought of; as early as 1887 Synge had started private music lessons with the violinist Patrick Griffith, but as a way of life it was a totally impracticable idea.¹⁶

¹⁶ "By all means write and advise him to give up the idea of living by music, and offer him a place in your office and a prospect of living

Joining an amateur orchestra at this time, he experienced a sense of belonging he had obviously not shared before:

The collective passion produced by a band working together with one will and ideal is unlike any other exaltation. (CW II, 14)

Being part of an organic unit that had as its ultimate objective providing for an audience and themselves the pleasure of music is one of the markers of Synge's personality which no conscientious critic of his work or biographer has ignored.

It is worth noting that he refers in his notebook to both music and nationalism in their capacity to arouse emotion. His thoughts on the kingdom of Ireland were highly emotive:

Everything Irish became sacred... and had the charm that was not quite human nor divine, rather perhaps as if I had fallen in love with a goddess. ...Patriotism gratifies Man's need for adoration (CW II, 13-14)

Emotions aroused by music and related simultaneously to religious ecstasy and human love were expressed in similar terms;

A slight and altogether subconscious avidity of sex wound and wreathed itself in the extraordinary beauty of the moment, not unlike the sexual element that exists in all really fervent ecstasies of faith (CW II, 14)

This ecstasy in music led him "to realize that all emotions depend upon and answer the abstractions of ideal form"

as a gentleman." Letter of Mrs Synge to her son Robert, 7 January 1890, quoted in My Uncle John, p. 55.

(CW II, 15). His search for a 'world of magical beauty' and the almost 'physical intoxication' with which he experienced it in music led him first to his choice of music as a career and then to Germany. It would however be through reality as he found it among the peasants that he came across this world of beauty. As he was able to conclude in 1907, "A cycle of experience is the only definite unity".

Although totally condemned by his family as a decent way of life, the choice of a musical career was not as serious and factual a severance from family attitudes as his career in writing was to become. A cousin of John, Mary earned her modest living by music, was supportive of the boy's interest and took him on his first visit to the Continent, to stay at friends of hers, the von Eiken sisters near Coblenz in the Summer of 1893.¹⁷

The love of music led him out of Ireland to journeys through Germany, France and Italy, but ironically it was these travels that led him to literature. Synge realized he had not the capacity to become a musician or composer as he compared himself with German composers, concluding that the mark of originality that he as an artist could produce had to find other means of expression. The season on the Continent sharpened his perception of himself and of the position he was going to take in relation to Irish issues. He became aware of his country and of its past in a more conscious and

¹⁷ My Uncle John, p. 83

detached way. His first nationalist impulses were re-assessed in terms also of literary quality;

The Irish ballad poetry of 'The Spirit of the Nation' school engrossed me for a while and made [me] commit my most serious literary error; I thought it excellent for a considerable time and then repented bitterly. (CW II, 13)

It was now that he found and used words to express the poetry, the colour of locality and the life of a people that had hitherto not had a voice, with a gusto and exuberance (as he found suitable). The non-denotative use of language, the admittance into the realm of expression of all the scope of emotions which the constrictive decorum of his mother's Victorian principles deprecated, was an assault on the "prison-house of language" inside which he had lived.

Language is an instrument of ideological power and nowhere is it more blatantly at work than in situations of colonial domination where the native tongue has been repressed, devalued or forbidden. However unconscious it might have been in Synge's case his use of the English language to give voice to a people, a class his family would only acknowledge in terms of paying tenants or evicted tenants, constitutes an attack on the core of the instrument of power and on the classes that deploy it.

In Synge's own words the time at Trinity was time wasted. So he found occupations more fitting to his interests. He studied for his pleasure and his range of interest was wide, finding in learning the intellectual stimulus his life could not provide:

When I realized that life about could not give me any real satisfaction my desire for study came on again. I ran through history, chemistry, physics, botany, Hebrew, Irish, Latin, Greek, [...] and made a serious study of the history and theory of music.

(CW II, 13)

He followed the prescribed readings and complied with his academic duties. Besides these he followed his main interests - cycling around Wicklow, playing his violin and reading books on Celtic antiquity that enlightened his wanderings through the country.

There was no chance of following up this interest in Celtic archaeology at Trinity as there was no such subject being taught then. Irish Language, which he came to take, and win prizes on, did not concern the old literature of the country. It was taught through an Irish translation of the Bible, and its obvious purpose was to offer the missionary minded a special means of access to the 'dark Roman Catholics'. "About this time I entered Trinity, but did not gain much after the first emotion had gone over." (CW II, 14)

As the months passed his devotions moved more towards music and away from evangelical religion. By 1889 he told his mother he could no longer honestly attend Church. He still upheld the strict moral conduct of his family and assumed a rather ascetic manner which made it difficult for the family to criticise him openly.

John did not differ in type from his kindred with whom he could not agree.... he adopted the fundamental principles of their Protestant philosophy and applied in his dealings with them the methods which they advocated for dealing with the world.... When he differed from them on matters of faith, he claimed the right to think for himself and applied the individualistic principle, which they supported by the text: 'Come out from among them and be ye separate'.¹⁸

Until he left his mother's house Synge had always met people either of the same social background or of the same religious persuasion as his family. Their regular yearly visits to the seaside and to their family's estate houses in Wicklow allowed young John to mix with people to whom Mrs Synge found fit to relate. As a widow of not very ample means and strict evangetic beliefs she kept a modest household and received family and friends who shared her religious convictions. Among Synge's childhood friends, his cousin Florence Ross with whom he shared his early passion for ornithology stands out. From childhood companion she grew into a close friend, and youthful first love. Later on she came to introduce him to Cherrie Matheson, a close friend of hers who happened to live close to the Synge family at Crosthwaite Park. Her family used to go to the sea at Graystones like Mrs Synge's family. Cherrie had also been brought up in a strict religious environment and conversations on religious matters in the way Synge would lead them were mostly avoided, as the young girl would probably construe them as giving in to the sin of doubt.¹⁹

¹⁸ My Uncle John, p. 54.

¹⁹ My Uncle John, p. 90.

Syngé developed a strong affection for this young girl. Stephens in the biography dates his translations of Petrarch into English prose to this period. He identified his 'Holy One' and his feelings for her with the love of Dante for Beatrice. While in Rome Syngé had the opportunity to share his doubts about religion with other guests at the pension with whom he made friends, the American Hope Rea and the Polish Marie Zdanowska. He also shared with them and with Thérèse Baydon in Paris his worries about his doomed love for Cherris.

WHEN THE MOON HAS SET

These doubts estranged him from his beloved whose father was the community leader of the Plymouth Brethren, but were openly discussed with his friends which allowed him some intellectual breathing space.²⁰ Cherris Matheson repeatedly rejected Syngé's proposals. She could never conceive of herself accepting the love of a non believer as her young neighbour claimed to be. This rejection has often been referred to as the biographical source for "When the

²⁰ Cherris's father, Sir Robert Matheson, was a staunch Unionist and one of the leaders of the Plymouth Brethren, a strict fundamentalist sect started in 1827, which took the Bible to be infallible on all matters, believed in the Second Coming and did not use ordained ministers or preachers. For Cherris to have anything to do with Syngé would imply an even stronger severance from her family group than that which Syngé underwent, since her family creed was even more strict than Mrs. Syngé's. None would be allowed in the society unless he or she was sound doctrinally and also lead a goodly life. Syngé would be too far off the mark for such a society which had itself a number of divisions on theological and ethical issues. On this issue see Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, vol 9, pp. 843-848.

Moon has Set", an un-published, un-performed first play submitted to W B Yeats and Lady Gregory.

Syngé shows here all the bitterness for Charrie's rejection, and he finds in the play a positive end to this personal crisis. Despite the dramatic value of the theme, the play is too personal to achieve dramatic strength.

Colm, having lived abroad, returns to Ireland to inherit a large estate at his uncle's death. During the night of the preparation for the funeral he becomes aware of the fact that the barriers being raised between him and his beloved, Sister Eileen, are of the same nature as those that made his uncle die a solitary bachelor. He had been in love with a beautiful catholic, Mary Costello who belonged to a once rich and noble family. The uncle did not believe in God and was refused by Mary. He remained single and she was driven into madness and now wanders the roads as a tramp.

The old uncle tried to warn his young nurse Sister Eileen of falling into the same trap and wasting her life. Colm proposes to her asking her to give up religious life to marry him, only succeeding in making her more determined to leave at once. The timely appearance of Mary Costello and her warning not to follow her own steps begin to break Sister Eileen's determination:

There's great marrying in the world but it's late
we were surely, and let yourselves not be the
same. Let you mind the words I was saying, and
give no heed to the priests or the bishops or the
angels of God, for it's little the like of them, I
was saying, knows about women or the seven sorrows
of the earth. (CW III, 173)

Mary Costello's speech has already some of the phrase structures to be found in later work, although stilted and somehow inadequate. Linguistically this must be the first character that shows influence of Synge's contact with Aran. The principles of secularism and defiance of individual pursuit of happiness are the same to be found in other plays, openly stated in *Riders Well* and also inherent in *Playboy*. Faced with the warnings and the fate of the distracted woman as the image of her future, as she in her turn also trying to do "what was right" as "really a Christian" woman, Eileen becomes more receptive to Colm's entreaties and arguments. He succeeds in making her accept marriage and creative life on his own terms, before the moon has set. They take their vows in the rising sun and with Summer's radiant nature as witness of their betrothal, asserting both the divine and earthly qualities of their human nature:

Colm. ... We have incarnated God, and been a part of the world. That is enough. [*He takes her hand.*]
 In the name of the Summer, and the Sun, and the Whole World, I wed you as my wife. [*He puts the ring on her finger.*] (CW III, 177)

The central figure is Colm who voices the opposition to exogamic marriages and witnesses the demise of the aristocratic ascendancy. Sister Eileen's character is only thinly outlined, with a fragile and contradictory will. She is the only weak female character of Synge's plays. All the other major female roles are determined, assertive and capable of operating change in themselves through self-realisation and lucid awareness of reality. It is not for instance the words of the Tramp, or the lame wooing of her lover that

lead Nora Burke to find her way out of her stilted marriage. It is her own recognition of what each type of life has to offer, and it is also her own choice that leads Nora out of the shadow of the glen.

Mary Costello, the image of the distracted woman, in and out of the asylum, shares the wisdom and insight of the characters cast in the same mould of the mad outcast, as will be dealt with in the chapter "The Fool as Outcast".

Synge's alter ego, Colm shares the author's vision of the demise of his own class.²¹ It is more than a play about the grief of a rejected love facing the prejudice of religious segregation. It is also the lucid witnessing of the replacement of a social class. At Synge's and W B Yeats's time Ascendancy meant elite in a country allegedly deprived of a middle-class, if one connects the latter with the urban wealth steeped in industry. The current image of Ireland as a rural country put everybody who was not a peasant, tenant or Catholic working class in the irregular position of decaying or affluent Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.

Synge's comment on the word itself is ironical. Following the reading of Archbishop Trench's English Past and Present, he noted that the term derived from the language of astrology and therefore he concludes with detached irony that ascendancy involved a belief in astrology.

²¹ Comparison on this matter with W B Yeats's Purgatory will be enlightening.

Mc Cormack sees "When the Moon Has Set" as a daemonic reading of the experience by a Victorian Anglo-Irish. He observes that the title itself acknowledges two potential movements but neither is endorsed as Synge stood witnessing the replacement of Ascendancy by a counter-hegemony: "neither greater darkness nor greater light".²²

The plot contains too many autobiographical traits to be ignored. The drafts include passages from Étude Morbide, which make the whole exercise more of a personal statement than a play. But because of and beyond that it is also a document of historic value.²³

In one of the drafts, Notebook 26, Colm refers to his uncle in these terms: "What a life he has had. I suppose it is a good thing that this <Anglo-Irish> aristocracy is dying out. They were neither human nor divine" (CW III, 162, n 1). As McCormack stresses the relevance of the play lies in the tension between and exposition of exogamy within a sectarian culture and a dramatization of the consequences of such exogamy in a setting which has masked its sectarian ideology.²⁴

There is not, noted in this play the plaintive assessment of the causes of the demise of the 'big house' as W B Yeats points as being poverty, public sale of property and

²² W J Mc Cormack, Ascendancy and Tradition in Anglo-Irish Literary History from 1789 to 1932. Oxford, Clarendon, 1985, p. 392.

²³ Synge will return to this theme again in an documentary and dispassioned way, in the article 'A Landlord's Garden in County Wicklow'. There also no tears are shed for the parting rulers. David Greene however sees it as the eulogy for the tragedy of the Ascendancy, which seems to be a misconstrued assumption.

²⁴ CW II, p. 395.

mésalliance. This is an endogamic attitude that considers exogamy as a *mésalliance*, implying by the marriage outside the social group a prejudice against class inferiority, racial and sectarian differences.²⁵ Synge sees the exogamic marriage as the best way of cancelling out the prejudice that permeates both social groups and possibly as the continuation of a tradition in a new social structure:

Colm. ... From our harmonized discord new notes will rise. In the end we will assimilate with each other and grow senseless and old. (CW III, 177)

The influx of new blood into the declining class will give its decaying body a new strength even if in a new ideology. The Catholic Eileen comes in the morning sun to receive her betrothed in the green silk dress which Colm gave her, leaving among the dead her veil of "credulous feeling". She personifies an acceptable image of Ireland, life-infusing, breaking its own chains.

One could easily see in the weak outline of Sister Eileen's character, that is eventually manipulated by Colm, the image of the primitive native that will receive the imprints of the cultured class. In his gradual process of allegiance to a new hegemony in Ireland, Synge kept in his attitude some features that betray his belief in the role of the enlightened classes as leaders of the people. In Ireland a part of the Ascendancy claimed to be exactly that.

²⁵ A Norman Jeffares and A B Knowland, *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W B Yeats*. London, Macmillan 1975, p. 275.

NATIONALISM IN THE DUBLIN OF THE 1890'S

"Nationalism usually conquers in the name of a putative folk culture. Its symbolism is drawn from the healthy, pristine, vigorous life of the peasants."²⁶

The period from 1891 onwards marks a relative lull in the activity of party politics. The Land War died with the large clamp down by British authority, imprisoning large numbers of Land-Leaguers and later by the rejection of the Ladies' Land League and their radical support of evicted tenants which had been more effective and committed than the work carried out by their more moderate companions, the imprisoned Land-Leaguers.²⁷

Literary groups emerged with various kinds of nationalist interest. An awareness of having a separate identity from London, which for the most part ignored anything peripheral, made these young Anglo-Irish men look to their own country as a source of inspiration. Alienation from the centre of the Empire made this generation of the last decade of the century look for its roots in the country that had only met with contempt from their predecessors.

From the early nineteenth century Ireland lived through a "crisis of authority" as the hegemony of the ruling group was gradually undermined by a new counter-hegemony, of the colonized nationalists who had not accepted their subordi-

²⁶ Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983.

²⁷ Synge's family name was involved in an eviction process that hit the headlines of some nationalist press. Castle Kevin where Synge spend many holidays was a boycotted house.

nate status. Aware of this growing challenge the Ascendancy tried to create sentimental links with the nation that would legitimate their supremacy and leadership and safeguarding their material and cultural dominance.

The Ascendancy chose to make its link to the nation through the remote peasants, most of whom had become tenant-farmers after the Famine. In so doing, the Ascendancy sidestepped a major group, the Catholic middle class.²⁸ They were already producing and deploying their own counter-hegemony, with principles that the Irish intellectuals found alien to the real Irish tradition. The model image used by the Ascendancy highlighted the close link the native lords had with their subjects before the Saxon invasions, and saw in the peasant, the keeper of the old Celtic tradition. An interest in Celticism was the dominant characteristic of this movement and an image of their ideological mobility. They looked far into the past for a common denominator that all groups could share. In their search, they did not look for the Gael but the Celt, as France and Germany had been doing for years then, producing with it a large amount of philological and anthropological study.²⁹ England could also look into the British Celt and contribute to the wealth of research in ancient literature and saga, study of the race and its sub-division and philological study.³⁰ Any

²⁸ Another group which was totally ignored was the cottier-labourer who lived in almost total destitution.

²⁹ Cf. E. Renan, Poésie des Races Celtiques, 1897.

³⁰ Matthew Arnold, English Literature and Irish Politics, edited by R H Super, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1973.

connections with the native's religion, Catholicism was seen as either a non-Celtic issue, therefore non-Irish and irrelevant or detrimental to this approximation. Its hold on the peasants was justified by the similarities popery had with pagan religions, which made it easy to assimilate by a non-rational, emotive temperament as that of the Celt.

With these postulates backing their new interest in the destinies of Ireland, Protestant Ascendancy saw itself as entitled and empowered to embody the struggle of light over darkness, truth over error, supremacy of protestant Britain over the barbarism of Rome. Nationalists saw the future differently. As James Fintan Lalor contended;

"it is a mere question between a people and a class - ... They or we must quit this island ... they or we are doomed"³¹

Through the 19th century various Ascendancy intellectuals had called their class's attention to the issue, such as Ferguson, Davis, Gavan Duffy, John Dillon.³²

³¹ James Fintan Lalor, Collected Writings. Dublin, Talbot Press, 1947, p. 63, as quoted in David Cairns and Shaun Richards, Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture. Manchester University Press, 1988, p. 51.

³² Sir Samuel Ferguson was Protestant poet and propagandist who recognised himself as an Irishman, and his class the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, owner of nine-tenths of the land and the better equipped intellectually to rule the land; his love for the land is equal to his fear of leniency towards Catholics which would lead to unrest, repeal and ultimate separation from the empire. For Thomas Davis however there was a difference of interests between the Ascendancy and other protestants who were not land-owners, and he joined the Repeal Movement lead by O'Connell, in an attempt to evade the identification of sect and nationalism, by creating a cross-class cross-sectarian alliance. Found with Charles Gavan Duffy and John Dillon the journal The Nation, a repealer mouthpiece. This journal published regularly ballads of nationalist inspiration later published in a collection The Spirit of the Nation, with Synge seems to have appre-

These "colonizers who refuse", using Albert Memmi's term, take the stance of being Irish and Protestant.³³ As Cairns and Richards point out, most of these moves by the colonizers towards the interests of the colonized have not the objective of identification and (self) absorption, rather an interest to maintain influence through the association and appropriation of the images of Celticism.³⁴

The attempts of people like Ferguson to create unity by digging into the distant past for a "locus of national consciousness" - "a green point of neutral ground" encouraging the different groups to meet each other, still sought to achieve cultural pre-eminence for the Anglo-Irish. Davis saw the landlords' interests as different from those of the Ascendancy, and so looked for a Protestant platform that did not have to support the landlords against tenants.

The portrait of the colonizer drawn by Memmi rightly identifies the uneasy ideological position of people like Synge:

ciated in his youth and then rejected as poetically ineffective. See Cairns and Richards, pp. 22-41.

³³ Albert Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized, London, Souvenir Press, 1974, p. 39.

³⁴ Cairns and Richards, p. 25.

The colonized in the midst of whom he lives are not his people and never will be. After careful consideration, he cannot be identified with them and they cannot accept him. (...) He does not foresee such an assimilation; (...) While he happens to dream of a tomorrow, a brand-new society in which the colonized ceased to be colonized, he certainly does not conceive, on the other hand, of a deep transformation of his own situation and of his own personality.³⁵

Synge can be seen as a "colonizer who refuses" meaning that his conscious rejection of his class politics and ideology does not ensure the erasure of unconscious attitudes and a intimate sense of detachment from the practical processes the nationalist élites chose to pursue. On the other hand the way he critically rejects the manipulation of the Irish peasant, and the genuine sympathy for the people he describes, can put him "malgré lui" as an 'organic intellectual' as he contributed in his own way to the fashioning of a definition of the Irish as Subject.

The record of Synge's public life at the last decade of the century finds him following his arts degree at Trinity College, while attending music lessons at the Royal Irish Academy of Music where he played the violin. His time then seems to have been taken up by these two courses and there is no record of his involvement with University Societies and other debating or political clubs.

Living with his mother in Dublin and having a relative as tutor, Anthony Traill, his family environment seemed to have persisted through his college years (My Uncle John, p. 43), ensuring a social life which fitted Mrs Synge's strict

³⁵ Mammai, pp. 39-40.

tures. It was only during his visits to the continent that he found people with whom he could share his thoughts and where he could join in open discussion of religious and later political issues. The open difference on religious matters with his family led to differences of opinion concerning politics and the land situation in Ireland.

A LANDLORD'S GARDEN IN WICKLOW

I would like to argue that Synge's most clear expression of his class alignment as a "colonizer who refuses" his oppressive role is to be found in his article 'A Landlord's Garden in Wicklow'. He stayed with his mother's party at Castle Kevin for the Summer 1889 after it had been boycotted for a number of years and was lying in decay.

This article gives us his thoughts on the matter of the landlord class to which he belonged. Synge pictures it as an endangered species that is unable to find ways of altering its doomed course. Its more glorious past and present pectiness are described without much commiseration. One is made aware of the plight of "farmers and fishing people" but the little concern for the dwindling of the old landlord families is probably well deserved in Synge's opinion, "These owners of the land are not much pitied at present day or much deserving pity" (CW II, 231). He could see them as separated from the country, uprooted and aimless. In the Collected Works edition of this article, Alan Price added the following note:

Still this class with its many genuine qualities had little patriotism, in the right sense, few ideas, and no seed for the future, so it has gone to the wall.³⁶

Synges's brief description of the landlord class in the eighteenth century as "high-spirited and highly cultivated aristocracy", could have taken his family as a topical example. On both sides of the family there had been a gradual decrease in status and wealth.

Synges's maternal grandmother, Mrs. Traill was born in Drumboe Castle. She married a clergyman, Dr Traill and after his death during the Famine her large family could not even afford to live in the Dublin suburb of Blackrock and had to emigrate for a while. Returning to Blackrock she joined the large number of people of the affluent landed gentry who through mismanagement and poor rent collection had lost their opulent way of life in their country houses. Coming to Dublin to lead a more economical life, they did not mix with the Dublin affluent professional class. They were socially displaced and if a few managed to recover their previous status, it was difficult for the others who did not to integrate into Dublin society at a much lower rank than previous class expectations.

The Synges family estate had been enlarged in the early nineteenth century by his great-grandfather Francis Synges. He took great pride in educating his son John both in Dublin and Oxford. During his journeys through Europe he was im-

³⁶ CW II, p. 231, footnote 1, taken from Box File C.

pressed by Pestalozzi's educational methods.³⁷ When he returned to Ireland, fired both by his educational interest and evangelical fervour, he set up a printing press to further his purposes and a school for poor children. He was the father of a very large family, 14 children on whom he practised his educational methods and instilled his religious faith. He became a member of the Plymouth Brethren and moved to Devon probably due to his religious convictions.

His managerial decisions on the property seem to have been less fertile than his religious zeal, for his improvements to the estate were not of a profitable nature, rather a decorative one. With the recession after the Napoleonic wars he found himself heavily in debt. It was his elder son Francis who rescued part of the estate from the Encumbered Estates Court. Uncle Francis, as he was known to Syngé managed to make it prosper by the end of the fifties, but his brothers had to take professions to support themselves and their families. John Hatch Syngé, Syngé's father became a barrister and married in 1856. As he also died quite young, when John was only one year old, Syngé's mother and her family lived from the rents of their properties.³⁸

The Syngé family seemed to have enjoyed a good relationship with the peasant workers and local population which

³⁷ He became then known to the family as "Pestalozzi John".

³⁸ My Uncle John, pp. 8-13.

continued during Uncle Francis's life. On his death his wife's second husband came to be the owner of the estate.

Synge visited Glanmore in the Summer of 1889 with his family party who had rented the demesne from the present owner, Aunt Editha. The memories of this visit together with the decaying state of the property at Castle Kevin, were the sources for his comments published in the *Manchester Guardian* on July 1st 1907, 'A Landlord's Garden in County Wicklow'.

As Synge points out in the article the descendants of these educated aristocratic families survived abroad or in Dublin, declining in wealth, largess and taste. The following appreciation could well pass as a dispassionate appreciation of the evolution of his own family tastes:

... and bad bookbinding, bad pictures, and bad decorations are thought well of, where rich bindings, beautiful miniatures and finely carved chimney-pieces were once prized by the old Irish landlords. (CW II, 231)

There is no more hope for the landlord class in its power position, as Synge is able to assess it in his mature life, than there is for the Russian landed gentry portrayed by Checkov: a dispirited waiting and embittered whetting of the axe that will fell the orchard. But there is no bitterness in Synge's realization of this demise.

After referring to the previously active role of this aristocratic expended class as patrons of the arts, he turns to the present to recount an incident involving him and a

little thief in the decaying remnants of a landlord's garden, the epitome of social difference.

The garden which grew fruits, berries and "beautiful and rare plants" for the pleasure and leisure of the landlord - in a country where the majority of the population survived on the produce of a potato garden diet - now laid waste in a boycotted house.

Synge kept watch on the garden fruit on a Sunday morning when everybody was expected to be in Church, and chased the young man he caught stealing fruit. He listened to his quickly conjured excuses without believing a word, and after an admonition let him escape. Synge is not quick to raise invective against the thief when he finds out that contrary to his story he lives quite near by:

Yet it must not be thought that this young man was dishonest; I would have been quite ready the next day to trust him with a ten pound note (CW II, 233)

The men of Ireland who are led or forced to petty crime are those he also finds he can trust if tomorrow they find themselves on the same side of the fence.

It is a politically divided subject that one who asserts his 'landlordist' background by checking out the boundaries of a property that no longer belongs to his family, at the same time refrains from identifying the thieves with the decay of the property, even if the mark of their presence was more noticeable than the landlord's:

one could see three or four tracks with well-worn holes, ... where boys and tramps came over to steal and take away any apples or other fruits that were in season (CW II, 230)

When he was very young Synge had been given insufficient explanation for the burning of the cottage of a poor family evicted for lack of payment. The reason given by his mother proved the complete alignment of his family with the landlord's ideology: his family lived on those rents and if the tenants failed to pay, that fact became an open challenge to the Protestant class and a triumph of popery.³⁹ Still kindling the flame that had led her father's faith and using the methods of the estate agent who carried out the policies of absentee landlords, the Synge family was then strongly attacked in the nationalist press.

Synge's personal progress from evangelical faith to scientific doubt, through the enchantment of music and its ecstasy into 'temperate nationalism', his awareness of the power of language as he could find it among the peasants, were the strongest markers of his development.

The encounter with people who shared his opinions or showed interest for the same causes was the determinant move in his career. Attending the courses at the Sorbonne on Celtic antiquity and literature given by Petit de Julleville, Arbois de Jubainville, the long lasting friend-

³⁹ Dr Traill, an Ulster evangelical enthusiast made his faith prevail above his career. Passages from his notebooks are included in the Stephens Typescript, pp. 118-27. As Stephens remarks in *My Uncle John*, p. 15, "He spent his life, as he put it waging war against popery in its thousand forms of wickedness, which did not always endear him to his ecclesiastical superiors."

ship and correspondence with Mackenna, and later the mutually enriching friendship and partnership with W B Yeats and Lady Gregory, helped him find his own articulate voice. In the circle of the Irish National Theatre Society he also found strong and much needed support when his work caused outrage in the Dublin audiences.

THE 1890'S AND THE LITERARY REVIVAL

The imagination has wandered away to grow puissant and terrible again, in lonely vigils where she sits and broods among things that have been touched by madmen and things that have the smell of death on them and books written with the blood of horrible crimes.⁴⁰

Synge's association with the Irish Literary Theatre brought new changes to the then established oppositions within its mentors. There was a group devoted to the creation of a modern theatre in the line of European independent theatres, producing plays on contemporary issues by modern authors and there was also a group more inclined to the creation of an Irish Theatre by fostering the production of Irish plays by Irish dramatists, in a symbolist tone, experimenting with technique and using Irish actors, reviving Irish legends and myths, serving as support to the struggle for creation of some level of political independence. William Butler Yeats, the leader of the Irish Literary Theatre, welcomed Synge's arrival as if this was the end of a long wait for the avatar of a new age for Irish Culture.

⁴⁰ Version of Colm's philosophical speech which in Item 51 appears as part of the argument between Colm and Sister Eileen in Act two. Quoted by Professor Saddlemyer, CW III. p. 176, note 3.

The first substantive author to come out of the Abbey Theatre, Synge was going to influence the evolution of the Irish Theatre as Yeats anticipated, but in a totally unexpected way. He would not pledge the resurrection of the old heroes of the Irish legends, or any kind of symbolist drama. His heroes and heroines were to be characters that had hitherto never had any voice on stage, at least not their own. These are the peasant and vagrant communities as representatives of themselves, rather than the usual appropriation to stand for image of a beleaguered, suffering nation, or as represented by the British press, as half brutes of simian features.

POLITICAL STALEMATE

"...there is quite an awakening in Ireland in art and literature - such a comfort to have done with politics for the moment."⁴¹

In 1891 Parnell, the charismatic leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party died after his political career had been ruined through his connection with a divorce case that divided Ireland and his party. The English Liberal government manipulated the issue skilfully, causing Parnell to lose his party support as a condition to continuing Home Rule negotiations. And with Parnell's political death, the Home Rule talks also came to an end.

The 1890s became therefore one of the wastelands of Irish politics. The Parliamentary Party reached its lowest ebb ever. The main constructive force at this time was the cultural renaissance, as antiquarians, poets and intellectuals in general found in Ireland and Irishness a motive and a

⁴¹ Augusta Gregory, Seventy Years Being the Autobiography of Lady Gregory. Garrads Cross, Colin Smythe, p. 383.

source of inspiration, imbued with a new identity, no longer related to the centre of the Empire, but issuing from their own land.

There was in the spirit of Irish writers an undercurrent of messianism, the hope for a Deliverer. This belief made them search for analogies between old Irish legends and current History, comparisons with nationalist movements in Europe - Garibaldi in Italy, Germany and its Wagnerian images and idols of an heroic past, the American Independence and its promises of support. One comparison, widely used, was based on contemporary struggle with England: England stood for commerce and materialism whereas Ireland stood for imagination, idealism and spirituality.⁴²

Another favoured comparison was that of Ireland with Israel -- England would be the oppressive Egypt and sometimes Parnell would be the Irish Moses; quite appropriate as he died before achieving his dream.⁴³

In 1893 the Gaelic League was created responding to a call by Eoin MacNeill: "A Plea and a Plan for the Extension of the Movement to preserve and spread the Irish Language". Douglas Hyde made the first address in November 1892, "On the Necessity of De-Anglicizing the Irish People".⁴⁴ The League professed to be non-sectarian but in the end precipitated the conflict between what was to be known as Irish Ireland and Anglo-Irish Ireland. The League looked for the creation of a new Irish literature in Irish whereas Yeats and others proposed the development of an Irish literature in English that would rise to European recognition and sta-

⁴² See R F Foster, Modern Ireland 1600-1972. London Allen Lane 1988, for an updated and inclusive general view of Irish history providing an intelligent economic, social, cultural and religious analysis. On this period, see Part Four, Chapter eighteen, pp. 431-460, from which the following references have been taken.

⁴³ Lady Gregory identifies Parnell with Moses in her play The Deliverer. For Yeats too the Irish race was a chosen one.

⁴⁴ Foster, Modern Ireland, pp. 448-9.

tus. For Douglas Hyde and his movement the stress was on propaganda rather than on literature. One of its most prominent members, Padraic Pearse was inspired by the thought of creating a nationalism shaped by the native language. Soon the identification of true Gael with Catholicism created a deeper sectarian divide that was to oppose intellectuals generally interested in promoting an independent Irish cultural identity. Although there were other forces, movements, political and social groups in conflict, to give a general perspective let it suffice at this stage to mark the confrontation of two opposing principles. There was on the one hand a literary movement that valued literature as the means to achieve a sense of nationality which would transcend political values because it would restore to the nation its soul, and here were included most of the Anglo-Irish "returned exiles". And on the other hand there was a group of politicians who believed a play, a book or a poem that had any claims to nationalism had to conform to their image of a Holy Catholic Ireland, inhabited by pure, innocent, honest people.

The choice of plays and themes by the Irish Literary Theatre did not always coincide with the purpose of restoring a native Irish culture, as some nationalist leaders saw it. Here the well bred, lordly independence of art above propaganda had a social correlative in the Ascendancy manner of the authors. We will now follow the events that led to the creation of the Abbey Theatre.

THE ORIGINS OF THE ABBEY THEATRE

The story of the Abbey Theatre has already been told by many. Malone in Irish Drama and Ellis-Fermor in Irish Dramatic Movement provide even-handed accounts, although the work of Hogan and Kilroy The Abbey Theatre and the publication of the correspondence of the Abbey directors by Professor Saddlemyer, offer an amount of material and information

the tumultuous early years. In 1891 Yeats was one of the founders of the Irish Literary Society in London; Yeats met George Moore and Edward Martyn, two cousins with literary aspirations and tastes of very dissimilar nature, still both attracted by W B Yeats's ideals of "poetic faith, poetic practice, poetic ideal".⁴⁵ In 1892 a National Literary Society was founded in Dublin, again with W B Yeats: Douglas Hyde gave the presidential lecture on "The De-Anglicisation of Ireland".

In 1897 Yeats and Lady Gregory met and discussed plays. They and Martyn planned to produce Heather Field and Count-ess Cathleen. To finance their project, the production and further work on the same line but on a regular basis, they drew up a statement, which they sent to three hundred people, appealing for subscriptions:

We propose to have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Una Ellis-Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement, 1954, p. 59.

⁴⁶ Lady Augusta Gregory, Our Irish Theatre. London 1914, p. 20.

This was their first manifesto, the making public of a set of artistic ideals like so many other groups at the time.⁴⁷ On January the 16th 1899, The Irish Literary Theatre was founded under the auspices of the National Literary Society, and the financial support of Edward Martyn, a wealthy Catholic landlord.

Like the Théâtre Libre in Paris, it was created as a playwright's theatre, determining the form, material and actual production of the play. The year in which the Irish Literary Theatre was founded saw also the start in Moscow of what would be the Moscow Art Theatre, as Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko started on a project to create a new theatre. Both the Russians and the Fay brothers were influenced by Antoine's Théâtre Libre.

The difference between the Moscow Art Theatre and the Irish Literary Theatre was that the first was directed by theatre people and the second by writers; the former was concerned with style in production and acting, the latter was more interested in which type of plays to write.

One of the innovations of the Russian company was the idea of the performance as a dramatic ensemble, abolishing

⁴⁷ Other groups were established covering the widest scope of cultural endeavours. In 1884 the Gaelic Association was founded promoting physical training in the fashion of the other European Fitness movements, like the Czech gymnast clubs, and emphasising Irish sports. In 1900, the feminist movement Inghinidhe na hÉireann (daughters of Erin), led by Maud Gonne and Anna Johnson had nationalist interests, both political and cultural. They defended a policy of total independence, as well as the promotion of a boycott to the degrading contact with low English culture, "vulgar English entertainment, music-hall, theatre, songs, low English literature. Cf. Foster, pp. 499-450.

the star system. Yeats proposed his principle of total theatre. The Fays were the first to have Irish actors producing Irish plays and this met the needs of the Irish Literary Theatre for performers who could reproduce Irish accents according to the needs of each play.

Paris was the source of most of the influences that permeated the group. Ibsen's naturalism came together with Zola's and his social concern to write plays with a purpose, articulate and logical. Lugné-Poe's productions of Maeterlinck's plays gave a platform for the man who was to be a leading influence in the symbolist theatre. His static play principles seem to have an accurate and successful example in Riders to the Sea. Even the French language had an important role here. Wilde's Salomé was written in French. This play paved the way for Yeats's total theatre with its use of poetry, music, masks, mime, dance and other effects.

The symbolist influence was not only that of Maeterlinck but also of Mallarmé, G Moreau and Flaubert's play Hérodiade. In the early days of the Irish Literary Theatre there was some struggle for the predominance of a dramatic school, which the several splits in the group illustrate. There was a struggle between the realist drama of everyday life and the symbolist drama of inner life. Both used Irish themes and settings - either the peasant dwellings of Wicklow and Aran or the palaces and mountain tops of fairy tales and legends.

The mentors of The Irish Literary Theatre Society were of mixed backgrounds, some cosmopolitan and sophisticated, other more provincial. They all shared the formal education which Dublin could provide, followed in some cases by a season in London or the Continent. W B Yeats, Edward Martin, George Russell (AE), Lady Augusta Gregory and George Moore, in different fashions, reached the same final sensibility. Synge included Trinity and Europe in his educational background, with Paris and the Aran Islands supplying inspirational sources. All experimented in other kinds of writing before writing drama. Synge progressed through music, poetry, ^{and} literary criticism before trying the dramatic genre. The dual education of these returned exiles put them in a position of self-consciousness and some distance vis à vis their compatriots. Although trained to look beyond Ireland for their culture, their consciousness of their Irish heritage prevented them from identifying with any other nation or national culture. Their upbringing enabled them to participate in the intellectual activities of their time, and with that intention and interest they returned to Ireland to invest their artistic potential in the nationalist movement which at the turn of the century was reaching even Trinity College, the bulwark of anti-nationalism.

From the very start they had to convince or to appease a very determined opposition. The pamphlet "Souls for Gold", appearing in the Spring of 1899, prepared the reception of the group's first play, Yeats's The Countess Cathleen. The controversy was roused on religious grounds; the

Cardinal intervened, Martyn was afraid and wanted to withdraw his support. Two theologians passed the play as innocuous. This time Yeats went to some length to appease the sensibilities of the opposition, changing some passages in the play.

The first production of the Irish Literary Theatre gave The Heather Field as a success but The Countess Cathleen was produced with police protection and some signs of disagreement. The performance was at the Antient Concert Rooms in Great Brunswick Street.

These two plays set out what were to become the major lines of production of the Irish Literary Theatre and later the Abbey- a naturalist group producing plays of immediate social and local concern like Heather Field. The Building Fund. The Mineral Workers. by William Boyle, and another group writing plays using Irish legend and a fairy tale ambience to evoke the atmosphere of an heroic past, with intense nationalistic feelings. Whereas one strove for simple language the other tried to revive poetic drama, elevate dramatic language above the platitudes of modern educated (middle-class) drawing-room conversation. Yeats looked for musicality and a rhythm in language that he hoped could be found in Irish peasant speech. In their mood some of Yeats's plays were close to Masterlinck, and it was Synge who produced the best examples of the use of peasant language, rhythms and imagery, for which Yeats confessed neither he nor Lady Gregory had an accurate ear.

In 1901 change came to The Irish Literary Theatre. Till then the plays were produced by English actor companies, under the suggestion of George Moore. In 1901, AE introduced the Fay brothers to W B Yeats. According to Greene and Stephens, and despite some widespread belief encouraged by comments from George Moore, the brothers William and Frank were not mere amateurs but had good training in acting and Frank had his own theory of what a national theatre should be. According to the same sources again, Frank and Yeats corresponded before the introduction by Moore:

Frank wrote articles and reviews for Arthur Griffith's *The United Irishman*, and it was as a result of his review of *The Land of Heart's Desire* that he began to correspond with Yeats.⁴⁸

Their amateur company, the Osmond Dramatic Society was then producing Alice Milligan's Red Hugh (she was writing plays on legendary heroes in a heroic tone and to much public praise) and also tried plays in Gaelic. Their company interested the Irish Literary Theatre writers for their way of acting and also for the possibility of being more willing to try new methods and ways of acting. Yeats gave the Fays his Cathleen ni Houlihan and Moore left, obviously dissatisfied with the evolution of the group; he had written one play for it The Banding of the Rough. It is a play written in the manner of Ibsen, closely resembling The Enemy of the People.

The artistic differences in The Irish Literary Theatre were to be these: Yeats was more concerned with the

⁴⁸ Greene and Stephens, pp. 132-3 and 174.

mythopoëic function of nationality in literature than with the usefulness of literature as propaganda. After Parnell's death he was concerned for a time with making propaganda into a living form, with the support or influence of Maud Gonne for whom he wrote Cathleen ni Houlihan. On the other hand Moore had lived in Paris and was attracted and connected with Antoine's Théâtre Libre. Moore and Martyn looked to Ibsen and wanted to do in Dublin what he had done in Oslo.

The principles of the Irish National Theatre Society, founded in Dublin, in 1902, "to continue if possible on a more permanent basis the work begun by the Irish Literary Theatre", were nationalist in impetus and idealist in concept and artistic aims. The first series of performances with the new company directed by the Fay brothers included AE's Deirdre and Yeats's Cathleen ni Houlihan. They had no regular house then, using several halls in Dublin. The programmes sometimes included talks by Yeats on such topics as his theory of chanting, or the reform of the theatre.

Subsidised Theatre

In 1903 the company went to London with two plays by Yeats, The Hour Glass and Cathleen ni Houlihan; Twenty Five and The Pot of Broth by Lady Gregory, and Fred Ryan's The Laying of the Foundations. Miss Horniman became interested in the company and got involved in the production of Yeats's next play, The King's Threshold. This play was coupled with Synge's first play, In the Shadow of the Glen. There was

some reaction to Synge's play, and Maud Gonne left the theatre in protest. There was some protest from students, and articles in the papers about the slander of Irish womanhood. From then onwards it seemed Synge would be under the spotlight of the nationalistic press. When in 1904 the company went to London with In the Shadow of the Glen, Riders to the Sea, Yeats's The King's Threshold and Lady Gregory's Where There is Nothing, there was again controversy in the press about the aggravation of taking abroad this slanderous image of Irish life. The objective of the group however was to present their work to a wider audience and to get some financial support. They were successful on both attempts.

Miss Horniman answered this call for support of the company by providing it with a theatre. For that she bought the old Mechanics Institute and made it into the Abbey Theatre. It opened on 27th December 1904 with On Baile's Strand by Yeats and Spreading the News by Lady Gregory.

With the offer of a house came the opportunity to become a professional company, since Miss Horniman also provided a subsidy to run it as a resident company. This issue of the status of the company provoked a severance in the group. Part of them made a point of remaining amateur as a way of securing their independence, and also being an amateur company meant that everybody had a say in its running. Now with directors, managers, leading actors, some of the political principles on which the former company was founded lost their meaning. Some of the actors who left then joined Maud Gonne's company.

In the earlier years of their acquaintance, Miss Horniman had very flattering things to say about Synge's future:

Comparing your planets with those in Mr. Yeats' nativity I find it clear that his influence has been excellent for both of you ... and you will add to the prosperity of his theatrical schemes.⁴⁹

However, she came to dislike him because he opposed her permanent interference in the management of the company. He might have prosperity written in the stars, but to her his influence seemed to bring trouble in the air.

With very regular conflicts with their patron, the company continued through the years of Synge, keeping the same structure: a board of directors, Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge who chose the plays and administered the company, Frank Fay stage-managed, directed and trained the cast. Yeats for instance claimed that Frank knew more "about the history of speech on the stage" than anyone he had ever met.⁵⁰ Later both brothers left the company, as the differences of temperament aggravated the division over different attitudes concerning management of the company. Miss Horniman secured the patent and subsidy for a period of ten years, at the end of which in principle the subsidy should end. She was often acerbic about the actor's attitudes, and came to dislike Frank Fay in particular, claiming he was not competent to direct Yeats' plays.

⁴⁹ Letter from Annie Horniman to Synge, quoted by Greene and Stephens, p. 175.

⁵⁰ Letter to 'The Academy and Literature', May 16, 1903, as quoted in Greene and Stephens, p. 133.

One of her points of honour was that the theatre should not be used for any kind of political activities. As far as she was concerned the fact that the theatre she offered Yeats was situated in Ireland was just an unfortunate geographical accident. This she made amply clear in her correspondence with her "dear Deamon". She had agreed to pay a subsidy till the end of 1910, and then sell the lease and the house for one tenth of the money she had invested in it.⁵¹ However her generous contribution to the development of the Abbey must be duly recognised, as the permanent venue and a comfortable financial independence from the box office earnings allowed the company to develop their own principles and establish a style that was easily identified and came to be respected as their trademark.

The plans Yeats had fostered for an Irish theatre came to fruition, as young writers and actors kept coming to the Abbey. From the onset there were two different types of plays being offered: the modern, realist play in the fashion of Ibsen and Chechov, such as those of AE and Fred Ryan, and symbolist drama typified by Yeats, using themes from old Irish saga material. These were the ways Yeats could envisage the creation of "a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic litera-

⁵¹ Her connection was not to end amicably but came about due to a blunder caused by a young member of the company. Lennox Robinson, in the absence of the directors, allowed the evening's performance to take place when the death of King Edward VII had already been announced. This act was understood as an impertinent sign of rebellion to the Crown, the "wicked politician" Miss Horniman could not tolerate in her theatre. See Hugh Hunt, The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre 1904-1978. Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1979, pp. 90-91

ture". This indeed came to be, but followed a different course, with the arrival of Synge.

Synge's plays will put the dichotomy in a different perspective. The variety of his literary and artistic interests, which included Walter von der Vogelweide, Villon, Rabelais, Dante and Petrarch, Thomas à Kempis, Anatole France, Maeterlinck and Pierre Loti to name a few, were not the daily fare of most of his critics. He would neither subscribe to the "Cuchulainoid, springdayish" play nor to the "modern" play with middle class concerns, representing the ideas on art and life of this class.

His choice of peasant drama had intellectual and artistic reasons as we have found: his interest in Rabelais, Villon, and the poetry of the English idiom as he could hear it among the peasants. As we also noted this choice was one of political alignment as well. Synge could not identify with the methods of current politics and their underlying ideology. He had little sympathy with the promoters of changes who in the end were as alienated from the people they defended as his own family who took openly the side of the Ascendancy.⁵²

⁵² Recently the family name had hit the headlines of the Dublin press due to the eviction of some poor tenants from the Synge estates carried out by the author's brother Edward. The Freeman's Journal had reported largely on Edward Synge's eviction methods in 1887 - the height of Parnellism and the Land War. The family allowed itself no space for remorse or contemporing, as in their eyes much more was involved than the payment of rents, and they had to prove they would not bend to rule of the "dark Catholics".

Synge felt a stranger in this society and that led him to be detached from party politics, a detachment which was looked^{on} with suspicion by nationalists. Synge however, thought that this detachment gave him objectivity in the observation of Irish matters. He was little concerned with the issues that were life and death matters for other writers who, nevertheless shared his interest in the advancement of art in Ireland and the rehabilitation of the Irish character, so reviled in the British press. Instead he wrote plays peopled with characters his fellow patriots would not like to admit existed, who spoke a language critics claimed was a ludicrous fabrication, while Synge kept saying that this language he had heard among the people, a language full of strange turns, from minds full of poetry, wonder and the fantastic energy of life.

Such an attitude was met with suspicion and resentment from the nationalists, some factions of the church and even some intellectuals who could find no profit in the public support of such un-holy causes as Synge's plays. But it would be Synge's plays which created a following among younger writers, as the generation of Cork realists, as Daniel Corkery, T. C. Murray and Lennox Robinson, who developed to its limits the possibilities of Synge's peasant dialect.⁵³ In May 1909 James Cousins published an article encouraging some sort of return to historical drama claiming that even the National Literary Society believed

⁵³ Hogan and Kilroy, The Abbey Theatre The Years of Synge 1905-1909. Dublin, The Dolmen Press, 1978, p. 331.

...the Irish stage was suffering from too much peasant. The city man was suggested.(...) But there is something more substantial to be done. (...) I have had a longing for the breath of romance. I think I want someone to write a new historical play. I want someone to get "back to the land"- not the ground, but the soul out of which the things of the present have grown. Delving there he may, more surely than among the fluctuating and conventional eccentricities of cities, find his spade on the bedrock of nationality.⁵⁴

Ironically Synge had then his Dairdre play in hand, in the fastidious process of rewriting each act several times, but as it will become obvious, his Saga play will not cater for the needs of Sinn Féin readers.

Following Synge's principle that one had to wait for the time when urban life could be the source for art in the theatre, as he found now peasant life was, we can say that this time arrived when another controversial genius was able to make it yield its fruits, Sean O'Casey.

Yeats supported openly these new dramatists whose work was so different from what he had been looking for, yet so close to poetic life and diction, and above all so near the promise of an Irish theatre that would also have a share in the dignity of the world.

⁵⁴ 'A Word for Historical Drama', Sinn Féin (15 May 1909) p.1, quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, p. 329.

CHAPTER THREE

MATERNITY AND NECESSITY OR THE SURVIVAL OF WOMEN IN THE
SHADOW OF THE GLEN AND RIDERS TO THE SEA

Sublimation is a process of upward displacement through the social stratification of discourse. It is both a semiosis and a class variable, detected only in a perceived *difference* from 'unsublimated' practices. It is in fact the main mechanism whereby a group or class or individual bids for symbolic superiority over others: sublimation is inseparable from strategies of cultural domination. ... What is in question is not some abstract repression of 'instinct' but the validation of one set of social practices over against others. As a matter of fact one can never repress, or sublimate an *instinct*: one can however repress an already existing social or class practice by an act of censorship and discursive transcendence.¹

The first two plays presented by Synge to a small gathering in Yeats' 'at home' evenings in London met with immediate support from Yeats and Lady Gregory who saw in him the particular genius that was worth fighting for. Both plays feature women as the important characters who experience an internal struggle. Set in some desolate, poor island, the location of Riders to the Sea is easily identified with the atmosphere of the Aran Islands. The story of a woman keening for her lost son also resembles that told by Petrie in

¹ Stallybrass and White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression. p. 197.

his "Life".² The last cottage at the head of a long glen in County Wicklow is identified as one of the places where Synge used to stay and was recorded in a photograph. The story itself was recorded in the Aran Islands by Synge, and years later in America Lady Gregory was told by an Irish nurse maid that this was a traditional 'hearth story'; such stories were told in the long evenings by the fire, therefore commonly known and accepted even in the mainland as part of the Irish folklore, a fact strongly denied by the nationalists, who based all their further grievances against the play on the fact that it was anything but Irish.

These plays already show a distinctive diverging ideological positioning. Within the frame of the "colonizer who refuses", as observed by Cairns and Richards, and mentioned in the previous chapter, it is apparent that there is a disjuncture between Synge's ideology and this group ideology. According to Eagleton this gap between general ideology and authorial ideology may be determined by biographical factors such as sex, religion, region or by diachronical determination: the authorial ideology may "belong" to a putative future general ideology, as is the case of the revolutionary author.³ If there is a future ideology into which Synge's

² Collected Works, III, p. 31. For *Riders to the Sea*, see p. 3, "SCENE / An Island off the West of Ireland". In Synge's notebooks there are references to Petrie, as in Item 4373 (5), for 1889, among lecture notes, in page 11, "Romans & Druids. Conversion of Leoghair by St. P. Petrie II 196". As mentioned in The Synge Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College Dublin, there are more references to Petrie in Item 4375.

³ Terry Eagleton, p. 59. It is also interesting to note Eagleton's brief reference to the case of dual ideological insertion of the author, which could profitably be developed to study Synge's case. "There is also the case of the insertion of the author into the GI of another society, whether contemporaneous or not: the problem of

authorial ideology can be integrated, this can be in part measured by the degree of integration of Synge's work in the curricula of Irish schools and in the frequency of production of his plays. Such integration has to some extent happened. But the issues raised by his female characters are accommodated now in a group ideology that is not yet universally acknowledged in the general ideology. Feminists can identify Synge's heroines as women who are struggling to find a voice of their own. In this perspective the following two pieces are far from being mere 'period plays'. They transcend location and time, and also gender in the sense that the confrontation is not only between the sexes or age, but between personality and life in a hostile environment.

The particular feature of Synge's heroines, as will be confirmed in later chapters, is that these women characters take life in their own hands for their own purposes, for the realisation of their personal individual expectations, not as the embodiment of a general mythical utterance of the Land, the Irish land. This identification is all ^{that} the other nationalist plays wish to do, try hard to do - to let their work be understood as an identification of female character with Irish woman, and heroine with Mother Ireland. It seems that Synge was far too engaged with these characters as real people to allow them to serve causes they did not espouse, or that at least Synge believed did not serve their interests. Synge was particularly impressed with the Aran women

'cosmopolitanism'. Such insertion is always in the last instance a question of the determination of the 'native' GI." p. 59, note 3.

in whom he still found traces of a nobler past in their fight against poverty and suffering.

As Andrew Carpenter notes, the women in Synge's early prose and first play are impressions of a vision cast at a distance. In *Autobiography*, *Vita Vecchia*, *Étude Morbide* and *When the Moon Has Set* all the women are idealisations of the feminine, vehicles for Synge's search for his place in life.

Due to his ill health he remained at home longer than most boys of his age, and his family surroundings were peopled by devout women of his mother's persuasion or religious men. Still his commonly reserved and circumspect character brightened up in female company.⁴ His masculinity was not so assertive as to inhibit the free communication of women who still found him an appealing companion, as proved by his prolonged correspondence with the several women friends he met while on the Continent. He was less reticent in the company of women and this encouraged a similar easiness from them. For Carpenter the first noticeable change in his more realistic approach to women comes with his meeting with Hope Rea, an American whom he met in Italy in 1896 and with whom he felt sufficiently at ease to discuss the most varied subjects on an equal footing. "Now the women in his stories and sketches begin to respond to him and they become, though still distant and idealised, aware of him."⁵ But it is after the contact with the Aran women that Synge is capable of

⁴ Andrew Carpenter, 'Synge and Women', *Études Irlandaises*. Villeneuve d'Ascq, France, 1979 (1972), pp. 89-106.

⁵ Carpenter, p. 97.

depicting female characters that have any likeness to real flesh and blood rather than overstrung and stilted expressions of his own conflicts. He is moved by their attitude but also by their beauty. In his notebooks there are more references to his impressions of the Islands than he ever put into print. He is careful not to check the young girls by staring at them:

I am so much a stranger I cannot dare under the attention I create to gaze at a beautiful oval face that looks from a brown shawl near me. The girls are singularly unconscious, unaccustomed to receive attention. I notice no walking out of young men and girls. Courtship is I believe not considered a necessity. (...) The face came with me all day among the rocks. She is madonna-like, yet has a rapt majesty as far from easy exaltation as from the material comeliness of Raphael later style. ... The expression of her eyes is so overwhelmingly beautiful that I remember no single qualities of her.

The girls are inclined to deride me when there are a handful together. Singly they are at first shy, or pretend to it, but show exquisitely bright frankness when the ice is crushed. Older women are full of good fellowship but have mostly little English ...⁶

Such women seem to have in them all that Synge expects from true companionship. From here will come Nora, old Maurya and her two daughters, Cathleen and Nora; even the assertive Págeen Mike has something in common with the young Aran girl whom he characterizes as wonderfully humorous, simple and attractive and who proposes to Synge:

She says when I go away now I am to marry a rich wife with plenty of money, and if she dies on me I am to come back here and marry herself for my second wife. (CW II, p. 144)

⁶ Greene and Stephens, pp. 89, 95.

As Massfield was later to recollect about Synge, "his talk to women had a lightness and charm. It was sympathetic; never self-assertive, as the hard, brilliant Irish intellect so often is."⁷ The full range of feeling he is capable of perceiving in women is what he finds most suppressed in their lives. The "reverence for life and the sea" that subjugate women's wildness, humour and passion is not accepted with the same equanimity at all times. Indeed Synge chooses to bring on stage women who, like himself, can no longer endure the yoke of too repressive and painful roles established for them.

The lives of the peasant women, trapped in a sexual and personal waste, are confined to the painful roles of barrenness or of suffering motherhood, to see their offspring wither in misery or leave to survive elsewhere. The only possible escapes from this desolate condition are "... the three shadowy countries that are never forgotten in Wicklow - America (their El Dorado), the Union and the Madhouse". These are the gloomy prospects of these lively women, which Synge will confirm in all his plays. The heroines will be those who reject the imposed norms of self-effacement, and by their own dynamic stance oppose and detach themselves from the static community.

⁷ John Massfield, J.M. Synge: a Few Personal Recollections with Biographical Notes. Dublin, Cuala Press, 1915, p. 15.

THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN

On [the] French stage you get sex without its balancing elements: on [the] Irish stage you [get] the other elements without sex. I restored sex and people were so surprised they saw the sex only.⁸

In this letter dated January 1904, Synge gives some of his views on the causes of the controversy which surrounded his first contribution to the Irish Literary Theatre. Until the the plays presented there had not prepared the audiences to find on stage what they often tried hard to suppress socially and politically: untoward moral behaviour which would diminish the impact of theatrical representation as icons of Irish virtue. As Ganz well observes, the public was getting in a nutshell all they were going to object to in Synge's plays:

Even in Synge's first play, In the Shadow of the Glen, a short and deceptively simple piece, the whole range of his themes and attitudes-- the painful sensitivity of the artist, his alienation from the ordinary world, the destruction of beauty by the forces of life and time, and its paradoxical survival through the alienated artist himself-- appears complete.⁹

The source of controversy around The Shadow of the Glen was more a matter of ongoing belligerence between different cultural and political clubs than a criticism of the play on its merits or shortcomings. So far Yeats had produced the much praised Cathleen ni Houlihan, and the other plays pro-

⁸ Ann Saddlemyer, 'Synge to MacKenna: The Mature Years', in Irish Renaissance: A Gathering of Essays, Memoirs and Letters from the Manuscripts Review, ed. by Robin Skelton and David R. Clark, Dublin, Dolmen Press, 1965, p. 67.

⁹ Arthur Ganz, 'J.M. Synge and the Drama of Art', Modern Drama, 10, n°1, May 1967, pp. 57-68; p. 58.

duced before were either praised or given small notice in the press.

The first production of The Shadow of the Glen, in October 1903, carried a wide range of expectations for the whole group. Yeats thought that a new voice had been discovered. He wanted the symbolic, poetic drama to develop, and the particular quality of the language in Synge's play was close in mood and theme to Yeats' artistic ideals, even if he did not develop the elevated tone of verse drama, but used a highly poetic and musical medium instead.¹⁰

Here was a dramatist with a musically trained ear, who was attracted by the poetic tone of the peasant language. His work now was to recreate the intonation, rhythm and musicality of peasant speech phrases meticulously gathered throughout the country into a stylized musical score for dramatic use. The young cast had some difficulty adapting to this particular rhythm and intonation, as they were in the majority Dublin-based. In her memoirs, Mary Walker the actress who first played Nora recalls her impressions of the play as she worked on her lines:

I found the part a difficult one to master for it was unlike anything that I or anybody else in the company had ever played previously. . . . the speeches had a musical lilt, absolutely different from any I had heard before.¹¹

¹⁰ Yeats was very pleased with The Shadow of the Glen from the very first reading. The characters of Nora and the Tramp embodied more powerfully the rebellious spirit Yeats tried to express in Where There is Nothing, a play hastily published in a special supplement of The United Irishman in November 1, 1902.

¹¹ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, The Splendid Years. Dublin, James Duffy, 1955, p. 43

Considering the play as just another production of the Irish National Theatre Society it would seem difficult to anticipate that it would cause such violent public controversy between W B Yeats and Griffith, who had supported Yeats before against the puritanical view of the Irish peasant fostered and encouraged by the Church and the Young Ireland tradition.

Griffith's approval could be obtained for anything that was elevated and nationalist or likely to irritate the Church, as his previous support for The Countess Cathleen well proves. His movement had tried to create a programme based on an elevated and proud spirit of nationalism that would lead Irishmen into unity and independence from English rule. At one time Griffith had offered Yeats a place as one of the directors of The United Irishman. but the poet declined and in 1902 the nationalist paper and the theatre company it had fervently supported till then, parted ways.

In the Samhain Festival of 1902, the revival of AE's Deirdre and W B Yeats's Cathleen ni Houlihan had been greeted with undivided praise. Griffith's hopes at the time were on the capacity of the National Theatre to regenerate the country by becoming a political platform. This would have readily been so were it not for the unwillingness of the authors, W B Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge to accept the democratic rules of the society that allowed each member a vote on the decisions of the company and the choice of plays to be performed.

Grounds for difference arose in September of the same year with Lady Gregory's play Twenty Five which centred on the issue of the amount of savings a returning immigrant might be able to accrue without this becoming an incitement to others to immigrate.¹² An agreement was reached over this issue, but in November another stronger argument arose. Willie Fay had rewritten, in a less melodramatic tone, the final scene of P Colus's The Saxon Shillin. the winner of the first prize of the Cumman na Gaedheal play contest. This anti-British recruiting play ended with a deserter from the British army dying while defending his father from eviction by British soldiers. The alteration was supported by Yeats against Maud Gonne and Griffith's opinion; this was the apparent cause of Griffith's resignation. Due to recurring differences of opinion, Yeats managed to justify the creation of a reading committee in February 1903, allowing him control over the selection of plays.

It is amidst these events that The Shadow of the Glen made its first appearance at Coole Park in October, and later in one of W B Yeats' Mondays "at home". Yeats saw in Synge's style an opportunity to fight for his own principles as it were by proxy. As Flannery observes;

¹² The concern for the social effect of the plays on the audience seems rather displaced on this issue, as those who were pushed into immigration would hardly be expected to be part of a Dublin theatre audience. It does also denote from those who opposed the one hundred pounds sum a near religious belief in the power of persuasion of the theatre upon simple minds. Instances of this overstretched paternalism recur throughout the period.

What Yeats could not fight for in his own name he could and would fight for in the name of Synge. Thus he planned a careful series of steps that led up to the first production of In The Shadow of the Glen in October 1903.¹³

There had been controversy with the heroine of The Countess Cathleen, but if it irritated the Catholics on religious matters, the part was played by Maud Gonne which was an encouragement to the nationalists. In the case of The Shadow of the Glen, the nationalist leading actors Dudley Digges and Maire Quin withdrew from the group, as they found the play's subject to be of an insulting nature.¹⁴

This was the first play of its kind. Training and instructing the cast into performing simple actions, with economy of gesture and elevation of tone, in scenes that were accurate depictions of existing locations (Harney's cottage in Glenmalur, County Wicklow), may have puzzled the cast in the same way as it was claimed, it had perplexed the audience and a large number of critics: was it a "real" depiction of Ireland or a romanticized version of a folktale? As many critics and scholars have mentioned, the more the nature and sources of the play were justified and explained, the stronger the opposition to it.

¹³ Flannery, James W, W B Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre: The Early Abbey Theatre in Theory and Practice. London, Yale University Press Ltd, 1976, p 323.

¹⁴ The Shadow of the Glen went into rehearsal in September but as early as April that year Dudley Digges and Maire Quinn had become so involved with other productions in other nationalist societies that W. Fay and Frank Walker had passed a motion to make the members seek approval of the Society before engaging in other productions. The motion was passed with only two votes against. See Laying the Foundations 1902-1904. R Hogan and J Kilroy, Dublin, Dolmen Press 1976, p. 58.

The theatrical expectations of a Dublin audience had been formed by the previous experiences of other theatres, at The Queen's and The Gaiety which housed the English companies, offering a traditional melodrama where 'stage-Irish' characters would feel at home, and the Celtic plays of such groups as the Irish Literary Drama Society, or the "tableaux vivants" often performed at the Oierachtas. None of this prepared the public for the shock of reality which The Shadow of the Glen constituted. The note Yeats sent to the press referred to the loveless marriage, an "Irish institution", and this raised a few eyebrows even before the first night.¹⁵ Maud Gonne took the opportunity to express her disapproval of the play and of the evolution of the society since the arrival of Synge, by walking out on the first night of the play.

For David Greene, the whole controversy surrounding the play is an unfortunate misreading of a romanticized version of a folktale:

Synge of course, wrote one play- 'The Shadow of the Glen'- which romanticized an authentic folktale. But the audience were unable to recognize the fact that the play was based on a folktale and insisted upon seeing it as a realistic treatment of loveless marriage among the country people. No wonder Synge was puzzled by the violent reaction his work received.¹⁶

¹⁵ Holloway's first impressions of the play in rehearsal were not encouraging: "All I know is that it is terribly unIrish in its sentiments and its moral tone is not its strong point". Quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, op. cit., p. 70.

¹⁶ David Greene, J. M. Synge Centenary Papers, 1871-1971. Dublin, 1971 p. 195.

As we can see, doubts over reality, romance or fiction concerning Synge's plays became matters for delicate argument. To defend the author from the immediate charges of nationalist groups, critics stressed the freedom of the author, and his creative licence. Attempts to argue that Synge was very close to the peasant communities from which he drew inspiration, did not fare much better. For some nationalists, this dissident from the *Jeune Irlande* was intent on defiling the image of Irish womanhood and did not care if his play was going to add to the repertoire of insult and abuse with which the English continually graced the Irish.

Synge does treat the theme of loveless marriage in this play but it was not the first time that an unequal marriage appeared on stage in Ireland.¹⁷ The folktale Synge points as its immediate source is only one variant of a well-known tale in Ireland.¹⁸ What is new and challenging from the

¹⁷ Griffith mentioned a better approach to the theme, in a note he added to J B Yeats's letter to The United Irishman, 31 October 1903: "If the Society were anxious to stage an 'effective attack on the loveless marriage in Ireland', it had already in its possession a play by one of its members, Mr Columb, which attacked that institution very effectively indeed. Mr Columb lives wholly in Ireland, and knows the people of whom he writes, and therefore did not make the woman of his play unfaithful." Quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *ibid.*, pp 82-3. It is not clear which play Griffith is referring to here, as The Land, where such a problem is raised did not appear until two years later. It must be the monologue Kochan's Wife, of which Malone gives a brief summary, comparing it with The Shadow of the Glen: "In this little sketch a woman feels her home lonely and depressing because she had married the wrong man, and she ponders a way of escaping from it all.", in The Irish Drama. London, Constable and Co., 1929, p. 165.

¹⁸ Sean O'Suilleabhain, 'Synge's use of Irish folklore', refers to tale type 1350 (the loving wife) and motif H466 (feigned death to test wife's faithfulness) as the index number for the story recorded in The Aran Islands. He further stresses the differences of Synge's play from the more common ending of the story registered in Ireland (beating of wife and lover), and from the tale type 1510 (the matron

start is the way Nora takes her stance against a situation endured by so many women in peasant communities.

Nora refuses to comply with social norms and to perform the roles established for her as a woman. This refusal forms a pattern for Synge's heroines. The idealisation of women in this period took models who refuse society's established norms. Looking back to a primitive heroic past, Yeats found women like Deirdre, the Countess Cathleen, the legendary Cathleen ni Houlihan, who took life in their own hands.

The play starts with Nora Burke finalising the preparations for the wake of her old husband Dan Burke who is lying on his bed, presumed dead. To this wake come the Tramp, an unexpected visitor looking for shelter from the rain for the night, and Michael Dara, a young shepherd who has been courting Nora. She takes the opportunity of the Tramp's presence to go out and summon Michael, allowing the corpse a breathing space, during which he has a drink and explains to the surprised Tramp his plan to expose his wife's infidelity.

As the young ones enter and engage in conversation with the Tramp, it becomes obvious that their mood is very different. Nora is despondent and pensive, but Michael now that he sees the old man dead, starts finding in the posses-

of Ephesus), "which is a different tale". In J.N. Synge Centenary Papers 1971, ed Maurice Harwood, Dublin, Dolmen Press, 1972, p. 19.

sion of his land and sheep an attraction similar to that he had for his wife.

Nora's realization of her entrapment, of the waste and solitude in a childless marriage is the first step to freedom. Her growing awareness of the fact that her life at the end of the glen would not change considerably if she took Michael Dara for a partner makes her a dissenter, a social outcast. The psychic state of the locality makes Nora reject Michael's proposition of marriage. She would still be alone, unable to avoid the decay and old age that has caught up with Dan Burke.

The wake gives Nora an opportunity to contemplate the life she has led in a desolate glen, with only the proximity of the odd shepherd's hut, under rolls and rolls of mist and shadows, but it also helps us clarify the true nature of the opposition that sets lover against husband in this seemingly conventional triangle.

Michael, the odd man out, "a kind of a farmer has come up from the sea to live in a cottage beyond" (CW III, 41), appears as the lover in a traditional plot, the natural opponent of the old husband in stock comedy. He is prepared after some waiting to replace the old *tyrannos*, taking possession of his money, his land, his animals and his wife.

His conversation soon leaves matters of ascertaining if Nora is a woman "with a past", to which she answers with a direct challenge:

Michael [as before] I'm thinking it's a power of men you're after knowing if it's a lonesome place you live itself.

Nora [slowly, giving him his tea] It's in a lonesome place you do have to be talking with someone, and looking for someone in the evening of the day, and if it's a power of men I'm after knowing they were fine men, for I was a hard child to please, and a hard girl to please [she looks at him a little sternly], and it's a hard woman I am to please this day, Michael Dara, and it's no lie, I'm telling you. (CW III, 49)

All this is still too remote for Michael, who prefers to contemplate the common sense of Nora's previous choice of a husband with property, which he finds more reassuring and in the end to his advantage. It is in this dialogue, arguably the turning point of the play, that we see how Nora moves away from a static position in a blinkered life of desolation and solitude into a dynamic dissension. We are made aware that Nora does not choose to leave, even the Tramp tries to placate the violence of Dan's retribution, suggesting she might be received by Michael. Dan knows otherwise, "Is it a fool you think him, stranger, or is it a fool you were born yourself?". When she turned round to Michael, his only suggestion of an alternative home for her is not his own as Dan could foretell, but the "fine Union below in Rathdrum" (CW III, 55).

The detachment of both husband and lover help Nora reach the logical conclusion of her previous reasoning, and decide to follow the Tramp not as a constraint but as a deliberate choice. It is worth while considering this dialogue as one can see in it the stuff of comedy, and the ways in which Nora diverts from her static role into that of

heroine, while Michael appears more and more as a new version of old Dan:

Nora [taking the stocking with money from her pocket, and putting it on the table] I do be thinking in the long nights it was a big fool I was that time, Michael Dara for what good is a bit of a farm with cows on it, and sheep on the back hills, when you do be sitting, looking out from a door the like of that door, and seen nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, and the mists again, and they rolling up the bog and hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the stream roaring with rain?

Michael [looking at her uneasily]. What is it ails you this night, Nora Burke? I've heard tell it's the like of that talk you do hear from men, and they after being a great while on the back hills. (CW III, 49)

Nora's words worry Michael who has had no time yet to wonder about the mists, storms or long rainy days, as his own days are spent mastering his new trade (tending the mountain sheep) and acquiring property, to be able to relate to Nora's thoughts in any way. As she speaks, Nora piles up the money from the stocking. This slow, mechanical gesture, which is reminiscent of the slow and hard process of accumulation of wealth in a peasant community - the savings of a lifetime are piled up on the table - lets her mind wander freely. The stage directions for this scene, [*putting out the money on the table*], [*She puts up the money, listlessly, in little piles on the table.*], [*holding out her hand*], [*she pauses*], Michael [*moving over three of the piles*], <[*She pauses again*]>, (pp 49, 51), illustrate kinetically the same diverting of attention and interest. The slow, spare and listless gestures of the hand attract Michael's eyes to the money being piled on the table, while at the same time

Nora's thoughts concentrate on the effect the passing of time has on people like Mary Brien, Peggy Cavanagh and herself. Repetitive gestures leave the mind free to wander, and the solitary life of Nora has little to break the routine of everyday chores.

Both husband and lover are on the same side of reality, of a life of self-preservation, herding-together. It is therefore no great wonder (yet still a surprise on which the whole effect of the play stands or sinks) that after throwing his wife out of the house, Dan invites Michael to stay behind and have a drink. They stay in some kind of amity because Dan needs company for his drinks and because they share the same restrictive view of life that is confined to the immediate realities discernible through the mist and the drudgery of daily life. This is not what Synge admired in peasant life, the real spirit of which he would find in the "intonation of a few sentences or some old fragments of melody", but which would easily be dulled, trammelled by the routine of survival.¹⁹

Life with Dan is equated with the coughing of sick sheep, whereas the life with the Tramp, even if it was not chosen by a voluntary gesture is accepted by Nora as more rewarding than the gloomy safety of despair under the shadow of the glen. The Tramp's life is associated with choices, expectation, the beauty of Nature under the sun and the elements. When Nora goes out into the rain with the Tramp, she

¹⁹ Cf. Armstrong, W A, 'Synge's Communities and Dissenters', Themes in Drama 1, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1979, pp. 116-120.

transcends one way of life and endorses the other. For Synge the life of tramps and their social origin is clearly expressed in "The Vagrants of Wicklow":

A few of these people have been on the road for generations; but fairly often they seem to have merely drifted out from the ordinary people of the villages, and do not differ greatly from the class they come from. Their abundance has often been regretted; yet in one sense it is an interesting sign, for wherever the labourer of a country has preserved his vitality, and begets an occasional temperament of distinction, a certain number of vagrants are to be looked for. In the middle classes the gifted son of a family is always the poorest - usually a writer or artist with no sense for speculation - and in a family of peasants, where the average comfort is just over penury, the gifted son sinks also, and is soon a tramp on the roadside

In this life, however, there are many privileges. The tramp in Ireland is little troubled by the laws, and lives in out-of-door conditions that keep him in good humour and fine bodily health. This is so apparent, in Wicklow at least, that the men rarely seek for charity on any plea of ill-health, but ask simply, when they beg: 'Would you help a poor fellow along the road?' ... (CW II, 202)

Synge obviously sees a trait of nobility in these people who will not appeal to cathartic pity to get charity, but just invoke their state of destitution without shame. In this attitude they claim to have as good a right to their own way of life as anybody else, as indeed does the Tramp when he tells Nora he knows of all the ways he can put food in his mouth. This does not presuppose that Synge is idealising the life on the roads. The events reported in "The Vagrants of Wicklow", some of them reported as taking place before Synge's eyes are a very sobering reminder of the harsh conditions the travellers in general endure, both in

their own simple life, and in their contact with the community or the authorities.²⁰

IDEOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN

I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's. I will not reason company my business is to create.²¹

This play emphasises more what is rejected than what is endorsed. In other plays the theme of the alternative virtues of the vagrant life is more developed. The Wall of the Saints, for instance, emphasises how the deprived life of the travellers can sharpen the senses and imagination, even if maintaining always the awareness of the dangers it implies for the old blind couple.

The shock of the new, especially the questioning of the beliefs and expectations of Synge's detractors, upsets deep-rooted modes of thought, aesthetic values, moral standards. In a very brief play, Synge puts into question a very large set of attitudes, without volunteering an obvious solution, and this at a time when nationalists were least interested in scrutinizing the stereotyped bastions of their defences.

²⁰ Of striking relevance are the stories that report the bad will of peasants against vagrants, as when they are suspected of witchcraft as reported on p. 203, or the story, witnessed by himself of the drunken flower-woman. She is confronted by the police as they try to push her out of the village. Synge reports that when the scene comes to blows, the woman faces up to the men in uniform, "tearing off the rags that still clung about her, 'Let this be the barrack's yard, and come on now the lot of you.'", p. 207. Synge is obviously cleared of the accusation of giving a rosy picture of the vagrant life, when he dares expose the treatment these people would be subjected to at the hands of the police.

²¹ Synge's Notebook 4378 (10), p. 69.

A sequence of shattered expectations in terms of form raises the problem of classification. The play first elicits the traditional lover's triangle, and then shatters it as Nora and Michael are seen to diverge gradually in their interests to end in the odd but likely re-arrangement of affinities Dan- Michael and Nora- Tramp. Thornton considers that the attacks on the play show how well Synge succeeded, as the true nature of the affinities manifests itself, in contradiction with the stereotypes.²²

Starting with a seemingly conventional plot situation, it frustrates the audience general expectation: is it a comedy, a libellous tract, or a naturalist play with decadent overtones?

The language, one of the most sensitive issues in the definition of cultural identity of a nation is here again brought to task. The nationalist vernacular becomes a matter of diverse argument as it ranges from the hope of restoring Gaelic to its ancient role, develop the modern Irish through massive schooling, or the unashamed adoption of the hybrid language that was shared in various combinations of Irish and English, mixing structures, moods in a flexible medium.

It is not just the language, already matter enough, that challenges the definition and identity of the audience. The question of whether this was a stage dialect created by Synge or an expression of popular poetic speech is the kind

²² Weldon Thornton, *J. M. Synge and the Western Mind*. London, Colin Smythe, 1979, p. 100.

of argument that can be proved and contradicted continually. The use to which this particular medium was put was irreconcilable to the nationalist expectations. It endowed the peasant with a voice of his own, the noblest nationalist aspiration, but once given this voice, the discourse subverts the message. In poetry as well as in drama the disruptive capacity of the new discourse is apparent. Other authors who use language in this disruptive, modernist way, as Joyce and also in the theatre, Mayakovsky found the same resistance to the medium.²³

The play gives an articulate voice to the intimate, the personal, which emerges from the constraints of loveless marriage, "this most miserable institution so dear among our thrifty elders... by whom anything like impulse or passion is discredited, human nature coerced at every point and sincerity banished from the land".²⁴ To give voice to these feelings and thoughts Synge produces characters hardly expected to have any depth of insight further than the emotive expression of grief, love or laughter. The loveless marriage is seen by old Yeats as an oppressive institution, but

²³ Although a revolutionary himself, Mayakovsky's futurism was not the medium or method Lenin most valued as a vehicle for revolutionary propaganda. As for poetry he always preferred Pushkin: "I am quite convinced that the Revolution doesn't need comic buffoons who flirt with it, such as Mayakovsky". If they had to be suffered, "people should be reasonable and should not have the impudence to put buffoons, even if they swear by the Revolution, above the 'bourgeois' Pushkin". Valentinov, N. Encounters with Lenin. translated by Paul Rosta and Brian Pierce, London, O.U.P., 1968, p 52. The involvement of both authors in the political process was dissimilar, but both met with the misunderstanding of their work, either through an oversensitive press and audience or through the silence of the cultural bureaucrats.

²⁴ J B Yeats, 'The Irish National Theatre Society', The United Irishman. quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, op. cit., p. 82.

in fact it is only part of a familist class strategy, integrated in a whole social structure oriented towards the preservation of land rights.

The conflicts generated by subverting conventional expectations of both language and plot in The Shadow of the Glen, as in his other plays, come together with a controversial view of the woman, and the peasant. The social position of the peasant in the community and of the peasant woman in particular, is one of the more striking ideological challenges raised by Synge's plays, as they check the contemporary puritanical image and role of women in Irish society.

By the simple fact of putting both Dan and Michael on the same side of the argument, sitting down for their drinks as likely mates, Synge makes a yet more shattering move. As well exposed and documented in Cairns and Richards' study of this play, the threat to the familist succession system comes from "young bucks" who, in dire lust for land and in need of family comforts, seek to force marriages with prospective heiresses, by elopements or other likely methods.²⁵

Cairns and Richards develop their receptionist reading of the play on a larger framework of colonial discourse in which the attitudes towards women in colonized societies like Ireland are just the end of a long chain of images of

²⁵ "Women" in the Discourse of Celticism: A Reading of the Shadow of the Glen', in Canadian Journal of Irish Studies, Vol. XIII, no 1, June 1987, pp. 43-60. I am indebted to the authors for making available a copy of this article.

domination and their cruel correlatives. Attacked and insulted by the imperial forces - religious, judicial, military, intellectual or the press, the Irish defended themselves from the slur of being a wittering female race by reverting to a strategy which Nandy called "hypermasculinity". As a development from this reasoning comes the realization that sexuality is a force that needs to be strictly regulated and enlisted in the weapons against foreign oppression. To consolidate the possession of land, sex could only be tolerated within marriage and as a source of procreation, and only permitted to those allowed to marry, those chosen to inherit the land by a system of 'inter vivos' settlement.²⁶ Those who can speak of sexuality are married males (and the priest in his advisory function), and of these only those with children have any worth in the community.

Under these circumstances old Dan would be in natural opposition to Michael and the only acceptable interlocutor on such issues. Instead the old man chooses to impersonate on stage the image of his death, an image that to his wife bears the likeness of life itself, as she describes him as a form of living dead:

²⁶ Cairns and Richards, "'Woman' in the Discourses of Celticism", p. 47. On the collocation of such restrictive social practices in the general politics of land inheritance: "We must be mindful that familism functioned to prevent the break-up of the family's land-holding ... and that as a form of organisation its advantages ... was that it allowed the head of the household to select from amongst his male heirs the most suited to carry on the farm. ... Celibacy was a requirement of unmarried individuals, partly because the strictures of custom, partly because of the exhortations of religion, and partly because children had no access to cash without the approval of the head of the family". p. 49

... cold would not be a sign of death with the like of him, for he was always cold, every day since I knew him,- and every night, stranger (CW III, 35)

Michael for all his youth appears to Nora as a blueprint for a similar life, a similar death. It is she who passes judgement on the value of men, she that will choose. Very much in accordance with the opinion of Synge in his letter to Mackenna, for Cairns and Richards the problem lies in the dramatisation of sexuality:

In deciding to dramatise issues of sexuality - and in particular desire - within Irish peasant families, Synge was laying bare for analysis the axis along which the discursive regulation of sexuality was deployed in support of a particular, and very demanding, strategy of alliance. Whatever his own objective, he opened up the possibility of inspection and disruption of that strategy by the importation and articulation of desire.²⁷

To this I would like to add that following the inappropriateness of the theme, sexuality, the other offensive stumbling block is the fact that the subject is a woman. Women's place in the community had been reduced almost to invisibility.²⁸

This attitude of the farmer community concerning the role of women and their relative position in the family had emerged after the Great Famine and was widespread in other classes. Peasant female labourers had until then participated in all areas of the family economy, as active earners,

²⁷ Cairns and Richards, 'Woman' in the Discourse of Celticism', p. 49.

²⁸ This does not mean that they did not contribute economically, intellectually and politically, but that there is hardly any public recognition of the fact, or any ideological category with which to identify such events.

as most of their work was outside the home.²⁹ Their situation was changed in three ways. Domestic industry almost disappeared, tillage was replaced by livestock, (a less labour intensive activity) and the proportion of labourers to farmers fell sharply. It was the poorer groups that enjoyed more economical equality, so the economic power of the family was increasingly held by males.

As J J Lee notes, the Famine affected the marriage prospects of women.³⁰ As their contribution in outside work fell, women's economic support to the household was reduced to the dowry. A girl's wedding prospects became then heavily dependent on the dower her father could provide. Normally farmers would only endow one daughter so as not to dissipate their wealth. As a consequence the marriage rate fell drastically and the age difference between husband and wife increased.³¹ These factors placed both father and husband in a particularly authoritative position. Life expectancy rose and young men had to wait longer to inherit property. The economic aspect of marriage attained particular relevance in this period.

The credibility and social weight of a family in a farmer society depended on keeping the property undivided. To that purpose undesirable marriages had to be avoided and

²⁹ 'Women and the Church since the Famine' J J Lee, in Women in Irish Society, the Historical Dimension, ed Margaret Mac Curtain and Donncha O' Corrain. Dublin, Arlen House The Women's Press, 1979, pp. 37-45.

³⁰ J J Lee, p. 38.

³¹ J J Lee, p. 38.

boys and girls kept well apart. Although the great outcry against Synge's play focused on Nora's abandoning the home, this gesture could be atoned by compensatory measures, and in some other plays such an action did not elicit the same reaction. In 1908, Padraig O'Connor won the first prize at the Oireachtas with Bairbre Ruadh. This play concerns the arranged marriage of a young farmer's daughter to an old publican. The young girl elopes with her lover and a sister dutifully takes the place of the fiancée. It seems that as long as a family contract is honoured it does not really matter who is honouring it, provided the possession of the land is secured:³²

A society dominated by strong farmers, and providing little female employment, inevitably denied most of its children the chance of rearing a family in the country. . . . Sex therefore must be denounced as a satanic snare, in even what had been its most innocent pre-Famine manifestations. Sex posed a far more subversive threat than the landlord to the security and status of the family.³³

Traditional Irish chastity becomes confused with English prudery, as Lee explains, in this attempt to control marriage and sex. The process is a fusion of the interests of one particular class of Irish society (the economic stability and status of the farmers) with a particular foreign attitude or social conduct which is then extended gradually to other classes in the country and even in the cities. The Catholic Church experienced a steep rise in vocations, both male and female, absorbing part of the young population

³² Hogan and Kilroy, The Years of Synge. p. 257.

³³ J J Lee, p. 39.

without marriage prospects.³⁴ The Church in its fortified ranks and the lay teachers, mostly women educated in strict orthodoxy, will be active in the spreading of this image of women, first to the other peasant strata and then to Irish society at large. It is worth noting that both the clergy and school teachers came largely from farmer families.³⁵

In a society that relies on family imagery and values, young women found it increasingly difficult to marry in their age group or at all. The male population was reduced by the emigration and the constraints of inheritance. The young men who were available were those who did not have the stamina to look for a better life elsewhere. There would rarely be a young man of property like Shawn Keog - who is an orphan. Young women like Nora, Molly Byrne or Pegeen Mike would have to marry older men. These situations encouraged submissiveness in women as they had to depend on the will of the father and later on the father image of an older husband.

What is striking in Synge's heroines is their self-assertiveness, their capacity to determine their own lives, accepting or challenging the prescribed social roles. Nora's marriage choices are quite reduced, but she maintains an impressive strength of character and an independence of

³⁴ The other areas which assimilated these landless youth were domestic services, prostitution and emigration to America or Australia, where job prospects would be farming or industry, as well as domestic services and prostitution. For women there were also the possibilities of marriage as well; single women were encouraged to emigrate to marry the "pioneers".

³⁵ J J Lee, p. 40.

judgement, which we can witness as she evaluates her life in a childless marriage, and considers with detachment the idea of another one. She looks at marriage for what it gives and not for all its moral and social connotations. On the other hand the covetousness with which Michael Dara watches the money piling on the table depicts well the situation of young men looking for a wife. Rich widows were the object of special attention from young men like Michael Dara.

Many critics spend some time arguing about the power of Nora's restraint, which to Daniel Corkery is virtually non-existent, since for him she is little more than a prey to her own lust. Corkery does not agree with Yeats' comment in the preface of the First Edition of The Well of The Saints that Nora is "as melancholy as a curlew, driven to distraction by her own sensitiveness, her fineness":

What he created was a piece of naturalistic flesh and blood, wearing her lusts upon her sleeve, a being all appetite and no faculty, a woman after his own literary fancy, full of physical courage, daring and bold. ... On the other hand the melancholy that is in her, conflicts with the mood of the tale.³⁶

Others stress the fact that the men she mentions are only occasional talking companions, absolving the peasant housewife of any contaminating touch from these male strangers, and in the laundering process removing the original motive for Dan's bed-trick. It is obvious that Nora is starved both of the comfort of social interaction and also of the affection and human warmth that marital intercourse

³⁶ Corkery, Daniel, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama. Cork, The Mercier Press, 1966, p.125.

usually provides. In making her a woman who restrains her sexuality the critics make Nora morally acceptable and all trace of defamation of Irish womanhood is removed; this aseptic model can be used to promote elevated concepts of liberation. The proclamation of her supposed infidelity has till recently been an acknowledgement of Nora's perversion. Both critical positions issue therefore from the same ideological principle, which sees a situation in which a woman's social or sexual life is organised in terms of her own needs, rather than those of her husband and family, ultimately the needs of the land, as something of an aberration, not to be reckoned with, in principle ignored completely. None of these critical approaches consider Nora's independence as a subject, which to her seems to be more important than the economic stability that the land could ever provide.³⁷

These controversial images would never be accepted as truthful in a society that saw itself "as a beacon of spiritual light in a world deluged in a materialistic sea" and which as it criticised England for its decadence unconsciously assimilated the "prudish values of Victorian middle class morality, which simultaneously idealised and repressed woman".³⁸

³⁷ The refusal to acknowledge or to accept Nora's stated or implicit sexuality, are to my mind two different positions of the critic concerning the definition of woman, which reveal more about the critic than shed light over Nora's life.

³⁸ J J Lee, p. 40.

One other feature of particular relevance in the ideological challenge is the role of the Tramp in the play and his capacity to put forward a case for the life of the roads, a world of harsh reality and beauty, in opposition to the values of thrift and hard work of the farmers. He is at first put in a position of detached witness, at the same time arbitrator and helper, in Souriau's terminology, as he transforms the banishment of Nora by her husband into a positive alternative.

It is among the outsider in general, the tramp, tinker or the beggar, that Synge finds the humanity, the raciness of the soil he wants to express in his plays. Forced by Dan's expulsion to match her actions to her thoughts, Nora must now look for survival in a situation of extreme necessity. Her predicament is the same as other women who, in total destitution, are driven onto the roads to beg.

RIDERS TO THE SEA

With this limestone Inishmaan however I am in love, The thought that this island will gradually yield to the ruthlessness of "progress" is as the certainty that decaying age is moving always nearer the cheeks it is your ecstasy to kiss. How much of Ireland was formerly like this and how much of Ireland is today Anglicized and civilized and brutalized.... Am I not leaving in Inishmaan spiritual treasure unexplored whose presence is as a great magnet to my soul? In this ocean alone is [there] not every symbol of the cosmos? (CW II, 103)

Although Riders is one of the most praised of Synge's plays, considered one of the best short tragic pieces, it nonetheless fails to conform to the critical criteria literary critics use to classify tragedy. It is much too short,

there is little movement, no action, and the sea there is not well used as a tragic antagonist. The critic who tries to apply the conventional patterns available will fail to see a recognisable pattern in the structure of the new play.³⁹ Synge certainly does not follow the rules of his predecessors or the expectations of his contemporaries, so naturally the attempts to evaluate such a play as Riders in conventional terms will be of little use.

As Thornton puts it, all the Aristotelian, Christian and empirical foundations for the mental structures present in western modes of thought clash and fail to identify what Synge is presenting in the plays, especially in Riders to the Sea. For this play to be considered as a tragedy there must be a conflict.⁴⁰ The conflicts that centre on Maurya can be summed up as the conflict of Maternity and Necessity. She is not just a passive Pietá. The structure of the play, the repetition of names and places, makes death inescapable as if between the big stones and the white rocks the circularity of tragedy reaches completion. For Raymond Williams there is no tragedy, only "weary resignation" as he sees Maurya as the mother who opposes the strength of the elements statically, without offering resistance.

For Errol Durbach however the tragedy of existence that Maurya incarnates surpasses a static passive suffering, as he finds her implicated in the death of her son. She shares

³⁹ Keir Elam, Semiotics of Theatre and Drama. London, Macmillan, 1980.

⁴⁰ Thornton, Weldon, J. M. Synge and the Western Mind. London, Colin Smythe, 1979, p. 100.

in the life-giving process with the sea: as she gives life she also witnesses the disappearance of all the men in the household. Survival and death come from the sea.⁴¹

Although all of Synge's plays are indebted to the Aran Islands for the wealth of material in theme, language, mood and location which he collected there, Riders is specifically about the plight of these islanders. He made long-lasting friendships with young men and old story-tellers, but the women whom he met also made a striking impression. The women depicted in this play attending to the various tasks of daily life are the final result of his perceptive and sympathetic observation. Summing up his experience in Aran, he compared these women with those of less primitive surroundings.

These women are before convention and share many things with the women of Paris or London who have freed themselves by a desperate personal effort from moral bondage of lady-like persons. Many women here are too sturdy and contented to have more than the decorative interest of wild deer, but I have found a couple that have been turned in on themselves by some circumstances of their lives and seem to sum up in the expressions of their blue grey eyes the whole external symphony of the sky and seas. They have wildness, and humour and passion kept in continual subjection by the reverence for life and the sea that is inevitable in this place.⁴²

These are his models. In their acceptance of hardship and grief he finds a trait of nobility, alongside a wildness which is not tamed by the continual struggle for life.

⁴¹ Durbach, Errol 'Synge's Tragic Vision of the Old Mother and the Sea', Modern Drama, 14, n6, 1972, 363-372.

⁴² Greene and Stephens, pp. 89-90.

Among the islanders' way of life he also finds a dialogical presence of opposites which appeals to him.

The life of the peasants and their beliefs made a strong impression on Synge as they appeared to live without any feeling of alienation although their various traditions seemed sometimes to be contradictory even to a sympathetic observer. Synge found in Aran a combination of Christian and pagan belief that was ideal and appealing to him since he felt a strong sense of guilt and alienation from his family as he could not share in their evangelical tradition. However close he was to his relatives he could never reconcile his views with those of his family. Free, empirical modern thought could not go together with evangelical explanations of the world through a literal reading of the Bible.

For some reason even more jarring oppositions dwelt uncompromisingly in the minds of Aran people - pagan beliefs and Catholicism. Synge could not avoid realising the irony of this blending of paganism and orthodoxy, and he comments on two services of the dead realised in succession: "There was an irony in these words of atonement and Catholic belief spoken by voices that were still hoarse with the cries of pagan desperation" (1913: 75).

The islanders however were not aware of this irony or incompatibility, and resisted the continued and unsuccessful attempts to eradicate pagan beliefs by both the Catholic and the Anglican Church. In Riders, Maurya knows of the sea,

the priest knows of the Church; God and the portents (spirits, ghosts, the sea) know of us all.

After kneading a cake, Cathleen sits down at the spinning wheel, and Nora, the youngest daughter, enters the cottage kitchen with a small bundle. The old mother is resting after many anguished days of waiting for her drowned son Michael. Bartley, the last living son, is planning to go to Galway fair to sell horses, much against the will of his mother who wants him to stay to organize his brother's funeral. With the bundle she has got from the young Priest, Nora also brings words of reassurance about God's providence and mercy. There are from the beginning three lines of action; Maurya's continuing wait for the return of her son, the daughter's hiding of the parcel and identification of the body, and Bartley's preparation to leave for the mainland to sell horses. As they wait for the return of Michael, the completion of an event initiated before the play began, a new one is also being prepared, Bartley's departure. The journeys of all the men of the family have been protracted encounters with death. This last preparation for sailing to the mainland carries with it the imminence of tragedy.⁴³

Bartley's determination to sell the horse is not an objective in itself. His steps have been determined by the other men in the family; this gesture and the urgency with which he goes about it does not denote the abstract idea of the male role in the family, but the fulfilment of a mode of

⁴³ Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama Theory and Methods of Analysis*. New York, Random House, 1970, (64-77), pp. 70-74.

male behaviour. The only male survivor, Bartley feels the necessity to go to Connemara, in part to fulfil his new role as a man of the house, as part of a community which endures a cruel environment. From the beginning it is clear that his intention is strong enough to overcome his mother's fears. His motivation arises from the fact that he is the only person left to fulfil the role of responsible male, which he intends to carry out even if the desired acquiescence of the mother is not forthcoming. The younger son enacts the traditional masculine role of his society, projecting an image of himself into this role - giving orders to the women, taking up his tobacco and receiving the support of the family. There is here a conflict between Bartley's need to assert his role and Maurya's refusal to recognize it. The sooner the mother recognizes her son's masculine role, the sooner he will be reclaimed by the sea. The determination of Maurya is to focus all her energies in the attempt to oppose the inevitable, the loss of her last son.

Her motivation is strong but in the circumstances she does not have a specific goal to focus on, she cannot stop him from going to the sea permanently. She cannot prevent him from assuming his role as a man. According to Beckerman, "the diffuseness of her motivation helps to explain the indirect way she applied her energies to keeping Bartley from his trip."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama*, p. 73.

For Beckerman a project in drama is the concrete focal point of a character's energy. As he analyses Riders' action he looks for the answers to these questions: what is the precipitating context, what is the project of each character, what path does the tension follow and where is the crux of each segment of action. He goes on to analyse a specific segment of action, Bartley's departure, separating implicit from explicit activity. It becomes apparent that there is much more implicit than explicit activity, particularly between Maurya and Bartley than the daughters.

The daughters assist Bartley in his intention to go to the sea. Cathleen as the young woman who carries through the routine of daily life is fulfilling her role as woman in the household. Young Nora is not given the initiative to start action; as a child her main function is one of liaising, bringing news, reaching people. Through her capacity for sympathy she empathises with her mother, succeeding in reaching the grief-stricken Maurya. Bartley and Cathleen have a positive motivation - to assume their role as survivors in the struggle against necessity. They must take up their posts however young they may be. In social terms this signifies an upward displacement, an appealing prospect even if the causes that led to it are tragic. Maurya's project is maternity, the need to nurture and preserve her offspring from harm. But through the long nights of waiting for the missing ones, she has reached the end of hope and is beyond despair. What is left for her when Bartley refuses to take heed of her pleas, is resignation. This loss is so obvious

to the old mother that she can never agree to his departure. It is out of this type of knowledge that visions of things to come arise.

THE NATURE OF MAURYA'S STORY

For Mary King, Maurya's telling of what she saw by the well is a fantasy, the creation of a fictionalised narrative. Now that she has no hope of keeping her son alive or of recovering the one that was missing, she will carve a place for her menfolk in the lore of the island.⁴⁵

As she returns Maurya is distracted and goes to the fire, keening softly. Cathleen's questions to find out why the bread was not delivered are an unsuccessful attempt to penetrate the mood, the circle of distraction in which Maurya is thrust. It is Nora's request to tell her a story that conjures up the mood for the delivery of Maurya's frightful vision - "Tell us what is it you seen" (CW III, 19). And then this tale or vision is told cancelling out any hope of rescue. The sea claims its victims and there is little she or the priest can do.

The parallels with Revelations bring in the element of death in yet another form, working in conjunction with all the pagan omens of the primitive lore. To ride the red mare, being followed by the pale horse, is to repeat the apocalyptic image defiantly.

⁴⁵ Mary C King, The Drama of J.M. Synge. London, Fourth Estate, 1985, chp 3.

Cathleen takes her mother's story literally when she goes to check the progress of Bartley and when she contradicts the vision of Michael with the hard facts expressed by the bit of shirt and the plain stocking (CW IV, 19). Checking the reality of Maurya's vision with facts, she helps establish the "symbolic status" of the vision.

The vision concentrates in itself all the conflicts of the play: the tension between determinism and freedom, the old ways and the new ways, between the life of the islanders with their subsistence economy and their growing dependence from the mainland. Michael's new clothes and new shoes are a tiered image of these conflicts. They are the new robes for the New Life after death, the dim hope of evasion of suffering and fear on the island. But before being hope of salvation they are a sign of burial - Michael had been given a "proper burial", so we are told. For that new clothes are needed, and only rags remain of his old ones. The clothes of after life are new ones from the mainland, the identification of the dead is made through bits of rag taken from the shirt and "a bit of sleeve was of the same stuff".

The first image of the stage set establishes not only a strong link of the community with the sea, but also its supremacy. The oilskins, the nets are all "peculiar to the island". In those islands Synga found the unalienated relation of the hand to the tool; the instruments were common to the island because the materials used were local, and they also seemed "to exist as a natural link between the people and the world" around them. It is from the sea they get

their livelihood of fish and kelp. But as much as it gives, the sea also charges a heavy price. The white boards, new wood from the mainland, are there as a constant reminder of the heavy price to be paid for the goodness of the sea, and also as a reminder of the barrenness of the land, where no trees grow.

The polemic about the genre of Riders to the Sea seems to miss the major issues of the play. The relevance of this tragic play is to be found well beyond its concise non-Aristotelian structure, in a strong invocation of mood and locality.⁴⁶

The Irish audience responded to the play emotionally. The first production seems to have been too true to life in Fay's rendering of the final scene, which upset some of the more faint-hearted spectators. As usual in these matters Joseph Holloway's opinions and notes are a good indicator of the variations of unsophisticated popular taste:

Friday Feb. 26 ... a more gruesome and harrowing play than Riders to the Sea has seldom, if ever been staged before. The thoroughly in-earnest playing of the company made the terribly depressing wake episode so realistic and weirdly doleful that some of the audience could not stand the painful horror of the scene, and had to leave the hall during its progress. ... The audience was so deeply moved by the tragic gloom of the terrible scene on which the curtains close in, that it could not applaud.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ This short play with such an inactive protagonist bothered Joyce, but his real objection was with the theatrical project as a whole, to whose unelevated designs he found Synge was submitting.

⁴⁷ Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre, a selection from his unpublished Journal, Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer. edited by Hogan and O'Neill, London, Peffer and Simons, 1967, p. 25.

The following entry in his diary already acknowledges the value and importance of the play, quoting from Fay, that the play "despite its sadness, has pleased well. I think it is a masterpiece."⁴⁸

Cosmologies

Considering the ideological and social challenges of *Riders*, the audience is faced with conflicting cosmologies, as it sees on stage the statement of a perishing culture based on an economy of subsistence, leaving ground for a commodities society. The audience becomes aware of the fact that it belongs to this more commercial society which by its relative energy and dynamics forces the older culture to disappear.

The conflict of cosmologies is seen in terms of plot and reference material for the play, mainly passages from the The Aran Islands that offer source material for the play: the way of life of the islanders and their survival strategies, their relation to the environment, to nature with special note to the sea, and their particular understanding of the other world.

This play differs from Synge's other plays in not having a situation of outcast versus community in the plot. There is on the other hand a clear opposition between the life on the island and the mainland. In this case it is the whole community, the life on this small island, the life of

⁴⁸ Holloway, p. 37.

families depending on the sea for survival that is put in contrast with the mainland.

In many of their writings, messianic nationalists opposed Ireland to England in terms of development. England stood for commercialism, industry, greed and profit, whereas Ireland remained and survived in rural bliss. They defended this idea of a rural Ireland, unaware maybe that this image was also in the interest of the occupying power; industry was not developed across the Irish Sea, because Ireland should remain a market for British manufacture, and not its own purveyor. As Ireland was to England, so was the Aran Islands's way of life in relation to Ireland.

Mary King points out in her study of Riders to the Sea that the destruction of the islanders's subsistence economy is expressed in this conflict of old and new ways, and not just as mythical confrontation with nature:

We would see it, rather, as a drama of a house divided against itself by the pressures of history and time. It explores the conflict between the old gods and the new, between the *Vita Vecchia* of the old way of life, with its task of wresting a living from sea and soil, and the *Vita Nuova* of industrial society.⁴⁹

The old society is expressed in terms of family duties and relations; the new society brings in relations calculated in terms of price. All the commodity goods that are purchased come from the mainland: the new rope and white boards standing against the wall all through the play link the deaths of the men in the family in one long burial. In

⁴⁹ King, p. 49.

the monotone set, their whiteness is striking, and becomes an omen of death and a sign of the price economy:

Bartley (...) Where is the bit of new rope, Cathleen, was bought in Connemara?(...)

Maurya. ... and I after giving a big price for the finest white boards you'd find in Connemara. [She looks round at the boards]. (CW III, 9)

All the goods bought from the mainland are put to various uses multiplying their importance, use-value and meaning. The shirts are used by both brothers (Bartley leaves wearing Michael's shirt). The new rope is used to make a halter for the red mare, and should also be used for Michael's funeral. The possessions of the son will still find use after his death, as Maurya holds on to Michael's stick:

Maurya. [taking a stick Nora gives her]. In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old. [She goes out slowly.] (CW III, 13)

The boards which were bought for Michael's funeral will eventually be used for Bartley's coffin; but as she loses hope of ever seeing Bartley alive, Maurya asks for the boards to be used for her coffin;

... Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Eamon and make me a good coffin out of the white boards, for I won't live after them. (CW III, 21)

The stick, the rope, the boards, and Michael's flannel shirt, together with the knife used for cutting the string in the bundle and Bartley's tobacco, can only be obtained from the mainland, Connemara, Galway. For these commodi-

ties, the islander sells the produce of the island, pigs and horses. In this instance Bartley assumes his role as breadwinner, the member of the household who relates directly to the world of trade.

As the fair "will be a good fair for horses", Bartley has to ignore his mother's warnings, so as to maximise his profits; the pig with the black feet will be sold "if there is a good price going", Cathleen is told by her brother.

This need to leave for the fair raises a conflict of priorities in Bartley's social duties: he is also expected to make the coffin and bury his brother in case the body appears on the shore. It is Maurya who gives voice to the bonds that link him to his family duties, to the old world. She appeals first to his duty to the dead, and as this found no echo in him, his importance to the living mother and sisters. Failing to persuade him to stay she compares the value of his life in economic terms with the purchase of horses:

Maurya. (...) If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only? (CW III, 9)

This last appeal has no reply as there is, at that historic moment, no possibility for Maurya to reconcile Necessity and Maternity, the urge to keep the son away from imminent danger. The mother's appeals now centre on her own death, trying to reach her last son through his filial duty towards her.⁵⁰ At this moment Maurya is fighting against

⁵⁰ In a notebook probably dated 1902, the mother gives more visible signs of impending danger "the wind is rising up and you seen your-

Necessity, against the sea, against the outside world of commerce. Nothing can replace her last son. Old and suffering, she is fighting her last battle against the sea which is both the nurturer and the gaping mouth of death.

Bartley's determination to leave is emphasized by the actions of getting the rope, his tobacco and changing his coat. Turning to the fire is the gestural kinetic response of the mother to her son's determination. In a gesture of defeated grief, she covers her head, as if to start mourning another son the sea will claim from her:

Maurya [turning to the fire, and putting her shawl over her head]. Isn't it a hard and cruel man won't hear a word from an old woman and she holding him from the sea? (CW III, 11)

Cathleen takes Bartley's side and reproaches her mother's silence, and the "unlucky" and "hard" words she uttered just before and as Bartley was leaving.

She knows by now all her attempts to hold him back will be useless, so her last resource is the withholding of her blessing on him. The importance given to the blessing that was withheld refers us to the words of the young Priest:

Nora 'I won't stop him', says he, 'but let you not be afraid. Harseif does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute', says he, 'with no son living.' (CW III, 5)

self there was a little star up against the moon last night, and there was a ring round the sun and it rising today" and her plea is also more direct, "It is if you go out and the wind rising and get drowned in the sea hair of my heart, don't go Patcheen and leave an old woman alone". Appendix A of CW III. p. 244.

The Priest equates prayers with economic providence, by associating the loss of the last son with poverty. The prayers of a poor old mother will reach the Almighty God who, judging from the Priest's word, will see Bartley in economic terms as a bread-winner and not just as a soul. The Priest is aware of the predicament of the community in its confrontation with the external world, but the help and solace he can offer are put under scrutiny.

The knowledge that Michael had a "clean burial, by the grace of God", instead of being the prey of "the black hags that do be flying on the sea", is the only comfort that the Priest can offer:

Nora [getting the bundle from the loft]. The young Priest said he'd be passing tomorrow, and we might go down and speak to him below if it's Michael's they are surely. (CW III, 13)

Critics who find fault in Synge's use and misrepresentation of popular religion claim he only cares to see pagan folk lore and ignores their true religion and Catholic devotion. This is seen as part of the general mythologising of the rural society, which M Goldring reluctantly admits to be a trait of the perception of the literary movement as well as of the political and religious nationalists.⁵¹

⁵¹ Maurice Goldring, 'Chronique d'histoire littéraire - le mythe d'une civilisation rurale dans la renaissance littéraire irlandaise', in *Études*, 177: 117-126. On the subject of rural myth, Goldring admits that religious as well as political life were dominated by this idealised vision of the peasant life. However, he sees the use of the rural images for source material to an art which the writers themselves deemed truly national as pilfering the Gaelic culture to enrich a foreign one. He does not consider the gross idealisation for immediate propaganda use as a violent normalisation of peasant identity.

In *Riders* the Priest is conspicuous by his absence, but his words echo four times throughout the play at moments of intense expectation and suffering: he is the harbinger of the news of Michael's Christian burial, and the supporter of Bartley's departure. His image is associated not with the other men but with the women, spinners and cutters of thread. It is the women who, with their gestures of making and producing, with words, gestures and silences, operate as MÖira. Nora, the child brings news from the sea, from the Priest, the movements of the tide and the boat. She obeys instructions, and brings her sister the bundle tied with the black knot.

Cathleen is the operative centre of the household. She is attentive to every sound in the house and by the sea, supports Bartley's journey to the fair, assumes the role of economic interlocutor (she bought the knife used to cut the knot, she will try to sell the pig, collect seaweed for kelp). Her spinning at the wheel is interrupted at moments of premonition or recognition of death. On the first occasion, as Nora produces the bundle, brought by the Priest, Cathleen "stops her wheel with a sudden movement, and leans out to listen", (CW III, 5). After the identification of Michael's clothes, she resumes her work at the wheel concealing her tears. She stops again as she tries to oppose her mother's vision of Michael with the reassuring image of Bartley alive. These gestures and words only reiterate the premonition of death. The sight of Bartley riding the red mare, does not contradict the premonition of imminent death,

and Nora recalls the Priest's comforting words as the last assurance of safety. Maurya, the old mother, shares with the Priest the belief in the power of words. As her blessing to her son is withheld under the pressure of some enigmatic force "... something choked the words in my throat." (CW III, 19), she knows he is now beyond the influence of her words or the Priest's:

Maurya [in a low voice, but clearly]. It's little the like of him knows of the sea... Bartley will be lost now,.... (CW III, 21)

This suffering mother is seen by Durbach as active participant in the death of her menfolk, as implicated in the universal process of death and rebirth:

Once again, the antinomial imagery establishes itself as a visual element in the drama as the old woman sets out with the staff of life in one hand (blessing and bread) and the staff of death, the drowned Michael's stick, in the other. And at the spring well, the source of life and vitality, the prophetic vision of death upon the pale horse renders her incapable of restoring life to her doomed son. The mother, herself the source of life, womblike as the sea, unwittingly consigns her lastborn to his drowning, powerless to resist the operation of a universe in which the very fact of birth consigns all living to inevitable death.⁵²

The mother in this play is the protagonist who faces the sea constituted as antagonist. Like the sea, the women embody life and death, nourishment and necessity. In the play there is no conflict of cosmologies. On the contrary both the religious belief and the awareness of the interference of the forces of Nature in the life of men, are clearly

⁵² Durbach, p. 369.

present in the final act of a family tragedy, through the words of the suffering mother.

What seems to challenge the expectations of the audiences is the diminished authority of the representative of the Church. But this absence is offset by the high tragic tone of the play, which evokes cathartic pity for the plight of the poor islanders. In this way Riders can also be glossed as metonymy for the situation of Ireland suffering at the claws of the oppressive, commercial Mammon across the sea.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

The different solutions presented on stage for the women who have to accommodate necessity and desire in situations of utter destitution account for the different reception given to these two plays.

Nationalist criticism to the Abbey productions is an attack on the Ascendancy class and the reaction to the Shadow is the result of an instinctive withdrawal from all that fails to square with idealised national stereotypes. Yeats defended Synge in a tone which, to the nationalist press, was an arrogant declaration of aristocratic independence. The poet was challenging the narrowness of the new puritanical nationalism, estranging himself from militant nationalists and from pacifist Gaelicism, who could not en-

dorse the realities of necessity as presented in Synge's plays.⁵³

After the death of their last brother, there are very few prospects open for young Nora or for Cathleen herself, as without dowry they will hardly find a match. Female emigration was a common way out, to the cities, to England or to America. This and misery in the workhouse are the dramatic prospects critics contemplate. But a large number of women driven to desperate situations found other means of subsistence, which for moral puritanical reasons or for political strategies go totally unmentioned. Begging was the last resource available for married women to feed their family, when husbands could not find work. Prostitution occupied a vast number of younger women whom the family could no longer keep in its fold, either because of the lack of means to feed several adults, or because of social disgrace if they were found pregnant.⁵⁴ Synge talks of the perversion he finds among the "street arabs" around St Patrick's cathedral, but generally these groups are not mentioned. Looking at the coldness of the numbers of police registers, Mary Luddy can begin to unfold the silent tale of female misery which in Synge's words "would wither up your blood".⁵⁵

⁵³ Maud Gonne had criticised the play in the Paris press and Douglas Hyde abandoned the Abbey Theatre.

⁵⁴ With the exception of police records and the register of some philanthropic religious and lay institutions devoted to the "conversion" of "fallen women", there is no public acknowledgment of the existence of these women.

⁵⁵ 'Prostitution and Rescue Work in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', in *Women Surviving*, edited by Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy, Swords, Co. Dublin, Ireland, Poolbeg Press, 1990, pp. 51-84. See also in the same book for the extensive recourse to begging and other female

Within the avowed intent of not holding the rags of Irish destitution to present such horrible images of misery to the English eye, Synge stops short of the practicalities of survival. The Tramp knows of all the "ways to get food into his mouth", and soon Nora will learn too. In the strength of her youth Nora refuses a life-in-death condition, and Maurya in her old age endures the final loss of all her sons, no longer in despair but in heroic resignation.

employment, 'Breadwinners and Providers: Women in the Household Economy of Labouring Families', by Mary Cullen 'Workhouses and Irish Female Paupers, 1840-70', by Dymphna McLoughlin, and 'Life for Domestic Servants in Dublin, 1880-1920', by Mona Earn.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FOOL AS OUTCAST: THE WELL OF THE SAINTS AND THE TINKER'S WEDDING

What do they manage to impose on you? Words! Words which everyone can interpret in his own manner! That's the way public opinion is formed! And it's a bad lookout for a man who finds himself labelled one day with one of these words which everyone repeats; for example, "madman," or "imbecile"¹

In this chapter the figure of the outsider will be analysed both in terms of the fool who holds a precarious place in society and also as the observer of the community which defines him as external, inferior, and contaminating. Simultaneously the fool and the outsider will be observed as new instances of a literary tradition.

In The Well of the Saints there is a movement from the fringe of society where an old blind couple have been living happily in delusion, to the open roads that promise more dreams and another level of reality. In The Tinker's Wedding, a younger vagrant couple make tentative moves to join the settled community by going through a religious marriage, moved by the woman's desire for conformity and status. The

¹ Picandello, Henry IV, Act II, in Three Plays. London, J M Dent and Sons, p. 127.

former movement occurs when the couple fail to retain their place as village fools, and it becomes apparent that they do not share the villagers' eagerness to earn their bread with hard labour. The latter attempt to join in is foiled when the tinker couple fail to produce the price of their integration: half a sovereign and a tin can. In both cases the movement towards the open road is not an idyllic elopement as would be proper in comedy. Both couples have no choice but to leave as there is no place for them in the village, and they must search on the roads for a life in communion with Nature, the harsh nurturer. The figure of the social fool or the outsider is present in all of Synge's comedies, and even in Deirdre of the Sorrows. It becomes apparent that Synge sees these characters as bearers of a different set of values poetry, freedom from social constraint, worship of Nature sharing some of the nobility of a beaten race. It also becomes obvious that Irish society does not share this attitude towards the marginal and outsider as expressed in Synge's plays. As they embody the life which for him has all the appeal and mystique of a fusion and identification with nature, he endows them with a higher order of cognition, a wider awareness of the viability of other worlds, other rules, other values which should command respect. Synge's contribution in making the fringes of society visible, was to give them a place and a voice, such in the same way that Hauptmann had given a place and voice to the German workers in The Weavers.

According to Johnson the literary fool in Synge's plays can be characterized by three main points, the relationship to nature, irrationality and social status.²

The fool is closer to the movements and secrets of nature than other people, his instinctive response comes from the unconscious. This particular sensitivity is socially marked as irrationality and can be viewed in two socially opposed ways. Positively this irrationality can be taken as inspired and visionary, relating to the vision of the poet or the enigma of the oracle. If viewed negatively, irrationality can be considered as madness. To all intents and purposes the fool remains an outsider, relegated to the fringes of the community or kept carefully at bay.

In *Shadow* the characters who embody the folly of the outsider are the Tramp and Nora, they oppose the worldly wisdom of Dan Burke and Michael Dara, choosing instead a life in community with nature. Although the Tramp knows the roads, the glens and hills more closely than the others, he is aware that his life involves serious risks. Patch Darcy, the shepherd who knew his sheep and all the ways and secrets of the hills, was a strong, able man but the solitude, the gloomy climate and desolate landscape of Wicklow drove him into madness, and to his frightful end, of being eaten by crows. Throughout the play the references to Patch create a pervasive image that could well be equated with the image of the "Good Shepherd" and through his link with his simple

² T O'B Johnson, Synge, the Medieval and the Grotesque. 1982, chapter on Folly, p. 118.

living also to the Pauline connection between the fool and Christian values³. For the outsider to renounce the values of the community is an act of folly which is condemned because it undermines the principles with which society supports itself. As a matter of fact the close experience of nature and its use in language as symbolic matter for poetic talk, is shared by the fool and the artist, the blind and the gifted Tramp.

In Shadow, both Nora and the Tramp lay stress on the better life they can possibly find on the roads as compared to one under the solitude of a lonely glen. Even at this moment the threats of desolation and loneliness are made very real (the Tramp claims to have been the last to see Patch Darcy alive, who died in a way that is so much feared-to go mad on the hills and die alone, half-eaten by animals). Synge connects the desolation of the climate and of the landscape to the high rate of lunacy in Irish society.⁴ Nonetheless, he keeps throughout his plays and prose, a very positive vision of the fool/ outsider. He sees the outsider not as a worthless dropout, but as someone with a character similar to the artist, enjoying sound good health and in possession of a lively good humour. The two fool characters in Shadow, Patch and the Tramp are healthy fearless men, with the revered gift of the gab. In some way they keep the higher expectations that cannot be met in life close to the

³ T O'B Johnson, p. 115.

⁴ See reference to social origin of the tramp and the conditions of the peasants in the glens in chapter three on Shadow.

village, grazing sheep in the low mists of the glens and valleys.

The experience of the "clay and worms" reality out of which Synge expected to create new, living art is also the one chosen by the poetic, solitary fool, the Tramp in Shadow as well as by the Douls.

THE WELL OF THE SAINTS

When Synge claims that all art is collaboration he is acknowledging the influence and importance of his contact with the peasants and islanders who provided him with a wealth of stories, themes, similes and the fluid medium of a versatile language. In the notebooks of his many journeys through Ireland he held a vast collection of themes that would find their way into plays. There are also non-Irish sources of 'collaboration' from which Synge drew his themes.

There are two main sources for The Well of the Saints. One, "The Woman of Sligo", which covers part of the first act only, and a French "pre- Molière farce", La Moralité de l' Aveugle et le Boiteux as Synge mentioned to Yeats and to his friend Mackenna.

"The Woman of Sligo"

The story of the widow from Sligo was a legend told to Synge in Aran by several people and concerns the miraculous cure of a blind child at a well near the church of Ceathair Aluinn (The Four Beautiful Persons) in Aranmor. Reference to it is made in Item 4385, Notebook 19, in use around 1898,

and is quoted in The Aran Islands.⁵ The mother of a blind boy has a dream in which she sees the well on the island which would cure her son. The following morning she sets out for the island, and on arrival inquires about the well but refuses further help as she can follow the signs as she saw them in her dream. Once near the well she bathes the child's eyes and he is cured. Blissfully, the first thing he observes are some flowers, "Mother, look at the beautiful flowers!". With this exulting exclamation, the story ends.

This story has the elements of a particular kind of pre-Christian Irish legend, the *imran*, or the journey across the sea. These are always journeys to the Other World, where creatures live oblivious of suffering, the passage of time or decay of physical beauty. Some of the most famous of these journeys to Tir-na-nOg (the Land of Promise) such as The Wanderings of Oisín, The Voyage of Bran, all deal with this imaginary happy world. According to H R Patch the Irish are particularly good at creating this image of otherworldly happiness in their legends. If, as Anthony Roche points out, this journey to another world is one of the undercurrents of the play, there exist two distinct undercurrents in it. The play is brought out of the pagan context of the previous legends into an undetermined Christian time, to be presented as an ironic reversal of the more Christian theme of the holy intervention of a saint.⁶ In

⁵ In CW II, 56-7.

⁶ In 'The two Worlds of Synge's The Well of the Saints', in The Genres of the Irish Literary Revival, ed by Ronald Schleifer, Dublin, Wolfhound Press, 1979, chp. 3, pp. 28-38.

this particular case the island is not the place towards which one goes to live in everlasting bliss, but where other people come to seek to be cured. This makes it an isle of wonder for the inhabitants themselves as it provides them with material for storytelling. But in Synge's retelling it is also the place where their hard struggle is endured.

In the play, the island of the curative waters has been taken from its previous mythological realm. The water is now drawn from a well sanctified by the four saints's graves that lie by it. Cripples will not travel across the waters to reach the cure; this will now be administered by a Saint to those who are allowed to contemplate God's creation, and for His greater praise. The contented old couple who endured their blindness so patiently were found deserving of God's special grace by the community, and will be cured:

Timmy [officially] They are holy father, they do be always sitting here at the crossing of the roads, asking a bit of copper from them that do pass, or stripping rushes for lights, and they not mournful at all, but talking out straight with a full voice, and making game with them that likes it.

Saint [to Martin Doul and Mary Doul]. It's a hard life you've had not seeing sun or moon, or the holy priests itself praying to the Lord, but it's the like of you that do be brave in a bad time will make a fine use of the gift of sight the Almighty God will bring to you to-day. (CW III, 89)

For Synge true art should bear the characteristics of an original style. This would issue from a combination of the notion of a particular time, locality and authorship. This particular item, the origin of the curing waters, has deep Irish roots. It would convey to the audience that par-

ticular sense of locality, as it would bring to the mind of the audience associations with the stories of current accounts of miracles at the particular well mentioned to Synge in Aran, and to the pre-Christian legends of magic Other Worlds where misery would be washed away. Once the sense of locality is produced and identification is made, Synge will subvert the rules just as the "moralité joyeuse" of his source did, by presenting a totally different set of values from those usually found in a recognizable conventional structure. As it will become clear, it is not just this pattern of expectation for the cure of the old couple that will be overturned, but also that of the morality play.

La Moralité de l'Aveugle et le Boiteux

The second major source is the medieval French morality La Moralité de L'Aveugle et le Boiteux, which Synge read during his courses with Petit de Julleville on medieval French theatre, at the Sorbonne. He mentions in a letter to Mackenna that the original inspiration for Well was a "pre-Molière farce". This obscure reference to the source is quite meaningful and worth analysing in order to perceive what is relevant in Synge's conception of comedy.

He calls this old play farce and not morality, which it is by name and structure. The structure of the morality was a traditional medieval form which was of little interest to Synge. As the morality is a piece of devotional indoctrination, it goes against his ideal of art which he thinks should not 'serve a purpose'. What therefore is of interest to Synge in this little play is the subversion of the form

by the use to which it is put: to use the morality form to tell an anti-morality story. By locating it in time as pre-Molière, Synge is pointing to the type of comic to be expected: not the comedy of manners, nor the sarcasm of farce, but the medieval grotesque.⁷

In this play the comic rings the note of the grotesque, provokes laughter that is part and parcel of the medieval type of life, without the indoctrination of the traditional morality play. If one agrees with Saddlemyer, King and Johnson about the relevant part that the grotesque element plays in Synge's aesthetics, one has to bear in mind that it is not a grotesque of the Romantic literary tradition, but rather that of the medieval social tradition, as it was still an accepted part of popular festive expression.

La Vigne's La Moralité de l'Aveugle et le Boiteux was a sort of farcical sequel to his Mystère de Saint Martin, both probably drawn from a long anonymous 'mystère' on the life of that saint. This long piece was edited in Synge's time and it is possible that he may also have read it. André de La Vigne split the play in two, one morality, the life of the saint, and one farce, the inopportune cure of two beggars, a blind man and a cripple, which comes at the end of the anonymous text. Synge picked up this last portion of the story for his own play, the farce in morality form. It is never the experimentation in form that appeals to Synge. In this apparent conformism, the challenge brought in by the

⁷ T O'S Johnson, p. 31.

rendering of such new thoughts in conventional trappings always comes as a surprise.

This play raises a few controversial questions even for modern commentators. For contemporaries of Synge the play was verging on blasphemy, the Saint was after all a Protestant. Religious and nationalist criticism was met at the other extreme by claims that it was moving away from the "tendencies of modern life and thought". Here the attack was for leaving rationalism, "intellectual progressivism"⁸.

For modern critics, the choice of Martin Doul to remain blind, to refuse the reality we all have to endure is problematic, seeming to be inconsistent with the principles of truth Synge has always defended for himself. W. Thornton summarises the disagreement of critics such as Alan Price, Donna Gestenberger and Robin Skelton by first stating their common theme for the play - the relationship between imagination and reality - in Thornton's terms "some idea they are trying to vindicate, and the reality they are faced with". As Alan Price finds Synge a nihilist, he praises the nihilism in the play and finds its escapism agrees with the supposed meaninglessness of life for the Douls and for Synge. To Gestenberger the development of the play is out of keeping with the philosophical pattern of other plays. She sees it as a choice between two lies, and therefore inconsistent with what she thinks are Synge's beliefs as stated in other parts of his work. She also infers that

⁸ Thomas Kechler, reviewing the play for *Dana*, in 1905.

Synge supports the final choice of the Douls, which for her is disappointing.⁹

Here Thornton offers his insight: for him the play is saying that the Douls can base their life on illusion and untruth. The fact that Synge sanctions this is only an inference by the reader. Synge is exploring, not advocating what he shows us. Skelton's view of Synge as an existentialist finds the Douls have every right to their dreams and sees their departure as a victory.¹⁰

All these critics see the play in its incapacity to square with their own ideological expectations. The fact that it has been upsetting critics who try to defend Synge from his detractors to this day, only proves that there is something challenging normal orders of thought, aesthetic constructs that tend to a classicist model. It would be right to say that the grotesque is the measure that upsets all aesthetic and ideological equilibrium, and yet it is in itself the regenerating force in literature. The interpellation such a play makes to a contemporary reader or audience still challenges more than aesthetic values.

The strong irony of the play lies in the violent reversal of the quality of the miracle. Hopes of a greater unity bring alienation, of a greater joy a more bitter discontent,

⁹ Weldon Thornton, *J. M. Synge and the Western Mind*. Irish Literary Studies 4, Garrade Cross, Colin Smythe, 1979, pp. 100-140.

¹⁰ Thornton, p. 133.

as at the same time darkness becomes a better path to enlightenment.

The contemplation of life, the ability to see should come as the greatest pleasure. But this is clearly not the case for the Douls. It will bring separation, increased hardship and disillusion. They have lived in an imaginary world fostered by the sympathetic jocosity of the villagers, who for their own pleasure have made the old blind couple believe that they were still looking young and beautiful.

The village fool, the village blind man and the notorious woman are as much part of life as the village blacksmith; they complement orthodoxy with that note of difference, wonder and at times cruel relief. They have a place at the bottom of the social scale, if a very precarious one. To make the picture of the relative position of the very destitute even more precise one has to recall the alternatives available - the Workhouse or Union - and the fear and punitive load always associated with it.¹¹

The old blind couple are tolerated as indigent because they offer the villagers a continual play. Their presence tells a story of make-believe and the reversal of their social position will assess the real place of the imaginary in the community. This reversal provokes a serious clash with the community's work ethic.

¹¹ In times of hardship the Workhouse was the only help provided for and dreaded by the destitute. For the farmers the madhouse was the more common refuge, as lunacy was a pathological condition originated by the desolation of the landscape, according to synge.

Apart from their petty trade in rushes, the Douls survive through the power of words - the villagers' encouraging lies and their own stories, gathering a willing audience around them.

They have lived in a world of imagination, of beauty and harmony, where they could find themselves physically in tune with the world as they experienced it. The harshness of winter was not so dour, as they could not see the effects of death and decay in their more unpalatable images of pain, need, ugliness and poverty. Their stories have earned them a living and a place in the community. In the ever-hard existence of a peasant community, the old blind couple have lived happily in a pre-lapsarian dream of beauty. The happiness that has won them their cure (CW III, 89) is going to disappear altogether as crude reality is forced upon them. The practical joke played by the villagers had caused them no visible harm and has turned them into the wonder of the village. But what was the wonder of beauty for the old couple, was a complacent comic irony for everyone else. This duality creates an ironic plot situation as the audience shares a piece of information the two characters ignore.

The audience is made to experience, in the very first scene, this ironic situation as it would be offered to the peasants every day. Once it is made clear that they live in a fragile world contrived through the power of words, Timmy's arrival with the news of the miracle sets up the first conflict of values. He gradually becomes aware of the imminent grief that is to meet them; as the others arrive

and start teasing the Douls, only two stage directions give out this awareness, "awkwardly" and "pityingly"

Timmy [pityingly] The two of you will see a great wonder this day, and it's no lie. (CW III, 1, 87)

The Other World of heroes like Oisín has no hold on reality, it is only made of dreams of "gold and silver; the vision of a beautiful, fair woman; the singing of the birds; the opened natural store of the earth's fecundity".¹² While the Douls live in the constraints of their blindness, as it were in a world of irreality, their dream of beauty is tolerated as inoffensive. After the cure, such an attitude becomes "willful blindness". This puts the social function that encodes this little white lie very clearly in focus. Besides providing amusement for the community, it reinforces the position and status of the blind as an outcast, by using patronising charity. As the old people are now cured, they reproach and curse one another and the villagers for their deceit; they no longer meet with the same sympathy. In a way all have been losers in the miracle. The Saint has lost his Holy Water, the Douls have lost their dreams and the villagers their fools.

The Challenge of The Well of The Saints

The play challenges its contemporary audience and even modern critics on religious, social and ethical grounds. The apparent depreciation of the final miraculous intercession of the Saint, challenges the unquestionable dogmas of

¹² In "The Wanderings of Oisín", as quoted in Johnson, p. 120.

religion, as it reverses the values associated with light and darkness. Those who prefer to live in darkness, claim to appreciate and have as good a judgement as those who see.

Of the several reviews the play got for its first production, only two were positive. One is a letter to the editor of The Irish Times. 13th February 1905, praising the "great literature in barbarous idiom as gold is discovered in quartz". To rescue the play from the generally bad press usually served to the Abbey, came a critic from La Revue d'Art Dramatique et Musical, praising the language, symbolism and action set in an ideal Ireland.¹³

If the French critic was elated by the play, the same could hardly be said about the nationalist reviewers. It was accused of showing unsympathetic and alien characters, nature's freaks, in an unhealthy human squalour, and a total ignorance of the nature of religion in Ireland.

The expectations created around a legend of the imran type have in this play a double reversal. The journey to Tir-na-nOg would take the hero to a fantasy world of happiness. Here the miracle of the curing waters should have brought happiness by calling the blind to the contemplation of reality. As the theme has been Christianized by making the magic waters a Holy Water, another reversal is produced in the rejection of the cure.

¹³Henry Lebeau, 'Les Spectacles du Mois Mars 1905: Étranger', La Revue d'Art Dramatique et Musical IX, Paris, 15 April 1905

Ethically the effects of the cure, and its final refusal, seem to challenge the assumed expectations of holy intervention. Miracles are benevolent interventions of the divinity, a rescue from distress, based on the compassion of God rather than on the merits of the afflicted. As in the parting of the waters of the Red Sea, this may cause suffering to others. In this case the cure has brought increased hardship and disillusionment to the people it was supposed to help, and only brief entertainment to the villagers. The contemplation of God's image in the creation sends Martin into sardonic criticism or into raptures of courtship, instead of devotion. The way Martin ensures that the cure will not take place the second time, is by making the Saint believe he had suddenly changed his mind. This allows him to approach Mary who is kneeling near the Saint only to get hold of the holy water and spill it. This is the last resource of someone who knows his arguments will not be heard:

Saint [to People]. Let him be if his sense is come to him at all.

Martin Doul [shakes himself loose, feels for Mary Doul, sinking his voice to a plausible whine]. You may cure herself, surely, holy father, I wouldn't stop you at all, (...) but let you cure myself along with her, the way I'll see when it's lies she's telling, and be looking out day and night upon the holy men of God. [He kneels down a little before Mary Doul.]

Saint [speaking half to the People]. Men who are dark a long while (...), aren't the like of simple men, who do be working every day, and praying, (...) and it's my part to be showing a love to you would take pity on the worst that live. So if you've found a right mind at the last minute itself, I'll cure you, if the Lord will, and not be thinking of the hard, foolish words you're after saying this day to us all.

Martin Doul [listening eagerly]. I'm waiting now, holy father.

Saint [with can in his hand, close to Martin Doul]. With the power of the water from the grave of the four beauties of God,

[He raises can. Martin Doul with a sudden movement strikes the can from saint's hand and sends it rocketing across stage.] (CW III, 147)

All the awe and devotion associated with the direct intervention of God in a miraculous cure are here reduced to nothing. The extraordinary manifestations of Divine grace and mercy are refused on the grounds that there is not very much worth seeing in God's creation to make an old blind couple change their lifestyle.

The ethics of work are also questioned, as they are not seen as a universal value but as one form of realisation and integration into the community, among others. The Douls become forced in their late years to earn their living through hard work and unkind treatment, which could aptly be seen as a paraphrase of the book of Job. It is not just the accrued hardship that is heavy on them, but also the incapacity to enjoy life in the ways they value it. The skills that their previous condition developed have no use now, and the gift of sight has even reduced some of them, "There is a path going up through the sloughs. ... but I'm afeared after the time we were with our sight we'll not find our way to it at all." (CW III, 133).

Martin's self-confidence and the articulate argumentation of his case challenge the social groundings of a contemporary audience. As he courts Molly and as he refuses

the final cure, he is branded as mad and unruly; the challenge of the community is either to conform or to leave. This threat to leave presents an image of unvenerable old age, a type of social disgrace which is another painful issue for the rebuilders of Irish respectability. The choice to take to the roads, or even its acceptance moves the Douls out of the reach of institutionalised powers or counter-powers. They are now beyond the reach of a landlord, the Church, the state in many instances and even the nationalist movement.

The Fool as Outcast

Between the modern master and the non-modern slave, one must choose the slave (...) because he represents a higher order cognition which perforce includes the master as human, whereas the master's cognition has to exclude the slave except as a 'thing'.¹⁴

As the Douls leave the village, they join the large vagrant population which Synge liked to see in a very positive way. The deprivation the vagrants suffered under all kinds of weather did not overcast his image of the tramp or tinker as a being closer to nature, poetry and ecstasy.

Stepping out of the fringes of the community where they were the tolerated fools, to become outcasts did not constitute a very hard choice in itself. The Douls lost more than their dream of beauty: now obliged to earn their living they hardly fit with their new roles. Especially Martin,

¹⁴ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1983, (1988), pp. xv-xvi.

the dreamer who is forever commenting on a new image of ugliness or singing praise to some rare and youthful beauty. Timmy the smith who addressed the saint to point out the cheerful old blind couple, now only sees Martin as a lazy talker who is not worth his salt. He is either lazy or a proper fool, as Molly and the others call him.

Molly Byrne [.....pointing to Martin Doull] Did ever you hear that them that loses their sight loses their sense along with it, Timmy the smith?

Timmy [suspicious, but uncertain] He's no sense surely, and he'll be having himself driven off this day from where he's good sleeping, and feeding, and wages for his work.

Molly Byrne [as before]. He's a bigger fool than that, Timmy. (CW III, 119)

It is no longer the time for praising the great talker as before. If they want a place in the community they will have to face as hard a struggle as that of facing the roads, and to less benefit.

This would prove that the originally kind humorous joke the villagers played on the Douls served themselves first as a group, providing their dull lives with some excitement, grotesque entertainment and comic relief. The old blind fools served as jesters to a miserable court which cannot support the artist beyond the threshold of destitution. Confronted with the prospect of life in the village as a continuous railing, with the reminder of their visual misery and ugliness, there is relief and consolation in taking to the narrow roads and thriving in spiritual contemplation of the beauty of nature as it is offered to experience by the blind, and, as Synge saw it, also by the artist.

The refusal to square with the place cut for him in the community, now that he can see is the first reason for Martin's social folly. He does not display the humility and meekness expected in the poor, which brings them compassion and tolerance. He resents the hard work forced on him. Now that he is seen as a peasant the perception Timmy has of him is associated with the outcast. Comparing two speeches of Timmy in the final text with the previous choice appearing in the draft, clearly shows the association of the fool with the outcast. On page 103, "Timmy[...]. There's no fear of you having gold, a lazy, basking fool the like of you." Note 5 gives the first draft version as "a lazy gorging drinking basking hog the like of you". On page 121;

Timmy [pointing to Molly Byrne] It's well you know what call I have. It's well you know a decent girl I'm thinking to wed, has no right to have her heart scalded with hearing talk - and queer, bad talk, I'm thinking - from a raggy-looking fool the like of you.

Note 8 on this speech gives a version of an intermediate draft where the "fool" was " a raggy looking vagabond (thief) is setting off to be walking the world", (CW III, 102). Here the final choice of "fool", a seemingly lighter insult, actually covers the virtuality of the other choices, as it includes the loss of social identity.

This choice of difference and deprivation (refusing to be cured a second time) is indeed madness. If there are many ways to praise the Lord, the Saint cannot conceive of one that will imply the refusal of the gift of sight. Such a choice can only come from madness:

Saint [severely] I never heard tell of any person wouldn't have great joy to be looking on the earth, and the image of the Lord is thrown upon men. (CW III, 139)

The "wonders of the world" seem to appeal to the Douls in their mind's eye feeding their imagination. However when the contemplation of "the image of the Lord thrown upon men" is nothing but unpoetical human misery, it loses its scatological dimension. Once again a fundamental religious principle is challenged here by the utterance of its patent ineffectiveness: the images of men and women do not arouse more piety in Martin than they do in the other villagers, and he puts forward his case for interior contemplation:

Martin Doul [fiercely] Isn't it finer sights ourselves had a while since and we sitting dark smelling the sweet beautiful smells do be rising in the warm nights and hearing the sweet flying things racing in the air [the Saint draws back from him], till we'd be looking up in our own minds into a grand sky, and seeing lakes, and broadening rivers, and hills are waiting for the spade and plough. (CW III, 141)

Like the Tramp in *Shadow*, Martin can put his case convincingly, and will win respect for his argument if not support. As he evokes the depressing view of horses, asses, dogs "with their heads hanging and they closing their eyes" (CW III,141) as not awe-inspiring, he divides his audience and Molly charges the Saint to reply to it and win the argument:

Mat Simon. He's right maybe, it's lonesome living when the days are dark.

Molly Byrne. He's not right. Let you speak up, holy father, and confound him now. (CW III,141)

The argument is settled clearly. Martin stands against the community on three different issues and he has to face one challenger on each. On the ethics of work he opposes Timmy, on his social propriety and status he has to deal with Molly, on religious piety he has to deal with the Saint. The argument with Timmy can be considered as won by Martin, as well as the reclaiming of a right to their own vision. His approach to Molly is where he comes off the worst as his poetry and wooing do not reach the heart behind the coarse social propriety of the beautiful girl. Nevertheless when he stops praising her beauty, Molly becomes even more incensed, and what was reputed as madness has now more specific connotations, and deserves exclusion, not integration in the community:

Patch. It's mad he is.

Molly Byrne. It's not, but lazy he is, holy father, and not wishing to work, for a while since he was all times longing and screeching for the light of day.

Martin Doul[turning on her]. If I was, I seen my fill in a short while with the look of my wife, and of your own wicked grin, Molly Byrne, the time you're making game with a man.

Molly Byrne.<My> grin, is it? Let you not mind him more, holy father, but leave him in darkness, if that is best fitting to the blackness of his heart. (CW III, 141,143)

Beaten out of the village it is Mary who gives a balanced if grim view of their choice, along a tortuous and narrow path as Mary Doul foresees when they head south:

Mary Doul [despondently]. . . . if it's a long way itself, where you do have to be walking wit a slough of wet on one side and a slough of wet on the other, and you going a stony path with a north wind blowing behind.(CW III, 151)

Mary aptly presents their future as a "pilgrim's progress", perceiving more clearly than the Saint that this walking along a stony path is their own way of contemplation and worship. Like Tiresias, they are illuminated with a transcendent vision when blind, which is not accepted by the community.

The people of the roads and tinkers as Synge saw them and brought them alive in The Tinker's Wedding. are again an instance of this heightened relationship with nature. The tinker, his tales and carefree adventurous life is the perfect foil for the image of the fool as an outcast. The outcast as a fool is a solitary individual who can easily be victimized. In The Tinker's Wedding this is not the case.

THE TINKER'S WEDDING

There is no fool in this play. The outsider appears as an organised unit in a parallel society. Sarah is a beautiful woman, and a mother. The movement is not like the previous plays one of separation, alienation from society; the conflict arises as Sarah tries to step into the territory of Christian convention and belief to get married, forgoing in this fashion her own tradition as a tinker. The wisdom of the tramps see this as foolishness, as they believe none of their problems will be solved by marriage and words of priests. Sarah is committed to this idea, Michael is very reluctantly dragged into it and old Mary is unflinching in the criticism of such a fruitless waste of good drinking money. Michael fears this sudden change in Sarah's attitude

has come about with Spring, in a way acknowledging it as an ineluctable strength. If he does not go along she will leave him. But for Mary the matter is one of lunacy: it came with the change of the moon and as someone who has seen a few moons pass in her lifetime, she is sure that at the passing of the moon again, this distemper will prove to be nothing.

If the tinkers do not manage to turn the Priest into a fool they themselves are well cleared of the claim, as their subculture is never at risk during the play.

Source of the Play and Its Changing Fortunes

In a play such as The Tinker's Wedding Synge moves further from acceptable conventional piety. Its characters, a family of tinkers belong to a group with which Synge had less direct contact and more secondary information in stories reported to him by the old men in pubs, at fairs, by tramps. Islanders, tramps, villagers, people from the mountains or the glens were perceived by Synge directly, as he stayed with them, travelled and drank listening to their immense wealth of stories. Tinkers were "so dirty and their mode of life so disreputable that it would have been impossible for John to mix with them at his ease".¹⁵ Still that does not mean they were totally alien to his knowledge, or that he cringed from their company, as we can see from the passage that serves as the source material for this play and provides a motif for the characterisation of Michael Dara in

¹⁵ My Uncle John, p. 157.

Shadow. At a fair in Aughrim, County Wicklow, Synge joins in conversation with a shepherd and a tinker.¹⁶ The tinker joked about the skills of the shepherd and once the tinker left the shepherd tried to recover his damaged pride by telling the tale of the tinker's failed wedding:

When I had spoken to one or two men I wished to see, I sat down near a bridge at the end of the green, between a tinker who was mending a can and a herd who was minding some sheep that had not been sold. The herd spoke to me with some pride of his skill 'Let you not be talking,' said the tinker when he paused for a moment. 'You've been after sheep since you were that height' (holding his hand a little over the ground) 'and yet you're nowhere in the world beside the herds that do be reared beyond on the mountains.

Then a woman came up and spoke to the tinker, and they went down the road together into the village. 'That man is a great villain,' said the herd, when he was out of hearing. 'One time he and his woman went up to a Priest in the hills and asked him would he wed them for half a sovereign, I think it was. The Priest said it was a poor price, but he'd wed them surely if they'd make a tin can along with it. "I will, faith," said the tinker, "and I'll come back when it's done." They went off then, and in three weeks they came back, and they asked the Priest a second time would he wed them. "Have you the tin can?" said the Priest. "We have not," said the tinker; "we had it made at the fall of night, but the ass gave it a kick this morning the way it isn't fit for you at all." "Go on now," says the Priest. "It's a pair of rogues and schemers you are, and I won't wed you at all." They went off then, and they were never married to this day.' (CW II, 228-9)

This is the source of the anecdote for the plot. But the play does more than just tell the story. It is put in the tinker's mouth, told from a completely new perspective. In this play Synge has the only occasion of depicting the outsider not as an isolated individual, but as a social

¹⁶ 'At a Wicklow Fair: the Place and the People', CW II, pp. 225-236.

group with its values and structure. If the challenge Synge's plays offered to his compatriots could be measured in terms of undesirable voices, The Tinker's Wedding would probably rank as the most troublesome and unappealing. Yeats and Lady Gregory disapproved completely of it, finding it unsuitable for the Abbey. When it was brought to London, Yeats found it unsuitable for himself, walking out in the first act. Still, the play was generally well received.

The play is now no longer read as insulting but as a "play of life", and "the most consistently funny of the comedies".¹⁷ This is not because it has lost its power in reclaiming a platform for a different vision of the world, but because the political and social realignments determine a new understanding of the marginal, the periphery, the minority, the lower-other. The tinker is the lower-other par excellence, towards which society has no intentions of assimilation, indoctrination or "recuperation". Within the play the tinkers are defined as a group apart, with their own structure, and a certain animosity is made explicit against its members in the attitudes of the peasants, as is obvious in the quotation above.

Critics have reacted very differently to this play through time. Maurice Bourgeois, David Greene, Donna Gastenberger and Daniel Corkery see it mostly as an immature artistic failure, an exercise in the transition from the one- to the three-act play. In a similar note Vivien

¹⁷ Mary King, Chapter 5, 'The Play of Life: The Tinker's Wedding Revisited', p. 88.

Mercier also finds fault with the display of violence towards the Priest, which he finds out of place in a comedy and highly unlikely in any circumstance. Alan Price finds relevance in the creation of the characters, comparing them to those in other plays.

Those like Robin Skelton and Denis Donoghue who find positive interest in the play look at its structure. Skelton studies the drafts to look for the theme of the "green man". Donoghue claims that comedy depends on the realization of a mock conflict. This last point has some interest as the author shows the awareness that there is no clear cut antagonism made in the play. Mary King sees the Priest-tinker relationship as "dialectical rather than exclusively antagonistic".¹⁸ It is here in fact that the issue of Synge's uncomfortable plays lies, in the blurring of much cherished boundaries.

"Nomad and Civilized Tribes"

The offensive character of the play comes from two different conjunctures: the proximity of the corrupting lower other with its implied danger of contamination, and the source and nature of the gaze upon society. The former lies in the fact that the Priest comes into too close contact with the disreputable lower-other, suffering as expected physical aggression and vilification, and the latter in the fact that it is the tinkers who, during much of the play observe and evaluate society as total outsiders whilst being

¹⁸ King, p. 88.

in fact native to the land. This double bind situation of civilized society being at one time the object of evaluation but not the dispenser of judgement, necessitated the recognition that nationality was not, and could not be a completely universal entity for Ireland, as these characters are beyond any useful appropriation for nationalistic purposes, nor are they English. The characters can be easily identified, but they seldom manage to avoid hurting visions of Irishness, propriety and social decorum. What could be so representative of Irishness in tinkers that they deserved pride of place and right of speech in a theatre that claimed to be a national theatre, the nationalists might well have asked. Lady Gregory and W B Yeats avoided this kind of confrontation by never producing the play in Ireland.

The blurring of the boundaries between the nomadic and the civilized, the religious and the profane, the sacred and the pagan, the utterly structured and the apparently chaotic, are as disquieting to the bourgeois as the overtly anticlerical scene of physical aggression of the Priest. Even if the gruesome tying, gagging and ditching was toned down, the way in which the Priest relates to the tinkers remains a question to deal with.

The tinkers fall in the classification of nomads or wandering tribes on whom Henry Mayhew elaborates in the first pages of the four-volume London Labour and the London Poor.¹⁹ The following considerations assume that Mayhew's

¹⁹ Henry Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor: a Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those that will work, those that

views on the nomads will be a piece of acceptable evidence at Synge's time. In his work, the social reformer had tried to dissociate moral depravity from physical squalor which was a commonly accepted idea and given as justification for the lack of commitment in social reform. The immense popularity of this book proclaims that Mayhew's views had very wide circulation and were generally accepted by humanitarian philanthropists. By this it is assumed that the contemporary level-headed observers of the marginal groups would share the same ideological scientific and sociological assumptions expressed by Mayhew. He compares the wanderers to the "civilized tribes", finding much in common between "the nomad races of other countries", and those "of the vagabonds and outcasts of our own".²⁰ They all share besides the physical signs of:

a greater development of the animal than of the intellectual or moral nature in man, and that they are more or less distinguished for their high cheek-bones and protruding jaws - for their use of a slang language - for their lax ideas of property - for their general improvidence - their repugnance to continuous labour - their disregard of female honour - their love of cruelty - their pugnacity - and their utter want of religion.²¹

As Stallybrass and White point out, Mayhew's vision of the nomad is very similar to what Bakhtin defined as the grotesque. The nomad was the bourgeois's own antithesis: improvident, indifferent to marriage and domestic life, in steadfast opposition to authority in general and the police

cannot work, and those that will not work. London, Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1861. (New York 1968).

²⁰ Mayhew, p. 2.

²¹ Mayhew, p. 2.

in particular, and generally ignorant of religion. These nomads who transgress all boundaries of home, propriety and cleanliness catch the attention of other social analysts. They will be amassed by Marx in the general category of lumpenproletariat, all those marginal to the forces of production. In The Eighteenth Brumaire Marx finds no less than twenty different types in this "indefinite, desintegrated mass thrown hither and thither, which the French call la bohème".²² Comparing both Mayhew and Marx's interest in those elements of the social fringe which "embody the carnivalized picturesque", Stallybrass and White find it is "yet central to the 'Imaginary', the object of disgust and fascination". The lower other, the nomad works in this way as a source of repulsion and attraction, something that society tries to hide even in the construction of the cities, but which it cannot evade.²³ These groups appear to the bourgeois subject in the guise of everything he tries to regulate and repress as the unruly or unsightly parts of the body which must be regulated, contained, hidden by custom, reason or morality.

From the above it becomes clear that Sygne is using as the voice for expressing life in a more liberating perspective, a group that becomes associated metonymically with un-

²² Marx's quotation from Marx-Engels Selected Works, as quoted in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression. London, Methuen, 1986, (pp. 125-148), p. 129.

²³ See Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England for his analysis of the plan of Manchester, in which he finds an urban planning policy that hid the working-class housing behind a respectable front of commercial main roads.

ruly behaviour and self-willed degradation. Those that social reformers in Britain tried hard to "civilize", and from which Irish nationalists tried to dissociate (as Irishness was also associated by Britons with bestiality and filth), are here brought to the fore. A critical view of the play could easily find in its tinkers a step by step illustration of the social characteristics of the "nomads" as depicted by Mayhew. What, as usual with Synge, seems to further complicate the uneasiness of the matter are the other possible viewpoints which can be established in this particular situation of the outsider looking in. The fact too obvious to ignore, but overlooked so far, is that there was at hand another type of outsider, with which the values would be reversed, because it posits an image of civilizational superiority on the strength of its power and wealth, the English, which culturally is not very different from the "civilized native tribes".

The Outsider as Observer

Outsiders in all respects, the tinkers of this play belong to another fictional family, that is as wide a concept of the "other" as an external entity allows it. Culturally, the other has been differently perceived throughout the ages. This entity was the barbarian to the Greeks, the infidel to the crusader, the native to the captains of the first discoveries, the primitive heathen to the philosopher and missionary in the Eighteenth Century, the slave or inhabitant of the colonies to developing extractive plantation society and its central imperial core.

In the Eighteenth Century this primitive becomes the object not only of enlightened curiosity and experimentation, but from this concept is created another, that of the independent critical observer who will look at the old world with the new innocent look of the primitive unspoiled by civilization. Most of the time these are simple, uneducated, but articulate and keen observers. Other times they possess an older and sophisticated culture, and their observations shed light on the shortcomings and virtues of both worlds compared.

Montesquieu, in Persian Letters creates two of these outsiders, the Persians Usbek and Rica, who are visiting France and other countries in Europe as exiles and keen observers, for pleasure and enlightenment. They embody the ideal, educated and detached observer who is able to pass comment on the virtues and evils of Montesquieu's contemporaries, his society, the various ruling systems of Europe. Usbek leaves, much illuminated on the cynicism of court society, on the merits of education of women and of a tolerant ruler. He will have to return home because the security and discipline of his seraglio has deteriorated. His wives are no longer faithful and neither love, fear nor the vigilance of the eunuchs can check them. It seems all his enlightenment has been acquired at such personal loss, albeit not for his wives. The epistolary format of these comments allowed for journalistic pamphleteering, and these letters appeared in periodicals. The pseudo-foreign observer (also a feature of fictional travel journals) is more than a disguise in a

masquerade. It is an opportunity, a pretext for depersonalization, liberating the author's critical intellect, allowing the work to remain:

a constant ironical reiteration of the relativity of religions, of human customs, of philosophies, which mirror but the intellectual mood of a civilization at a certain time. It smiles at 'eternal verities'. All truth appears as but a variation of prejudice.²⁴

It is this philosophical detachment from the 'eternal verities' of society, and the more profound allegiance to an almost mystical relationship with nature that Synge demonstrates in his plays.

Lesser known than Montesquieu's, but receiving wide circulation in their time were other letters of pseudo-foreign observers in England, using this type of character, usually witty and ironical, sharing the assumption that the subject could also be the object of the foreign gaze.²⁵ These literary endeavours have a strong interventionist bias, which Synge for instance refused to admit as ever existing as source for his own creative impulse. However he does not avoid the challenge and embedded criticism it presents. The particularly disturbing issue is the nature and quality of the chosen foreigner and the relationship thereby

²⁴ G L Van Roesbroeck, *Persian Letters Before Montesquieu*. New York, Burt Franklin, 1972.

²⁵ As quoted by Roesbroeck, the following could be found in circulation in England before the publication of Montesquieu's *Letters*: Edward Ward's *The London Spy* (1698-1700), the adaptation of Tom Brown's *Amusements Serious and Comical* (1700), letters sent to the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* (1710-1714), A Millier's *A Brief and Merry History of Great Britain* (1710?), Ogden's *The Conduct of Christians* (1717) and Defoe's *Continuation* (1708). Also deserving mention is Goldsmith's Irish satire, *Citizen of the World*.

established with society. By definition it must be an individual who has no connection with the society in cultural, social religious or political links. The characters he chooses as the subject of the play do indeed comply with these requirements: they do not share the culture, do not belong to the social structure, do not share the religion and are not contemplated in the political framework as elements of the Nation.

The subject in Tinker's is commonly an object of social denigration, of distance well kept, of exclusion from the commonwealth. The tinkers are not tolerated as the tramps are, for instance are not allowed to drink inside the pubs. They have a reputation for stealing, generally marauding, drinking, creating havoc and living outside the boundaries of respectability or decency - not getting married within the Church. As custom had it, the stories involving tinkers retold to Synge by farmers, other travellers and storytellers carried all these assumptions. So, assuming that in Tinker's we have a 'reversed look' that of the usually gazed upon or objectified as now the subject of the gaze, we have to qualify the nature of this new subject.

This tinker family is of course a creation of Synge, based on his notes from his travels in Wicklow, as documented above. Claiming that Synge's tinker is a piece of fiction in this context should not be understood as devaluing his insight into, and knowledge of, the vagrant life or in any way mean a disclaimer of his valuable contact with the people of the roads. It means that further than a

dramatization of a story told to him by a somewhat piqued shepherd at a fair (CW II, 228), the play offers a consistent view of Irish society from a novel point of view, that of the social outcast, the tinker, conforming to the portrait of the nomad drawn by Mayhew, quoted above. Reproducing the model of domination and cultural division to its own scale, Irish society will create a group which in a way takes the place that the poor Irish immigrant occupies in society in Britain, that of the degraded animalised lower-other. In Shadow. Well, 'When the Moon Has Set', Deirdre there is a character who is able to put the case for another view of life, offering other values. Here the balance is altered: it is the outsider who takes centre stage priority and conventional society's values that come under scrutiny as a piece of alien folklore, in a complete reversal of relative positions.

Synge brings together two groups that share Irish soil but rarely come into contact with each other - the Church and the vagrant tinker. All they know of each other is tainted by folklore and hearsay. Nicholas Grene in his study of the two Wicklow plays, The Shadow and Tinker's claims that the ideas about the vagrants's irreligiosity and their loose mores were grossly exaggerated, reporting his knowledge to the information provided by "The Report of the Commission on Itineracy", (1963). This report must perforce, as Grene admits however, give a watered down account of facts.²⁶ Therefore it is not far-fetched to assume that

²⁶ Even if it were accurate, this related to a period sixty years later, during which time two world wars had taken place. The emergence of Ireland as a free country brought social groups closer to-

Mayhew's description of the 'nomades' of England to be a more adequate characterization of the tinkers in Synge's time.

The tinker family in this play is formed of two strong-willed females and a man who lives between the scorn of his mother and the demands of his partner. The moving force of the plot is the apparently springtime madness of the young woman Sarah Casey who suddenly becomes ambitious for a wedding ring. This indeed is seen as lunacy by old Mary and Michael Byrne. There are serious social implications in this wish of hers to get married. At this stage we see a tinker woman looking at the society from which she is cast out as the seat of privileges and respectability. Young Sarah can only presume about the wealth and way of life of the "rich ladies", but she feels she has "as good a right to a decent marriage as any speckled female does be sleeping in the black hovels above" (CW IV, 35). This marriage contract will in her understanding open up a new avenue in her life - respectability and some social promotion.

Of course Michael has much to lose if he does not go along with her wishes. He has tried to convince her of the obvious advantages of their situation, but with little result. This wedding which will secure for him the woman whom he had chosen long ago seems utterly redundant, or even per-

gether, allowing for faster assimilation, were it not only for the development of communications and the closer and renewed contact with America.

nicious. He is making her wedding ring, but she finds it does not fit quite well:

Michael [looking at it carefully]. It's the fat of your own finger, Sarah Casey; and isn't it a mad thing I'm saying again that you'd be asking marriage of me, or making a talk of going away from me, and you thriving and getting your good health by the grace of the Almighty God? (CW IV, 9)

The ring on her finger, which symptomatically is coming out too tight for her - a metaphoric admonition that the ring will constrain more than liberate, that she is quite well off without one (fat equated with health) - will nonetheless command respect when she reaches the villages and approaches the man in her job of selling cans and songs:

Sarah [triumphantly]. It is, Mary Byrne. I'll be married now in a short while; and from this day there will no one have a right to call me a dirty name and I selling cans in Wicklow or Wexford or the city of Dublin itself. (CW IV, 35)

The other alternative way of rising in status is moving in with richer tinkers, like Jaunting Jim or the rich tinkers of Meath. As we are led into the heart of the tinker society, we become aware of its different units, where at first the general image of a chaotic mass prevailed. This is not an "indefinite, disintegrated" mass but a society where there is also some sort of class division, the rich and the poor tinkers, those who sleep on the ditch and those who ride in their jaunty cars. The exact way in which class division is organized is not made apparent in the play. It just gives the idea that Synge sees beyond the external superficial approach that society dispenses on tinkers, for whom it suffices that they are there, like so many other

groups in the fringe of society, of respectability. Here Synge takes the first step in the recognition of the tinkers' autonomous identity as a social unit, that is he gives a voice to a group that society could only handle with "coal-tongs". The fear of the contaminating touch of which Stallybrass talks is what the Priest here seems briefly to overcome when he accepts joining the drinks and chat by the fire. His progress from fear and surprise at the encounter of the vagrant couple, into some sort of conviviality and common experience is well outlined here. Sarah Casey's approach to the Priest is civil enough:

Sarah [in a very plausible voice]. Good evening, your reverence. It's a grand fine night, by the grace of God.

Priest. The Lord have mercy on us! What kind of a living woman is it that you are at all?

Sarah. It's Sarah Casey I am, your reverence, the Beauty of Ballinacree, and it's Michael Byrne is below in the ditch.

Priest. A holy pair surely! Let you get out of my way. [He tries to pass by.]

Sarah [keeping in front of him]. We are wanting a little word with your reverence.

Priest. I haven't a halfpenny at all. Leave the road I'm saying. (CW IV, 13)

The only possible expected reason for contact between tinkers and the Priest would be begging at the best of times. The progress from a half undeciphered entity, a "kind of living woman" into the prospective recipient of a cut-price sacrament is made through Sarah Casey's pleading, crying, and impressing on the Priest that the money that could pay for their salvation would otherwise be spent on

drinking. This whole dialogue follows still on the Priest's terms.

The arrival of Mary Byrne widens the antagonism of attitude and stresses the common core of shared human experience between tinker and Priest. This old heathen has seen the ways of the world through her travels and her stories. Such wisdom is given by old age and a long acquaintance with the primitive world of survival in /with nature. It will be her entreaties that will bring the Priest to sit down by the fire and share the porter, in this communion of hardship:

Mary. That's right now, your reverence, and the blessing of God be on you. Isn't it a grand thing to see you sitting down, with no pride in you, and drinking a sup with the like of us, and we the poorest, wretched, starving creatures you'd see any place on the earth?

Priest. If it's starving you are itself, I'm thinking it's well for the like of you that do be drinking when there's a drought on you, and lying down to sleep when your legs are stiff. [He sighs gloomily.] What would you do if it was the like of myself you were, saying Mass with your own mouth dry, and running east and west for a sick call maybe, and hearing the rural people again and they saying their sins? (CW IV, 19)

In good pagan fashion they sit around a fire. One could go as far as Mary King in finding grotesque similarities with the Christian sacrament of Communion. In a way it is communion, coming together under the spell of the fellowship of all the pilgrims' progress, sharing the difficult moments and offering sympathy to each other for their hardship. In this case the Priest sees himself in a worse situation. He, like his companions of a night, has a liking for drink and conviviality with his peers, as he is often seen

coming from the doctor's house at odd hours when he "does be in there playing cards, or drinking a sup, or singing songs, until the dawn of day." (CW IV, 13). As documented more explicitly in the drafts, the Priest has a strong affection for drink, and of course Vivian Mercier hopes indeed that Synges presumes the Priest to be drunk in the first act and sober in the second. That would be a reassuring explanation for this grotesque "bacchanalian communion", led by old Mary. She celebrates without requiring a fee, as it were for the true spirit of conviviality, providing an evident basis for the common denominator of humanity, making the disturbing points of contact that Mercier strongly hopes exist only in an intoxicated mind obviously apparent. What utter folly can drive a Priest to propose the thought of swapping places "what would you do if it was the like of myself you were", to such utterly inadequate candidates, but a strong dose of liquor? To these chance travellers he can afford to be just human, looking despondently on his holy calling as serious mortification, because unlike his parishioners these do not look up to him for spiritual guidance and unwavering fortitude, and unlike his peers or the bishop, they are not there to judge him.

Through the scene between the couple and through Mary Byrne's sermonizing we are brought closer to that fringe of society that had kept itself aloof of any kind of nationalistic appropriation and because of its particular characteristics would not find representation on the stage. They personify the grotesque, the ritually libertarian, the so-

cially unmanageable. Synge indeed may tend to look at vagrants in general as those who have an authoritative word to put in for the case of identification with and closer relation to nature. The defense of this perspective is already clearly expressed in "When the Moon has Set", but there it is more of an academic pose, a search into the distant unknown depths of Nature and the self. In the present play the closeness of life and nature, make it a symbiotic structure, following its own rules in which there is no need for the convention of marriage as envisaged by the "civilized tribes" or the Priest.

The madness in the tinker group is identified as the wish to opt out of it; this pattern of "madness" as a rejection of the main value systems of any society seems to be taken by Synge as a social constant. It is applicable to both the "civilized tribes" and the nomads, as the Douls are seen as mad in the same way, when they refuse the gift of sight. Here this madness is expressed in Sarah's fascination for the life of the "grand ladies", as she can perceive it through her outsider gaze. The irony of it is that the audience is made aware that Sarah does not have the means of access to that stratum in society and that the difference between her vision of the life of the well to do and the reality of urban life for most social groups shows her view to be highly fanciful and idealised. This idealisation has to do with visions of the self transposed into a dream-like reality, where she will be cast high upon a car radiating in the sun, while Michael will be down, below in the ditch, in

darkness. It is a very effective view in terms of inducing the right response from Michael:

Sarah. It's yourself you'll be calling God to help, in two weeks or three, when you'll be waking up in the dark night and thinking you see me coming with the sun on me, and I driving a high cart with Jaunting Jim going behind. ... (CW IV, 11)

Sarah's idealisation is brought back to manageable terms as the play unfolds and her plans fall through, and also by the sobering speeches of Mary Byrne. Strikingly relevant is the self assurance of both Mary Byrne and Sarah Casey. Well developed characters or just sketchy delinations as different critics will qualify them, they both share with other important female characters some strength which derives from their outspokenness, even if they have opposite opinions.

It is true that the tinker society is not idealized here. As reported in "At a Wicklow Fair", tinkers would meet every year at a fair where matches were arranged. As from Michael's report, "a clout in the lug" was a good means of reinforcing the match arranged when the girl wanted to go back to her parents. But Sarah Casey is now a mature woman, she knows she has more bargaining power than just tears:

Sarah [indignantly]. Liar, is it? Didn't you ever hear tell of the peelers followed me ten miles along the Glen Malura, and they talking love to me in the dark night, or of the children you'll meet coming from school and they saying one to the other, 'It's this day we seen Sarah Casey, the Beauty of Ballinacree, a great sight surely.' (CW IV, 11)

She is assured of her worth by the praise of all the other men who call her the Beauty of Ballinacree, be it the

police or even the school children. She is certain that she has a better chance to get a good husband than any. Such self-assurance is not a welcome proposition to any partner, tinker or otherwise who sees his position so easily challenged. This seems to agree with Mayhew's comments on the attitudes of nomad women in general, as applicable to all races. The children they may have had together do not seem to tie Sarah Casey down. There seems to be little emancipation to be won on the part of these particular women. They stay with the man they chose, but they seem to feel free to leave if the conditions do not please them, or at least they can challenge the partner on those grounds. Usually the opposite is the case for other Irish women as expressed by Nora Burke. They are expected to put up with very unsatisfactory marriages because of economic conditions, and their need to survive above the dire subsistence that can be scrapped on the roads. It is not correct to say with Mary King that there is no economy in nature.²⁷ It would rather be the case here amply exemplified that the principles of thrift and accumulation or acquisitiveness are not adequate to the necessities of a wandering life. The reason for Michael to abide by Sarah's wishes is her particular ability at getting money for her songs, stories or the tin cans.

As Nicholas Grene says, "Syngé could hardly conceive a plausible motive for Sarah's attitude, for he did not see why someone in her position should want to change it". Grene offers the case of Nora Burke as a contrast, where

²⁷ King, p. 90.

there is a more plausible case, an illustration of "a major truth".²⁸ There is obviously a case to be made to show that Synge was not impartial in his argument. He unmistakably sides with the way of life of the tinkers, as for him this is the closest identification with Nature in a structured way, and a higher order of cognition. The love of Nature which he developed through his youth and which came to replace religion in his more mystical search for identification with his fellow human beings, is here given a form in the life style of the tinkers. This identification develops through the characters and life of the outcasts into an organised plan for living. Here one does not identify or search for union with society, be it religious or profane. The ties that bind together individuals who follow the flow of seasons as their clock, and endure the harshness of a deprived life, must be stronger or more vital than those that he sees regulating social intercourse in urban life or even in village communities. The utter liberty to roam the length and breadth of the country has an appeal which Synge could not avoid idealising, as the liberation from social constraints. In The Tinker's Wedding this expression goes further than in any of the other plays, therefore this is the reason why it is seen as less successful. As his nephew states in his biography tinkers would hardly be the sort of people John would mix with, due to their unregulated behaviour. It looks obvious that if as a wary uncle, he ever warned or commented negatively on the effect of such social intercourse to his nephew, Synge himself felt more than a

²⁸ Nicholas Grene, p. 109.

passing interest in the life of these people who had a design for freedom. This interest may be tinted with attraction and repulsion as Stallybras points out, but in this case the characteristics which are socially denoted as repulsive, with Synge stand as affirmation of otherness, without a negative bias to it.

In other plays the outsider is a fool or at most a tramp, someone who shares both codes, who can mediate between society and nature, or is someone who is looking for a more liberating life, as in the choice of Nora, the Douls or Deirdre. The tinkers are already liberated, the statement is not one of yearning for another step away from the civilized tribes, but the reiteration of their experience as a valid one.

The Voice of "The Pride of Women"

Tinker's is a play of unconditional rejection of conventional values, more so than other plays, but without the idealised movement of departure towards the longed for liberation. There is no opposition of stasis and movement, but two similarly cohesive bodies, one concrete and the other perceived as fluid. This is a poor simile for what actually identifies the difference between the two groups. Both have a code its members obey, disobedience of which implies alienation. Sarah alienates herself from her community, but probably in a less radical way than it does Nora when she walks out of the cottage into the glen, leaving behind material stability, shelter and the status of a farmer's wife.

As usual, in this play the strongest case is made by a woman, Mary Byrne the old woman who incarnates the grotesque body with relish. Lavarchan in Deirdre reminisces over the independence of women, their strength and her youth. Mary Costello in When the Moon has Set is a weather beaten fool led into distraction by the incapacity to reconcile desire and belief, nature and faith, who tries to prevent the next generation from following her steps in obedience to the precepts of a Church alienated from humanity. Their voice is that of the old Mother, the all-embracing nurturer.²⁹ Claiming nothing but the end of fear from the sea, and knowledge of its ways, Maurya will be satisfied as anyone must be when all one's children have been claimed by the sea, "they're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me...". There is in this tragic statement a feeling of liberation from the constraints of survival that belies the assurance offered by the Priest. In the hearth keeper Synge finds the outsider, the mouthpiece of a larger existence, outspoken woman who only partly shares the attributes of conventional femininity.

This issue of the concept and image of the feminine is further complicated by the permanent question concerning the definition and classification of Irish society. The Arnoldian concept of feminine Celticism was also followed by some of the Celtic revivalist intelligentsia. Against this deep structure which justifies the position of the Nation as

²⁹ Synge had a close image of such powerful motherhood, a mother in his own, who alone represented parenthood to little John and to all her children. The author's strong affection towards his mother was always present even when they could no longer share the same beliefs.

a defeated race due to its own shortcomings - otherworldly, poetic, passionate, emotive - the nationalists like D P Moran produce the concept of the Gael as masculine, bellicose warrior. There they oppose the concept of the Celt as feminine race with the "hypermasculinity" of the Gael.³⁰

In this stance women would be very much in the same position: the nationalist issue is to dissociate the Nation from the slur of emasculation and fight the least offensive (but more persistent) image of Irishness with another that would raise the spirits of the Irish to a positive and performative attitude towards themselves. Whichever way it is observed, the matter is a totally masculine one. If society is defined as feminine and ineffective, women are expected to be demure hearth angels, displaying a high endurance of suffering. If society defines itself through masculinity then the feminine becomes all that has to be devalued, repressed, contained; women will be expected to be mothers, and companions but men will define well the terms of this companionship. In these circumstances of a elevated poetical image or a strict moral code which woman has to uphold for the sake of family, class, land and nation, Synge's woman claims what must be seen as a third way, a definition of woman which is tra-poetical, tra-national.

In this conjuncture Synge's woman is not a duplicate of the Celtic Twilight conception of Celticism, neither is she

³⁰ See David Cairns and Shaun Richards "Woman" in the Discourse of Celticism: A Receptionist Reading of *The Shadow of the Glen*. in *Anglo-Irish and Irish Literature Aspects of Language and Culture*. volume II, Uppsala 1988, pp. 31-33.

the expected image of Cathleen ni Houlihan, but an individual subject of her own destiny, which develops across barriers of social decorum or nationalist struggle.

Mary Byrne scolds Sarah for her insistence on getting married, and this raises the issue of the two different ways of life. In Act One there is the opposition Priest - tinkers on the lack of religion by the latter. In her long life Mary has heard "a power of things", "but there's one thing I never heard any time, and that's a real Priest saying a prayer." She is however aware of class differentiation as she rates the prayers of the Priest higher than those of "the rural people":

Mary. It's no lie holy father. I often heard the rural people making a queer noise and they going to rest; but who'd mind the like of them? And I'm thinking it should be great game to hear a scholar, the like of you, speaking Latin to the saints above.

Priest [scandalized]. Stop your talking Mary Byrne; you're an old flagrant heathen, and I'll stay no more with the lot of you. [He rises.] (CW IV, 21)

Her total lack of recognition and veneration for the religious is expressed in the clear equation of the Priest's prayers with her songs. She would "rouse up" the "poor, single man you are itself" with her songs, just as the Priest expects his prayers to inspire his parishioners into devotion and the fear of "the Almighty God" to those that will soon die. Her indifferent attitude to religion separates the Priest from this brief encounter. A point of contact was found between the two groups, the awareness of the frail nature of humanity, common to both. Both the Priest

and Mary find immediate consolation in drink, and feed their deeper yearnings with the power they invest in words. The Priest is not able to be a detached observer of his faith, only of the hardship of his calling. Mary Byrne however, is more clearly aware that words are powerful only before an audience, be it the Priest who is now listening to Sarah's "whisper-talk" or the audience she can muster to her own songs and stories. She interprets Sarah's attitudes in the light of her own belief. This "whisper-talk" with the Priest is interpreted as another symptom of madness:

Mary [nudging Michael]. Did you see that Michael Byrne? Didn't you hear me telling you she's flighty a while back since the change of the moon? With her fussing for marriage, and she making whisper-talk with one man or another man along by the road. (.....)

You'd never have seen me, and I a young woman, making whisper-talk with the like of him, and he the fearfulest old fellow you'd see any place walking the world. (CW IV, 23)

In Mary's code there is a redeeming feature in a flighty woman, her beauty. It is to Sarah that Mary will offer to tell old stories of queens, with "white necks on them" and "fine arms would hit you a slap the way Sarah Casey would hit you". In her view, the queens in the old stories look and behave very much in the way Sarah does, while still keeping their regal stance. To Sarah, "the glory of tinkers" she will tell:

the finest story you'd hear any place from Dundalk to Ballinacree, with great queens in it, making themselves matches from the start to the end, and they with shiny silks on them the length of the day, and white shifts for the night. (CW IV, 23)

But the serious threat is loneliness and rejection. The young couple gets busy with Tim Flaherty's hens in the backwood, and the old woman is left alone, with a noise in her head, which only a drink will soften down. Here she is aware of the scant power the old stories have when there is none to listen to them. For her they have the same soothing effect as religion, they give some relief and distraction from suffering, to those in pain or the innocent:

Mary. (...) What good am I this night, God help me? what good are the grand stories I have when it's a few would listen to an old woman, few but a girl maybe in great fear her hour has come, or a little child wouldn't be sleeping with the hunger on a cold night? (CW IV, 27)

When in Act Two she wakes up to find out all the whisper-talk was to do with marriage arrangements she does not revert to stories to dissuade the young from marriage, but charges them outright with folly, especially her son, "Well, she's a tight, hardy girl, and it's no lie; but I never knew till this day it was a black born fool I had for a son" (CW IV, 35). The derision of his mother's laughter leads Michael gloomily to admit that this is the last resort to stop her from going to Jaunting Jim. His financial worries do not trouble his mother's mind too much. Her stronger argument will be against what she perceives to be a helpless attempt to stop a movement which for her is natural: "And you're thinking it's paying gold to his reverence would make a woman stop when she has a mind to go?" (CW IV, 35). Women will have their way and there would hardly be any contract or law which could come to alter that. This contract with the Priest has two types of implications, one relating to

the attitude towards God, and the other relating to the social expectations derived from the contract. The first one is removed from the final text, but in typescript 'D' Sarah invokes the protection "from the Almighty God". For Mary, God has other business than interfering with them:

Mary [sitting down and leaning back against the ditch]. Safe from the Almighty God is it! What is it he'd care for the like of you. You wouldn't see the Almighty God up into the sky after the larks and swallows and the swift birds, or after the hares do be racing above on a fine Spring, and what would he want following us and we not troubling him at all. (CW IV, 34)

God and tinkers are invisible to each other, and it is possible to live one's tinker life without fear of collision with Him. Such outspoken ignorance of the definition of God as omnipresent comes from Mary's empirical observation of life: she has never met God in her wanderings. This blatant challenge of Christian belief by a vagrant who is so close, yet so far from the cultural core of the civilized tribes has been removed from the play. Synge then reduces the challenge of difference to the social implications of the wedding. The right Sarah claims to have a decent marriage comes under close scrutiny:

Mary [soothingly]. It's a good right you have surely, Sarah Casey, but what good will it do? Is it putting that ring on your finger will keep you from getting an aged woman and losing the fine face you have, or be easing your pains, when it's the grand ladies do be married in silk dresses, with rings of gold, that do pass any woman with their share of torment in the hour of birth, and do be paying the doctors in the city of Dublin a great price at that time, the like of what you'd pay for a good ass and cart? [She sits down] (CW IV, 37)

It is assumed here by inference that the tinker women enjoy better health than the grand ladies, an argument that Synge carries through in "The Vagrants of Wicklow", "the healthiness of this life, again, often causes this people to live to a great age" (CW II, 202). He also compares them with other vagrants in other countries, stressing the need for a healthy constitution to pursue a life on the roads in Ireland. They have sound good health and some nobility in their bearing:

These vagrants have no resemblance with the mendicants who show their sores near the churches of Italy, for mobility is a condition of existence of a tramp in Ireland, and the greater number that one sees are vigorous women and men of fine physique. (CW II, 196)

Far from seeing them as a disreputable mob, Synge chooses to stress what is valuable in the vagrants. Among these free roaming groups of tinkers Synge finds some of the best qualities of the Irish are being kept alive:

People like these, like the old woman and these two beautiful children, are a precious possession for any country. They console us, one moment at least, for the manifold and beautiful life we have all missed who have been born in modern Europe. ... One has inevitable sympathy with vitality and with people that unite in a rude way the old passions of the earth. (CW II, 199)

However highly he may praise the virtues of tinker life he does not shrink from going to the extent of displaying a wide gamut of offensive behaviour even as he uses them to put forward their views and philosophy.

From the reasons stated above, it seems less surprising that Synge allows these characters to take such important

roles in his plays. Again it is Mary Byrne who confronts the Priest on the issues of visions of the world. The contact between tinker and Priest comes to a gruesome conclusion.

In Hall, the man puts forwards the case of "unity with nature" strongly, and the woman gradually accepts this, summing up her adherence in a deep note of acceptance of hardship. In Tinker's on the contrary, the man has little arguing power. The defence and final summing up is made by the wildest advocate of the vagrant life- Mary Byrne.

In this way Mary Byrne appears as the apostle of otherness and at the same time as the example of the most Rabalaisian and grotesque of all the characters in the Synge canon. By this time Sarah has already rejected the idea of marriage. Their leaving in the end is a statement of independence and separateness, a chosen and assumed otherness:

Sarah [puts the ring on his finger]. There's the ring, holy father, to keep you minding of your oath until the end of time; for my heart's scalded with your fooling; and it'll be a long day till I go making talk of marriage or the like of that.

Mary [complacently, standing up slowly]. She's vexed now, your reverence; and let you not mind her at all, for she's a right surely, and it's little need we ever had of the like of you to get us our bit to eat, and our bit to drink, and our time of love when we were young men and women, and were fine to look at. (CW IV, 49, my italics)

The sacrosanct images of propriety and virtue invested in women are one of the strongholds of conventional morals, bourgeois or otherwise. The emergence of the woman as autonomous subject, not aligning with either side of the po-

litical divide can only be perceived as a divisionist attitude in a situation of struggle as that of Synge's time. Nationalists will see it as playing up the British vilification of Irishness, for England it will come as a reiteration of Irishness as a quaint oddity at its best, at its worst an immoral unruly mob. Synge adds insult to injury when, making a group of tinkers the subjects of a play with the privilege of critical observers of society, he gives the female tinkers the lead in the outspoken declaration of their own principles.

Synge gives full rein to the riotous behaviour of the tinkers who are not intimidated by the invested power of the Priest and attack him when he threatens them with the police. Priest and tinkers had been brought together under the spell of a welcoming fire, drink and a chat. They will be put in violent antagonism under the spell of commerce and religion, as they barter for the price of the sacrament. This wrangling also comes about when all are with empty stomachs and while the Priest is under the fear of the imminent arrival of the Bishop.

The outrageous behaviour of the tinkers is displayed in front of the church. Here the Priest expresses what can be seen as the common view of tinkers and well-known stories of their life: In page 41 - "It's a wicked lot you are", when they threaten confrontation he is afraid of their committing murder and soiling the church (CW IV, 43) and when things are getting out of the Priest's control he threatens report-

ing a "dated story" of their villainies to the police (CW IV, 45).

In spite of all these previous references to their unruly behaviour, the attack on the Priest comes as quite a surprise for the audience and the Priest himself. The reason for this must be understood in the fact that such attitude cannot but be perceived as an attack on the powerful, much revered and feared image of the Parish Priest.

The Priest is methonimically perceived as the Church and therefore carries with him a power and authority that are rarely challenged. He is used to being received by his community as the minister of God and behaves assuming all would revere God and His ministry in his own person. As it became obvious to many missionaries, the non-believers do not share the same awe and respectful fear for the physical representative of divinity. Here again the tinkers display the same type of behaviour and ignorance as the unruly vagrant tribes.

The abuse of the tinkers is seen to be produced in terms of three grotesque attitudes. Their presence will cause the church to be dirty, they can at any time cause bloodshed in front of it; their behaviour is unruly and riotous - the women fighting disturb the peace. The insults and attack on the Priest are a methonimic assault on the core of civilized society - the Catholic religion. Soiling, rioting, abusing the image of divinity, are all grotesque, down-grading explosions of the carnivalesque which an or-

dered society is expected to restrain, keep under control, out of bounds. This reversal finds its logic in the carnivalesque folk ritual which as Bakhtin notes, has:

The peculiar logic of the 'in side out', ... of a continual shifting from top to bottom, ... of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings.³¹

As the Priest is knocked down on the road and gagged with the sack that formerly kept the tin can and the three empty porter bottles Mary talks to him in an irrational ambivalence of violence and praise. As Mary King refers, the old woman tries to give the "whole episode the status of a necessary game". She tries to explain to the Priest that their resentment is not precisely directed at him, at his person, but at the way in which he was using his social position, by taking their money and threatening to report them to the police. Likewise it is Mary Byrne who moderates the couple's urge to throw the Priest in a bog-hole, since they had celebrated the night before in a festive communion. Mary is moved by what they both have in common - a good liking for drink, company and the power of words:

Mary [soothingly]. let you not be rough with him, Sara Casey, and he after drinking his sup of porter with us at the fall of night. Maybe he'd swear a mighty oath he wouldn't harm us, and then we'd safer loose him; (CW IV, 47)

In her analysis of this play as 'The Play of Life', Mary King studies it as a version of the 'noces à mi-

³¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rebels and his World*, p. 11. In the same pattern must come the boiling of the parson's cabbage with clothes and the quenching of "the flaming candles on the throne of God" by Sarah's shadow. *CW IV*, p. 33.

taines', which she relates to Synge's observations in his visits to Kerry and Puck-Fair:

True to the spirit of the folk festival, however, Synge's dramatic vision is antipathetic towards base negation. The dialectal action of the play recognises that the old world is inseparable from the new.³²

In this most competent study of the play Mary King finds that the greatest strength of The Tinkers' Wedding is the stress laid upon "the creative nature of the comic-ironic interplay between the two sides".³³ Paraphrasing Bakhtin, when full human relations are established, it is as if the old pattern of market place intercourse comes to life, again, and intimacy breaks all barriers between people.³⁴

Reviving to his full authority, complete with surplice and cassock, the Priest utters the long awaited words, not to Mary Byrne's requirement as a prayer, but as a malediction. The Priest is left "master of the situation" which in the present occurrence is an empty stage.

Those who run away feeling they have been outwitted by the shrewd Priest had nonetheless time to put forward their principle of a life in Nature, and denial of the community's principles. Mary Byrne, the minister of this unholy sermon and communion admonishes the Priest against interfering with their old rules, be it the way they order their family life,

³² King, pp. 100, 101.

³³ King, p. 101.

³⁴ Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World. p. 421.

or the expedients they resort to make a living. She gives her speech to the gagged Priest. This again is a humiliation, a carnivalesque type of reversal, since it is the prerogative of the Priest to speak, preach, spread the Word, to a usually reverent and quiet audience. For the sermon of otherness to be heard, the Priest has to be forcibly made quiet:

Mary. That's a good boy you are now, your reverence, and let you not be uneasy, for we wouldn't hurt you at all. It's sick and sorry we are to tease you; but what did you want meddling with the like of us, when it's a long time we are going our own ways - father and son, and his son after him, or mother and daughter, and her own daughter again - and it's little need we ever had of going up into a church and swearing . . . , or drawing rings on our fingers, would be cutting our skins maybe . . . (CW IV, 47, my italics.)

The opportunity is there for Mary to take. She gives a balanced humane statement of difference, refusing the Priest's principles on a pragmatic basis - to them they are of no use. What is revealingly new in this situation is the acknowledgement of both principles, as sets of contrasting values, which no Daniel Burke, Timmy the Smith, Saint, Shaun Kehog or Priest are able to make.

This brief riotous stage encounter has told its audience more than it would care to know. That there is an alien within us, not the execrable invader, but a disruptive part of the self of the Nation, one that lives beyond the containment of rules of decorum, morality or civility. This grotesque marginal entity is able to present a critique of the centre offering its own view of life as festive, regenerative, carnivalesque. Paraphrasing Nandy, the Tinker's is

a superior vision, since it acknowledges the existence of both structures of values, where all the others who stand for conventional society can only see the outsiders as a thing - a fool, an outcast, a social non-entity. Synge himself had acquired that vision, and he found it was one that needed stating even if it was "too immoral for Dublin".

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD AND THE CONTROVERSY
OVER THE POSE AND PURPOSE OF THEATRE

No critic or historian can discuss the Revival without mentioning the tragic power, the mysticism, the sense of elemental forces, the simplicity, the beauty, the dignity conferred on Anglo-Irish literature by this movement toward the primitive and the archaic. Equally, nobody has been able to explain why the first undeniable masterpiece produced by the Revival, The Playboy of the Western World, should negate most of the literary virtues I have just enumerated.¹

Synge was the first Abbey dramatist to be translated and produced abroad, a curious development since he was the one who most defended a strict relation to the soil from which the drama was to spring, in theme, language and mood. In different parts of the world The Playboy of the Western World has been read, produced and adapted.² The disruptive quality of this play has been studied from many varied approaches. Still, to Synge's contemporary audiences there

¹ Mercier, Vivian, The Irish Comic Tradition. 1969, pp. 247-248

² First recorded productions of Playboy in other languages, November 8, 1912, Münster/Westphalia, Germany: Stadttheater; December 12, 1913, Paris: Lugné-Poë's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre; 1955 Vienna: Karel-doskop, Sil-Vara's version; 1955, Hokuriku and Chugoku districts, Japan: Gekidan Mingei (People's Theatre Art Players); March 11, 1960, Cologne: the Kammerspiele, Annemarie and Heinrich Boll's version. In Kopper, A. J. M. Synge Literary Companion. New York and London, Greenwood Press, 1988, pp. 256-7.

was very little to praise or study in such an insult to Irish peasants, Irish women and the Nation at large.

To analyse the controversy over The Playboy in Dublin 1907, we have to recall the political events that shook Ireland in the 1890's as reviewed in chapters one and two to assess the level of entrenchment of political sectarianism and as a result the expectations of the nationalist groups concerning art, and also on a larger perspective we should look to Europe and other theatrical and artistic movements that in some way influenced the evolution of the Irish Dramatic Movement. These matters as analysed in chapter two, show how the arrival of Synge at the Abbey forced the course of events in a particular direction. As Yeats believed, Synge was the type of genius who was worth fighting for, even if his artistic production and ideas on art and theatre management differed at times radically from Yeats's. Synge made the whole Abbey project change direction by the production of his plays, namely The Playboy and by the defense of his aesthetic principles. For Yeats the defense of Synge's plays amounted to 'rock the cradle of genius'. For people like Holloway, the outlook was different:

Since I saw In the Shadow of the Glen, I always thought that Synge would be the rock on which the society would come to grief, and that time has arrived I am sorry to say.³

In this chapter attention is focused on Synge's writing process. By analysing some of his notebooks, with various notes for plays, then scenarios and drafts we come across

³ Holloway, Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer. Tuesday, Feb. 7, 1905, referring to Well of the Saints, p. 53.

his ideas on specific subjects that do not appear openly in his plays. By going through these several layers in the construction of the text, we aim to disclose some of the sources of controversy, or at least view them in a different light. However even at this stage it must be said that the controversy is a public, historical event, and therefore the ideological causes for the reaction must be found in the minds of the audiences as well as in the text.⁴

Synge's Aesthetics

A clearer image of Synge the author can be partially reconstructed from his own drafts and several notes on the most varied topics related to his methods of artistic creation. Until the early seventies this image was very much influenced by the writings of W B Yeats.

The statements of W B Yeats subscribed to by scholars like Bourgeois, Ellis-Fermor and Grene about Synge's incapacity for political thought, promote the myth of the disengaged artist and his independent pursuit of artistic perfection. If it is true that Synge's work stands apart from contemporary local issues on the political scene, it is nonetheless deeply rooted in Irish country life.

Synge's notes on lectures both at Trinity College Dublin and at the Sorbonne, as well as his own comments on his readings help us understand his aesthetic perspectives

⁴ Of great relevance to this particular issue see Cairns and Richards, "Reading a Riot: The 'Reading Formation' of Synge's Abbey Audience", in *Literature and History*, 13:2, 1987, pp. 219-237.

better than much well intentioned fiction written on the subject.

A few notes taken from Notebooks 5, 10 and 20 offer some material for the rewriting of Synge's intellectual image. As a first point we will look into words that appear in the Notebooks as particularly charged with meaning. The second will concern the nature and aims of the artist and the third the new poetic and its source material:³

Energy is the only life and is from /the/ body, and reason is the outward circumference of energy. Energy is the eternal delight. (Notebook 10, p. 69)

Reason is the boundary of this eternal delight, this source of creativity, but this conception of reason is not perceived as a universal principle. Creativity appears in Synge as an individual's response to impulse, and reason an individual's shaping of this impulse. Images like these recall Bakhtin and Rabelais. The principle that inspiration is a life energy, that it comes from the body and takes a social external form, i.e. the theatre, is very close to the work of Rabelais, in its perceptual analysis. Rabelais's work can be seen as the last instance of bringing together in literary form a total regenerating process, as it was experienced socially in carnival and other popular festivals. It brought to the narrative the spirit of re-

³ Reference to the Notebooks will be made in the text following the quotation. The material for this chapter was collected from the Synge Manuscripts Collection, kept in the Manuscripts Department of The Old Library of Trinity College, Dublin, and the references are therefore according to the numbering in the catalogue published in 1971.

neval of life and the comic parody of authority which had been present in satirical poetry and farce throughout the Middle Ages. Synge is reviving in the twentieth century that which successive regulative efforts, be it of the body or of society's groups had achieved in obliterating: the regenerative interplay of society and its self-parody.

Words like Freedom, Energy, Creativity are laden with meaning for Synge. The balance of energy and reason, of truth and imagination are only a few of the dichotomies to be substantiated throughout his plays. Nicholas Grene generalised this issue for the whole of the plays as a all-embracing theme, that of the "conflict between dream and actuality". Synge feels the pressures on creativity that come from social constraint:

What does the spirit need in the face of the modern life? The sense of freedom (Notebook 10, p. 10v)

But the boundaries of this freedom are in its definition, as he quotes in his notes on Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding:

Liberty cannot be where there is no thought nor volition, no will, but there may be these without liberty. (Notebook 10).

The liberty to create, the volition to be independent in his own creation are pressing issues. Synge rejects most authority on the grounds that it can be fallible, constraining, reduce the artist's work to mere copy of other's methods or ideas:

I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's (...) my business is to create. (Notebook 10, p. 69)

Synge wrote several pages of notes on the new edition of Blake's Poems by W B Yeats in this Notebook. The reference to a dichotomy of worlds, and confessional belief in imagination are part of Synge's earlier literary preoccupations:

The world of imagination is the world of eternity /.../ the world of imagination is infinite and eternal /./ The world of generation or vegetative/ is finite and temporal (Notebook 10, p. 68)

I know no other christianity and no other gospel than the Liberty both of body and mind to exercise the divine art of the imagination. (Notebook 10, p. 86)

The capacity of the artist to use his creative imagination should have no more boundaries than those of his own skills and of the medium used. Synge underlines the following quotation from Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Book II, Chapter V:

The simple ideas we have are such as experience teaches them us, beyond that we cannot make them clearer by words. (Item 4373, p. 50)

This limited capacity of words to bring perception beyond the realm of immediate experience is countered by the artist's capacity to perceive reality. The freedom of the artist to create within a system of his own making is morally regulated by strong values of truthfulness. Often in his writings Synge will claim the truth of his work as a measure of its validity:

When an individual rejects error and embraces truth a last judgement is passed on him (Notebook 10, p. 68)

The artist who finds the creative energy in his body will suffer the ravages of intense emotions. Somehow it appears to Synge that the male body is not sufficiently adequate for the experience of artistic emotion and creation. It seems to have been thus for the young violinist in Vita Vecchia. This text, reputedly autobiographical, offers an instance of the perfect medium for the enjoyment of intense poetical sensations:

She is a perfect physical type. The finer organism of women seem to be able to preserve the intensity and delicacy of perception necessary for an artist with perfect physical health in a way rare with men. - I have had presentiments and dreams before but never anything like this. I hope it will end without calamity. (Item 4382, p. 15)

Here Synge doubts his capacities as a teacher, and he also comes to the conclusion that the woman was physically better equipped to experience the whole range of sensations the artist needs. Once he decided he was not to make a living out of music, but rather from literature, Synge tried to find his own method, his own aesthetics, supported by his own judgement and experience. Such endeavour was not without its shortcomings. His often mentioned incapacity to take advice from other writers had to do with a certain mistrust of authority and also with the originality of his aims which were never fully grasped by his fellow dramatists or by the company. So, in matters of argument, his *Reason* will be the measure: "... all that I can prove, one wiser may refute, and therefore I believe nothing any man has proven"

(Item 4386, p. 4v). The shock of Darwinian revelation in his youth made him reluctant to accept any dogma, however sacred.

Synge is often accused of having been totally ignorant of contemporary art. His notes and articles, as well as some unsigned reviews can contradict this suggested ignorance. In Notebook 20 there are a number of notes for the article on Literary and Popular Poetry. Here he traces the evolution of 19th Century's interest in ancient and popular poetry and culture, the first movements of opposition to Parnassians and later to Symbolists, and to the final emergence of a new school, a new creativity. The poets should not copy the productions or the moods of the popular poet;

but seized by instinct his inner mode of work to escape the restrictive boundaries of legend and lore, they formed themselves a legendary existence and thus dominated all ages in an indeterminate atmosphere (Notebook 20, p. 49)

Referring to Maeterlinck's plays, Synge comments on the nature of the legendary characters:

we encounter in them the princesses of old ballads and the kings of fairyland who do not issue from any known legends but rule simply in the kingdom of the human spirit. They have names as impersonal as their vestiments and preserve more completely than any legend the depth and profound humanism of the mystery which lies about us. (Item 4382, p. 49v)

The qualities Synge finds in popular poetry are obviously akin to his notions of energy and vitality. Such poetry is characterised by "a certain brusqueness of attack", "absence of gradation". The capacity to create upon the

sources new moods and atmosphere was strongly helped by the present fluid nature of the medium:

The vital creative potentiality of this new interest in popular poetry was that its medium was a fluid material where syllables /can/ be drawn out or suppressed at will. (Notebook 20, p. 49)

The awareness of the fluidity of the linguistic medium will allow Synge to create with great artistic freedom upon the rhythms and usage of his peasant dramatic language. One can profitably relate again to Rabelais and Bakhtin's comment on the use of grotesque by Rabelais and the contemporary state of fluidity of the language:

Rabelais lived at a special moment in the history of language. The official versus the unofficial struggle could then be seen more clearly ... <latin versus vernacular>.... Bakhtin's sensitivity to the breakdown of old languages and the birth of new ones is underwritten by his own experience of the same "pregnant death of the past" in his life.⁶

Both Rabelais and Synge participated creatively in the history of language which has a slower rate of change than political history. They happened to live at times when the change was visibly taking place.

For Synge the material quality of emotions is but a part of the experiences upon which the poet works. Art is a refinement of emotions, the objective ecstasy. The "unlimited ecstasy" can only be achieved either through art or through religion. Synge rates these as the highest areas of intellectual emotion and ecstasy:

⁶ Clark, Holquist, Bakhtin. pp. 318-19.

The human joys and the human pities are the two feet of the human being on which he moves. The divine ecstasy is above both ((Item 4382, p. 48)

As all religion is a "growth of pensive love", the achieved expression of refined and purged sensual love would be art, and the 'ultimate effort' of joining both religious art and artistic religion "is a perfect union which will be the last great task of humanity" (Item 4382, p. 48).

The comic tradition and the Playboy

The problem in analysing Synge's work, in ascribing meaning, explaining reasons, lies in his juxtaposition of conflicting ideas, which is unbearable to the committed political critic. With such type of work one cannot rally an audience undividedly on simple images of immediate adherence, which ignite the fervour of the crowds. This is what any movement should expect from an art form which called itself Irish, when the nation was passing through one of its moments of despair. Still all but present, the devastating ravages of the great Famine were increased by the callous unresponsiveness of the London Parliament. These were some of the immediate causes for the misery of the poor tenants, which led those who did not die of starvation, either to emigrate or to wage the desperate Land War. These were reasons enough to wish for an agit-prop theatre which would carry to the artistic front the nationalist cause. Instead Synge's work does not make any morally acceptable value judgement which could be at one time worthy of note, witty, exemplary or edifying. The combination of a strongly crafted poetic language, racy and full of life, with sub-

jects and characters which in no way seemed to contribute to the elevation of the image of Irishness, had no use in a struggle against the powerful counterpart of British propaganda. The type of laughter which can be found in Synge's work is seen to be somewhat alien as well:

Synge ... stands almost entirely outside the Gaelic literary tradition. All his four comedies are, in a sense, satires upon rural Ireland, but by comparing these with The Parliament of Clan Thomas and its progeny we can easily see where the novelty lies in Synge's work. Unlike the class-conscious Gaelic poets and satirists, Synge sympathises with the underdog and the outcast, be he tramp or tinker, parricide or blind beggar.⁷

Synge's rich humour does not follow the comic Irish tradition. As Vivian Mercier points out, the traditional Irish jester is garrulous, crude, even gratuitously obscene for a modern reader; his comic verse or satire reinforced the image of power of the ruling class. As Olivia and the Irish lords well knew, "there is no slander in an allow'd fool".⁸ The comic effect of their stories or poems was achieved at the expense of the outsider, the stranger.

The original, mythical source of these forms of the comic may be traced back to processes of reducing the threat of an enemy, invader or a more powerful neighbour. This tradition of grotesque humour dates back to the period when Irish society defined itself, determined its boundaries and individuality against the background of conflicting power struggles. The scorned and outwitted stranger was the exorcised shape of a threat - natural forces, mythical beings or

⁷ Mercier, p. 239.

⁸ Twelfth Night, Act I, scene v, line 81.

powerful neighbours - bereft of threatening power by the exercise of laughter.⁹

Synge mentions the existence of two different types of historical material, as regards the interest of the artist:

Il y a dans la littérature irlandaise une sorte de dualisme. D'un côté Conchobar, Cuchulainn et les guerriers d'Ulster, héros favoris des file; et de l'autre un groupe ennemi dont les Fir forman surtout sont un élément fondamental.¹⁰

One of Vivian Mercier's propositions in The Irish Comic Tradition is that Synge's humour does not follow the traditional social pattern of Irish humour. Dividing the comic into humour, wit, satire and parody, Mercier does nonetheless find Synge's work to be an example of the persistence of Irish humour and satire in the Literary Revival

In The Well of the Saints Mercier finds fantasy used with symbolic overtones in the ironic consequences of the miracle. The macabre and grotesque humour, of which he gives instances in The Aran Islands and The Playboy of the Western World, are a direct influence of the popular tradition. These found expression in Synge's work more clearly and before other authors of the Irish Literary Revival, due to Synge's scholarship in old Irish, his knowledge of modern

⁹ For the social origin of these tales: "Originally the folk tale was (and still is to a certain degree) an oral narrative form cultivated by the common people to express the manner in which they perceived nature and their social order and their wish to satisfy their needs and wants. ... the tales are reflexions of the social order in a given historical epoch". In Jack Zipes, Breaking the Magic Spell. London, Heineman, 1979, p. 8.

¹⁰ In Notebook 4378, p. 65. In the adjacent pages of this notebook there are notes on several chapters of Jubainville's study of Celtic Legends, Svendenborg, the Rig Vedas.

Irish and his close contact with the peasants and islanders.¹¹

Synge and the Controversy

The reactions to The Playboy of the Western World have been of the most varied kinds on either side. D Greene, in Synge and the Irish considers that the uproar which greeted the Playboy could be described as a natural hazard that had to be accepted by any writer who belongs to a movement founded paradoxically upon nationalist principles and which professes or cannot disguise a contempt for the mob. Synge was only the first to face the consequences. Nationalists later saw the production of the Playboy in England as being bad enough, but doing no essential damage to Irish prestige there; it only confirmed the English in their belief that the Irish native was a half savage who would be expected to kill his father and be praised for his heroism. From a totally different perspective, Ezra Pound was to comment in a letter to John Quinn:

I think the Theatre, Yeats, Synge and company, has developed a wide sympathy for Ireland, which the revolutionaries have wiped utterly away.¹²

But the conflict was aggravated in America. The idealisation of the homeland could not allow any form of desecration of its household gods. Running from famine and misery the Irish immigrant was trying hard to dissociate himself

¹¹ Mercier, p. 35.

¹² Pound, Ezra, The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941, edited by D D Paige, London, Faber and Faber, 1951, p. 202.

from the label insidiously attached to him by a certain press that he was an uneducated, drunken, irresponsible person, fit only to be a servant.

The fact that Synge had turned his back on what his family stood for and practised did not ingratiate him in the eyes of inflamed nationalists who kept vigil over the temple of Irish National Virtue. On the other hand his family reacted in a similar way although for different reasons- as if the embarrassing play had been written by someone else with the same name. "Not nice", was the only comment Mrs Synge registered in her diary concerning the Playboy.

Yeats's hope of a fusion of Anglo-Irish and Gaelic cultures in order to create a European literature failed to take into consideration the contemporary reality, which could not ignore the degrading references to the Irish Paddy in the English press and the struggle to fight that colonial image by creating one that would be irrefragable at all levels.¹³

All those who defended Synge's intentions claimed that he was not a political man, whatever that might have meant at the time. But in that particular context to dramatise the Irish peasant was a political act with a particular ideological significance which could not be eschewed.

¹³ For a comprehensive study of the abusive representation of the Irish in English and American press, see L Perry Curtis Jr., Ames and Angles. The Irishman in Victorian Literature, Newton Abbot, David and Charles, 1971.

In reading the character of Christy as another instance of the colonial stereotype, the audience failed to notice to what extent it was a parody of the conventional figure. At the same time the transformation of Christy from a mock into a real playboy is a parody of the pious idealisation of the Irish countryman. The Playboy's assault on the myth of a noble Irish peasant is presented within a fictive frame, but this claim provides little protection from critics as the controversial political implications of the play continually threatened to dissolve that frame.

The responses to the play were on two levels: one saw it on the representational, referential level and the other only as a literary text, a theatrical exaggeration. This ambivalence of reactions responds to alternative codes in the Playboy. Characteristic of both these strategies to read the play is the denial of the other. So, by responding to the representational Playboy, the audience either ignored the play's vital mode of satirical farce, or else translated it into the inadequate channel of realism, thus reacting to the play as a social or political message. It is such a reaction that makes critics compare:

the stage Irishman is a gentleman in comparison with the vile wretch whom Mr. Synge presented to an astonished Irish audience as the most popular type of Western peasant.¹⁴

¹⁴ 'The People and the Parricide', Freeman's Journal, Tuesday, 29 January 1907, p. 6, quoted in The Playboy Riots. James Kilroy, The Irish Theatre Series 4, Dublin, The Dolmen Press, 1971. The fuelling of the opposition to the play was done in the daily papers, mainly the Freeman's Journal; by the time weeklies like Sinn Féin appeared, the play had had its run, and the argument was now off the stage and the streets, to be continued in the papers, still acerbic

In contrast the modernist reading of the play denies its social /political implications by ignoring its representational claims and favouring its extravagance and theatricality. In several statements to the press Synge defended art as exaggeration, showing also his contempt for the urban middle class, whose artistic codes were set against the literati.

The play is problematic because it insistently creates a way of responding to it which it then contradicts. To foreground the play's linguistic and aesthetic plenitude is to deny its representational implications; to try to fit the grotesque or theatrical discourse into representational framework is to deny the play's aesthetic code.

THE DRAFTS AND THE PREVIOUS STORY OF CHRISTY

Unlike the study of other plays in this work, we will approach The Playboy of the Western World by considering in detail several drafts of particular scenes. This approach was suggested by a particular impression the repeated reading of the play produced; some images strike the reader as more firmly achieved than others, even if the mood of the scene is indifferent, or, as in the cases studied here, particularly violent. Throughout the whole text one of the salient features is the recurrence of images of violence, both spoken and actually deployed. This violence consists of violence of speech, in invectives and vituperations, and

but in the pattern of organized debate rather than near skirmishes as had been the case during the performances.

violence of action in gestures of physical aggression, both as threats and actually performed.

Some of these scenes can almost be called pictorial compositions due to their elaboration, in which a theme is repeatedly sketched draft after draft, keeping some themes, removing others.

In Notebook 34 (item 4397) several projects are drafted for Playboy sequences. These include scenarios for acts II and III. Of the various options put down in this notebook dating from 1905-6, a few were incorporated into the play, but many were discarded.¹⁵ Some of the notes in these drafts are to be understood more as a means to convey a particular mood; sometimes it is the persistence of an image that appears to be of particular note. One observes the development of the personality of Christy from the shy young boy to the hero he made of himself in the course of events of the play. This progress is excitingly mapped throughout the drafts and notebooks. In them the character lives other experiences that shed light on the creative process of Synge.¹⁶

A few variations can be identified to find out which current of feeling or didascalical notations prevail from draft to draft.

¹⁵ By the end of 1906 Act I had reached typescript draft 'F', Act II typescript draft 'K' and Act III typescript draft 'L'. Since September 1904 there are sketches for this play in notebook 32.

¹⁶ The page references are to this particular notebook. For other drafts referred to, the Collected Works edition will be used.

A) The intervention of Widow Quin in trying to help, seduce or bribe Christy.

Tradition and prejudice have led theatre productions to cast Widow Quin as a sexually voracious and interfering old woman, which is not how Synge intended her to be. Furthermore, she is seen as an older woman, in a way repeating the pattern of the woman Old Mahon had arranged for Christy's wife, the Widow Casey. Of Widow Casey, there are only the grotesque details given by Christy, in a very negative attitude. (CW II, 99-101). This woman, in her mid-forties and in spite of her ugliness, is under the same kind of threat as all the other younger widows: fortune hunters will try to force them into marriage to gain possession of their inheritance, just like Old Mahon: "and he without a thought the whole while but how he'd have her hut to live in and gold to drink." (CW III, 103). Living alone they are extremely vulnerable, privately and socially, but the security of a second marriage can be bought at too high a price. Both property and reputation are at risk, as in the case of Nora in Shadow or Widow Quin. In fact, Widow Quin seems quite capable of surviving under these conditions but at a considerable price. She is the fool of the village, living apart, closer to the shebeen than the other villagers, "every living Christian is a bona fide saving one widow alone" (CW III, 67).¹⁷ She resorts to all kinds of

¹⁷ Indeed this reference is to the legislation of licensing hours, which was less restrictive for travellers, and allowed roadside public houses to be open later than others. Nevertheless, it is symptomatic that the widow is placed outside the community, and her property in disrepair, implying she is not given full credit without the presence of a man.

stratagems to survive, and the handling of Old Mahon is one of them:

The Widow tries to inveigle him away, begins to romp. Old Mahon thaws. "Old as I am there's many a woman would liefer have me this day than the Kings of England." She enters into humour of thing, he chases her. When she fails to get him out by blandishment <they> battle. (strong grotesque climax leading to lyric climax immediately of Pegeen and Christy) (CW III, 349-350)

Old Mahon also addresses her in almost explicit terms in draft 'F', in a scene with grotesque overtones, as she tries to lead him away:

Widow Quin [getting behind table in mock fear].
... Aren't you a wrinkled villain to go romping with a widowed girl?

Old Mahon. It's little I care if it's widow wife or witch you are or God knows what. (CW III, 353)

In fact Synge thought of her as a young woman, as can be seen in Notebook 28, in use 1905-6:

Widow (thirty dark) not gloomy but rather stiff in her relations with villagers very poor and very proud and very cynical (give her rich father in North that she will not write to because of her pride) (so indifferent that she has no ambition - hence her taking Christy) (CW III, 362)

Later in draft 'H' dated 10 August 1906, doing business with Shawn, she proposes marrying Christy. Shawn, "thunder-struck", questions the idea of marrying an older woman: "Widow Quin [angrily standing up]. Aged is it? I won't be thirty till next April day" (CW III, 118)

In other drafts her intervention pledging Shawn's case varies as well. Sometimes it is only Shawn who addresses Christy to convince him to leave the village. In one of her

interventions, she appears together with Pegeen trying to stop the cursing of the two men fighting:

Widow Quin behind Christy and Pegeen behind Old Mahon throw their aprons over their heads to shut their blaspheming that would stink the nation (4397, 24)

Obviously the idea of the two women becoming rivals was not prominent in this scenario draft. In most drafts she is seen as very active and resourceful. In Widow Quin's attempt to allow Christy the chance to make Pegeen swear to marry him and Michael James to bless them, she tries to hide Old Mahon: her strategies in the drafts range from enticing him with a drink to make him follow her, to making suggestions of offering her house to protect him from the rage of the crowds, and in each draft she is successful in leading Old Mahon offstage, till the final meeting of father and son. The ways in which she is paired with the various men are clear images of her struggle for survival, as she tries to negotiate a contract in the most profitable terms, be it marriage or alliance.

B) The reactions at the second and third entries of Mahon.

These also vary in their initial intensity and outcome. The stated objectives for these scenes are noted among the various options of action, and they are to show the collapse of Christy's shortlived expectations of the confrontation with his living father.

In these notes Synge puts the question of disposing of Old Mahon when Christy and the crowd come from the races. Unlike the stratagem of sending him off the opposite direction, with the threat of mob violence perpetrated upon madmen used in the play, Widow Quin hides him in the gable in the majority of these notes, allowing him to overhear the news and developments of action. It is the way he comes out that varies (pp. 22, 23v). Old Mahon overhears the news of Christy's success and Michael James's speech. So he comes out:

as friendly as possible to bless the match because he sees that Christy has won the day, then to his surprise Pegeen flings him over ... Old Mahon flings, (...) turns on him as before (p. 22.)

One can only read this as relating to other versions of the same scene, as this is the first confrontation of father and son. On page 23v this stage direction is broken into movements:

Old Mahon (at middle entry) shakes hands with Michael James. Goes to kiss Pegeen. She hits him a clout and then bursts out at Christy. He abuses his father then turns on him and all go into the pot.

The second entry of Old Mahon takes place in the middle of a long peroration on matrimony and the qualities of the prospective son-in-law by Michael James. Here the persistence of visual images of the grotesque and violence go together with the innocent glorification of violence in Michael's words. In this rather long speech the publican accepts the eventuality of death at the hands of his son-in-law as being no worse than any other death. In a later

draft, M James makes sure Christy is not intent on killing him. In the play all these considerations are erased and replaced by the more acceptable expectation of a strong and prolific issue from such a union. For purposes of concentration around the theme of a good marriage and its expected issue, Michael James's words become more restrained, instead of wandering around issues mentioned before in the drafts - Christy's supposed violent streak and his good fortune at the games. If this peculiar son-in-law had provoked a long, controversial speech on marriage, his departure does not leave M James at a loss for words. The publican closes upon the violent scene with a comparison with other forms of Christian amusement given by the devotions of Father Reilly, (p. 23) or a general call for drinks, as all that excitement died down and laughter made them thirsty (p. 24). The final version is much shorter and the crudeness of its comment makes it a philosophical evaluation of the publican's sober view on events: "Michael- By the will of God, we'll have peace now for our drinks." (CW IV, 173)

Synge had thought of the images of violence in page 24 of 4397 as a means of farce: "Make scene with and after fight with father as harrowing as possible to be relieved by farce at /the/ end."

C) Notes for scenes with characters on all fours

On page 22 there is a note "C- Old Mahon revives on stage and there is grotesque scene of two on their knees...". This image of the fight and grotesque behaviour is jotted down in the sequence outline for act III as an optional end. Further on page 24v, Christy kneels down and

begins to pray, or as in page 25v, Pegeen is on her knees when Old Mahon comes in and this time his words are not conciliating. At this time Pegeen is the first to be insulted by Old Mahon:

- Pegeen kneels down (Old Mahon comes in from behind)
Well this is a fine horse. (page 25v)

In this sequence of pages there are scenes of similar visual impact but bearing different emotional "currents", in Synge's words. There is a persistence of the image of people on their knees, as the fight drags them on to the ground. In all these scenes there is a common trait, that of a crescendo in images of social degradation, as the complication of the plot comes to a crux. As father and son come face to face, the characters probe deeper into their emotions, and bestiality is given free reign.

In the play itself images of people on the floor are those of Christy tied down and that of old Mahon coming in after he recovers from the fight with his son outside the shebeen. Here the father is no longer in the position of authority he previously had. Widow Quin had attempted to make him pass as a fool, and any traces of respectability he could have retained will be diluted in the final scene: "Old Mahon comes in behind on all fours and looks ^{up} unnoticed."

On page 23v it is Pegeen who turns violently against an amiable Old Mahon, as his presence there proves Christy a liar and for her no longer the hero of the day.

The curtain line is generally given at this stage to Michael James and not to Pageen. In the outlines of page 21v, 22 the curtain comes either on Christy being dragged away or on father and son, but here only images are suggested: "they shake hands on prodigious fantastic treaty of amity and curtain on that".

Synge had a clear idea of a stage situation of a violent and grotesque nature, a vision which would play an important role in the play. The strength of this impression is enough to endure several changes of characters and timing. Images and tales of fights Synge could find in legends and in the country lore recounted to him. The passionate violence with which such feuds were fought, sometimes to the death, were provoked by disputes that city dwellers would find trifling and indefensible. The backdrop against which such a scuffle as that taking place onstage as Christy is tied and burned is, I presume, as objectionable as all the other issues the critics took exception to. The violence of the villagers' reaction to Christy's assault on his father is unacceptable to the morality of middle class propriety. They are now reproducing the same level of aggressiveness, but they are not moved by self-righteousness. They do not react in condemnation of violence, they only act to keep their own peace within the community, and this is the reason why they have to deliver Christy to the police.

From all these variations what remains in the final draft is the coming together of father and son, on all fours. In a physical, masculine way, they express their au-

tual grievances in these fights, and some sort of redefinition of power position is achieved as Christy and Old Mahon go out together as master and slave. For father and son to come to terms with each other they have to fight. The familist image of the old father who prevails over his son's interests is here overturned. The young hero, who in his father's eyes is little more than an idiot, makes his mark socially and then is ready to confront his father physically. As opposed to conventional rites of passage, where the father stands often as tutor, example and leader, this is an overt critique of images of conventional authority, as this particular one is presented in all its rotund boisterousness and vacuity. Christy proves his manhood to his father by succeeding in overpowering him. From then on father sides with his son and defends him from the attacks of the crowd. In draft 'J' the defence is outspoken, "That's a set of filthy swine you are, to sell a decent Christian to the English courts."¹⁸ And in the final version the old father is contemptuous of Michael James' apologies accepting the mastery of his son more willingly than his destruction at the hands of strangers:

Mahon [grimly, loosening Christy]. It's little I care if you put a bag on her back and went picking cockles till the hour of death; but my son and myself will be going our way and we'll have great times from this out telling stories of the villainy of Mayo and the fools is here. [To Christy, who is freed.] Come on now.

Christy. Go with you, is it! I will then, like a gallant captain and his heathen slave. Go on now and I'll see you from this day stewing my oatmeal

¹⁸ *CW IV*, p. 172, note 3.

and washing my spuds, for I'm master of all fights from now. [Pushing Mahon.] Go on, I'm saying.

Mahon. Is it me?

Christy. Not a word out of you. Go on from this.

Mahon. [walking out and looking back at Christy over his shoulder]. Glory be to God! [With a broad smile.] I am crazy again! [Goes.] (CW IV, 173)

The need for this mutual recognition and the process through which it occurs are both strong and vital, but also difficult to express. The young son has to prove himself as a man, be accepted by society and recognised by his father. The image through which this unavoidable confrontation materialises is that of a grotesque violent struggle to which Synge was referring in the note on page 22 of his notebook, as mentioned above. In this position father and son partake of the struggle common to all species in the same situation, young buck against old dominant male, Spring defeating Winter. The affirmation of young Christy becomes total only when he defeats his father, and is accepted by him. More than the killing of the father the issue is the acceptance by the father of his son as an adult. That had to be achieved on stage; the previous hit-and-run story could never serve this ultimate purpose.¹⁹ The paramount need for such recognition can only be measured accurately by realising the persistence with which this scene erupts in many forms throughout the various drafts.

¹⁹ As Kilroy notes, the fact that father and son make peace and leave the stage together is not given such relevance. One of the few reviews to mention the final amiable departure of father and son is the first, and probably the most violent denunciation of the play, in The Freeman's Journal on the Monday following the first performance, 28 January 1907. See The Playboy Riots. pp. 7-9, 11.

D) Images of violence involving women.

All the images of violence involving Pegeen show her as a strong willed young woman, well able to defend herself. Her dialogues with Christy show the more tender affectionate side of her, and the young woman's romantic expectations. If she demands protection from her father or her fiance, against all sorts of masculine danger, it appears to be more a question of status and respectability than one of genuine safety, as she seems well able to defend herself.²⁰ These images of violence occur in the drafts with greater frequency or intensity than in the play. In the final version they are toned down or erased completely. These draft scenes often appear as a development of lines that would break the concise unity of action and theme that all the plays achieve. Their inclusion in the play would create other subplots implying a completely different set of choices in the structure of the play. One particularly good example of the erasure of such an image is in the extended version of the first private conversation of Pegeen and Christy. This dialogue expands in the earlier versions to include extremely virulent apostrophes against women, going slightly astray. In the earlier drafts Synge does not know exactly how to move forward at this stage. In similar fashion the character Christy finds himself in a novel situation, and does not know what is expected of him or what to expect at this stage; later the dialogue will sound more

²⁰ It is interesting to note that the censor had the reference to the "kahky cut-throats" removed in 1920 during a tour of the West, as mentioned by Lady Gregory in her diaries.

concise. Both character and author develop by trying new approaches, selecting and rejecting gratuitous violence. The polishing up of imagery in this dialogue shows Synge giving first a free hand to unbridled chauvinism, and woman-hatred that lies more or less hidden in the young man who is fearful of women, to gradually rejecting it and choosing approaches that are less aggressive towards women. In this particular case, the observation of the final draft shows the intelligence behind the selection and the process of choice of the several dialogue options produced:

CHRISTY expanding with delight at the first confidential talk he has ever had with a woman: We had not then. It was a hard woman was come over the hill; and if he was always a crusty kind, when he'd a hard woman setting him on, not the devil himself or his four fathers could put up with him at all.

In the very earliest drafts of the play, which come under the title Murder Will Out, this woman has more to be accounted for. Christy will explain how she set his father against him, telling a tale of how the ruin of the family was caused by Christy. Physical descriptions vary; she is at first neither young nor old, then the image takes more shape- she is said to have many children, and sometimes to be evil too. But returning to the first private scene between Christy and Págeen in the Murder Will Out draft, Christy gets carried away by the new situation he is confronting. He is having then his first sympathetic female audience and his imagination runs free. He had been accepted for the courage of his murder. With encouragement, he might have done more and better. If Christy had reason to

kill his father, the woman who had set father against his son was more deserving of punishment:

Pegeen- women is worst young fellow, any fool knows that

Christy-It's the truth you're saying surely and it's often I'd have liked to cut their bloody throats, to throw them down again/st/ the ground in a stoney place and break their necks ... nay I'd blacken their giggling (sic) eyes. ... I'd/ like /to/ put them under a train or pitch them to be sliced among the wheels of the ships I've heard tell of./ they do drive with a boiler and steam.(4331, p. 97.97)²¹

Pieces of gratuitous violence like these are erased from the final drafts of the dialogue. It might be suggested, however, that their presence in the selection of the drafts encourages the study of the evolution of the character Sygne is creating.

His resentment against this woman is transferred to an objectified subject in the play, the Widow Casey of whom he offers the young girls a physical and moral portrait as a proper monster. In the play the Widow Casey is also the remote cause of the murder:

Christy [with horror]. A walking terror from beyond the hills, and she two score and five years, and two hundredweights and five pounds in the weighing scales, with a limping on her, and a blind eye, and she a woman of noted misbehaviour with the old and young.

.... 'I won't wad her,' says I, 'when all know she did suckle me for six weeks when I came into the world, and she a hag this day with a tongue on her has the crows and seabirds scattered, the way they wouldn't cast a shadow on her garden with the dread of her curse'. (CW IV, 101, 103)

²¹ There are other versions of this scene. Professor Saddlemyer quotes one which she dates as Winter 1905, from Draft 'D', including a marginal comment, 'climax', CW IV, p. 82.

In the earlier drafts the character who causes so much repulsion is only sketchy, a mere adjuvant to the opponent in Mecherrey's terms. On the other hand, the feelings of rejection are widely explored and given full expression. As Christy observes the effect of his words on the girls he has two options from which to choose: he can rely on the power of his words as expression of cumulative deeds of violence - e. g., killing of the father, willingness to kill 'giggling women', or he can compound on the one same event of the parricide, giving powerful reasons to justify his outraged refusal of Widow Casey. The first option as drafted, creates an instance of physical violence against women in which Christy is the verbal perpetrator. Had Synge kept this dialogue in its earlier form, the attack on the father would be understood as just the rash action of a naturally violent character. This is not the way in which Synge wants the character to develop; he wants to stress the fact that Christy is a naturally moderate character. As he mentioned, there are men who commit deeds of violence because their passion is roused, but then do repent and there would be in the community's eye no reason for further punishment since they themselves are already contrite. The attack on the father is to be understood as such an isolated instance and cannot therefore be associated with other stories of hypothetical violence. Little praise would come to a man by his reputation of beating up women. Such an attitude goes against the idealised image of a hero. The commonness of the act would win him little admiration, and few friends among the women. Women's degraded social status make them

likely victims of such violence and such a recognisable event would scarcely be newsworthy. However, the issue here is Christy's development, and his interaction with women is one of the situations through which he must grow. Christy must find a way of relating to women who, until this present situation, have been sources of fear and suspicion; now they are amiable, supportive persons, without any of the traits of Widow Casey, even if willful and resourceful as Peggen and Widow Quin prove to be.

The killing of the father is the sole violent element of the previous story that develops into the action of the play. The tentative approaches to the question of violence and how to use it in the play are present in the drafts. Here Synge experiments with the subject. Scenes of violence are kept in the final drafts, and they include both women and men.

Ideological Challenge of the Violent Scenes

The almost irrational violence that these scenes imply or express clearly is all that any committed nationalist felt he had to object to in a National Theatre. Nationalists must negate these scenes, ignore their presence when they surface, and concentrate on the ethics of laborious, suffering farmers, the stronghold of their recruiting and voting power. This is also a class which emerged out of the Famine and the Land War with an ethics, and socio-economic strategy that was gaining ground in Irish society:

... the necessity to achieve popular success grew with the progress of electoral representation. As each of the post-Parnell factions of the Parlia-

mentarian party strove to achieve superiority it was driven to do from necessity what the cultural nationalists were doing from conviction - that is, to celebrate the values and virtues of the Irish "people", who, by the 1890's, were unquestionably regarded as being synonymous with small farmers. ... We would argue that it was acceptance of the identification of the small farmers as "the people" which made what were perceived as attacks on their integrity, and in particular the integrity of their women, such a serious issue for those who were in contention for the leadership of the nationalist class-alliance.²²

It is therefore no surprise that the first and most outspoken attacks on the Playboy came from The Freeman's Journal, surpassing the virulence of the attacks in Sinn Féin. The former was a leading voice in agricultural improvement and land reform, and during the Land War had led the campaigning against evictions, attacking Edward Synge's eviction of destitute peasants from family property for which he was the land agent. Such press could easily identify plays like Synge's as the work of a class enemy, attacking on the cultural front, just as his brother had done in the notorious eviction cases.

The violence which nationalists found too grotesque to countenance and not representative of Irish character, was to Synge the natural result and inevitable circumstance of the particular virtue of Irishness. Its poetic spirit and elevation of emotional ecstasy could only exist exactly because all emotions had a code of expression in the peasant culture, unrestrained by the restrictive puritanical middle

²² Cairns and Richards, "WOMAN" in the discourses of Celticism: A Reading of The Shadow of the Glen. pp. 52-3.

class decorum. He is determined to give the grotesque element its voice no matter who may be displeased or shocked.

He often mentions the specific characteristics of Aran people, stressing the peculiar mingling of the violent and beautiful which Synge finds impossible to separate, "the simplicity of the men enables them to throw a naïve extravagance into their steps that is impossible in places where the people are self-conscious" (CW II, 153). But these same people will engage in a fight or delight in witnessing a family brawl that can last for hours:

... some of the young men danced to the 'Black Rogue', and then the party broke up. The altercation was still going on at the cottage below us, and the people were anxious to see what was coming of it.

About ten o'clock a young man came in and told us that the fight was over.

'They have been at it for four hours,' he said, 'and now they're tired. Indeed it is time they were, for you'd rather be listening to a man killing a pig than to the noise they were letting out of them. (CW II, 153-4)

William Fay in his memoirs retells the hard struggle to keep up the director's decision to take "the courageous course, and the company though it was no joke for them, loyally supported their decision to go on playing at all costs". He was painfully aware of the level of resentment the play and its continued production with police protection caused, and of its effects on the support to the Abbey company, for if you could preach to the public, you could not force them to like what they did not:

Not content with libelling the saintly Irish people, we had actually called in the tyrant Saxon's myrmaids to silence their righteous indignation!

Of course the root of the trouble was that Synge had written a brilliant play about the Irish peasantry without any of the traditional sentiment or illusions that were so dear to the Irish playgoer. . . . However you cannot beat the public in the end, as I had warned Synge and the other directors, because they can always boycott you. And that was what happened after *The Playboy*. . . . All our hard work from the November of the previous year was forgotten²³

Fay felt nonetheless that he was supporting Synge not just out of loyalty but also because he believed Synge's knowledge of the people, which nationalists were keen to deny, was profoundly sympathetic and more accurate than any of the audience's Davisite perception of "the people":

One thing that made Synge's plays difficult for a Dublin audience was that he actually knew the people he was writing about, whereas they only thought they did. . . . I don't suppose half a dozen people in Dublin could have told you the difference in idiom and brogue between a man from the glams of Antrim and a man from Waterford, or between a Galway man and a Wicklow one. I myself knew these distinctions in a rough-and-ready way owing to my experience as a stroller and I knew Synge was right.²⁴

The strongly overcoded concept of the "Irish peasant" could be perceived by that audience in three different frames of representation. The images of the *Playboy* were hardly fitting even with the Anglo-Saxonist inspired version. There were in this play some traces of identity which allowed for an uneasy political identification with recent history.

In his study of this play, Robin Skelton makes Christologic references concerning the fate of the hero playboy, as

²³ Fay, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre*. London, Rich and Cowan, 1935, p. 214.

²⁴ Fay, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre*, p. 215.

received and adored, only to be sacrificed in the end. Such a comparison with the Passion implies an upgrading of the play, as one can identify in it larger, universal moral contents. This comparison can even be extended further, to consider Christy a sacrificial year king which the community lionizes and sacrifices in a ritual maiming, for propitiatory fertility reasons. Probably this is where a nationalist audience would find itself more ill at ease, as it was not so long ago that they had sacrificed their "uncrowned King of Ireland", in a process that owed nothing to ritual political assassination. The political death of Parnell, followed shortly by his physical death, and that of the Home Rule campaign and the slumber of the Parliamentary Party, were very clear and painfully recent images of the extents to which idolising could lead not a class but the whole nation. The O'Shea divorce case was the crack in the icon image of Parnell. Although it would be inappropriate to suggest that Synge is making such open comparisons here, it is my claim that the crude images of violence in the play evoke scenes of a recent past in a very uneasy light. The final humiliation of Christy and his recovery of self-esteem in the end, and even the use of the word "shift", which had more implications than just an offence to maiden decency, as the obscene anti-parnellite songs kept in mind for decades to come, would become easy associations to make in these circumstances.²⁵

²⁵ Some obscene songs involving the name of Kitty O'Shea had become common at the time. I could still find students in 1987 who knew a song relating to the event in which the name of Kitty O'Shea is connected with "shift".

Final Marriage Pairing

In the various drafts and scenarios there are many different attempts to find a satisfactory ending to the play. In earlier drafts the couples are paired in conventional comedy patterns, Christy with Pegeen and Michael James with Widow Quin, or Pegeen with Shawn and Old Mahon with Widow Quin. Socially acceptable or iconoclastic, the idea of final marriage is present in the drafts. The play itself starts with the fiance's preparations for the trousseau (CW IV, 57), Shawn will soon come in with the wedding rings, and there is throughout the play repeated reference to the awaited dispensation from the Church to allow the marriage between cousins (CW IV, 59). This engagement puts Pegeen in a situation akin to that of Nora Burke. All the likely marriageable candidates have gone, there is not in the neighbourhood a man capable of the exploits that would stir the emotions of a young woman. Were it not for the disturbing arrival of Christy who will challenge this situation, the traditional familist arrangements would follow their course. The stem-family system as referred by Arensberg and Kimball is obviously a recognisable strategy of this community.²⁶ In Notebook 28, a draft for a four-act version, Michael James proposes to Widow Quin, but their projects are checked by Shawn. The precondition for the marriage between Shawn and Pegeen as arranged between both parents is that Michael James will not remarry. This measure was taken to safeguard against the production of any male heir who, in all

²⁶ Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, Family and Community in Ireland. Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1968, as quoted in Cairns and Richards Writing Ireland. pp. 42, 61.

probability, would inherit the property. As the only offspring, Pegeen is the inheritor, but in the occurrence of a new birth the male heir would ~~likely~~ take all the inheritance and in the process remove the reasons that justify the alliance between the two families.

Christy's arrival is the cause of a series of disruptions in the tepid, potteen-numbed society. One of them is the challenge to the marriage system favoured by the farmers, from which incidentally he has tried to escape, refusing his father's marriage plans for him.

Possession of land is a measure of survival against the permanent threat of seizure and possession by the English settlers. Their strategy, familism, was designed to maintain or to increase the family's land from generation to generation. Those who did not inherit any land could hardly think of marriage, and those who did had to wait for many years before they could have access to the means to do so. In a situation where possession of the land is so central to the life of the community, it must perforce shape the understanding of other realities, in particular sexuality. Sexuality is not seen as an issue dissociated from procreation, and is only reserved to the married. Any attempt by an outsider to enter into the fold of marriageable women is understood as an attempt to force a marriage in order to get some land. In the Playboy the issues debated concerning marriage are mostly religious. In the drafts however, economic considerations are more clearly expressed.

They become obvious in the bargaining of Widow Quin with both Christy and Shawn as she is asked to intercede in their attempts to win Pegeen. The exchange in property and rights is perceived as a grotesque trade by city dwellers, but would be recognised as a crafty arrangement by farmers, who can better ascertain the use value and prestige these commodities provide:

Widow Quin. Ay. Would you give me the red cow you have and the mountainy ram, and the right of way across your rye path, and a load of dung at Michaelmas, and turbary upon the western hill?

Shawn [radiant with hope]. I would surely, and I'd give you the wedding-ring I have, and the loan of the new suit, the way you'd have him decent on the wedding day. I'd give you two kids for your dinner and a gallon of poteen, and I'd call the piper on the long car to your wedding ... (CW II, 117)

Christy has less bargaining power in marketable currency, but he is prodigal with his offer of prayers:

Christy ... 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!

Voices [nearer]. Christy! Christy Mahon!

Christy [with agitation]. They're coming. Will you swear to aid and save me for the love of Christ?

Widow Quin [looks at him for a moment]. If I aid you, will you swear to give me a right of way I want, and a mountainy ram, and a load of dung at Michaelmas, the time you'll be master here?

Christy. I will, by the elements and stars of night. (CW II, 131)

Shawn himself is a viable prospective marriage partner because he has already lost his father, i.e., gained possession of the land. It is the land that makes such an un-

gainly young men the match for Pegeen Mike. It has often been noted that there are no regular couples in the play, for all the talking of marriage involved. Four single men, five girls, two widowers and two widows, but not one married couple to provide a frame of reference.

In this situation the prospects of adequate pairing for both Widow Quin, a poor widow, almost an outcast, and Pegeen, "a monnied girl", are very scarce. The downfall from gallant hero and story teller to petty liar, is a cruel test for Pegeen's love. Her desire for romance and transcendence in her life were to be found in the male hero which she made to her measure. But she does not summon the courage to keep him, or to leave with him. In his final draft Synge had Pegeen rush out to the door in her lamentations for Christy. This final sequence was removed in rehearsal.²⁷ (CW IV, 175)

Strong, determined women come short of taking life in their hands. Pegeen has no courage to go out and risk all for her vision of life. Even the last impulse towards the door is controlled. Unlike Nora Burke, Pegeen has more to lose by leaving. Tramps and outcasts have more elemental but simpler choices to make. All the plays lay bare the dialectical opposition of life on the roads and life in the community. In Playboy, the same eagerness for freedom,

²⁷ In the recent production of Playboy by the Glasgow Citizen's Theatre, this stage direction is adopted: Pegeen returns from the door back to the bar, where she speaks her final line, which has been given spatial dimension, as the progress from the threshold of dreams into the constraints of necessity and custom.

exultation and joy are also present, but the characters are not marginal to the community, but central. If Pegeen had not refused Christy, the audience protest would have taken more riotous proportions. But any other choice by Pegeen could only be interpreted as a romantic escapism, as it would deny the agency of all the moral and economical constraints that fashioned and repressed this young woman's life.

Synge has a positive view of marriage as a possible partnership in passion or companionship in the couples that live alone with each other, Martin and Mary Doul, Sara Tansey and Michael Byrne, even Nora and the Tramp. The women who find an adequate partner have to break away from many limitations of an enclosed restrictive community. Synge gives in Pegeen the portrait of a woman who abides by the rules and values of her community, who closes the door and keeps to the hearth, but is bitterly aware of the life she renounced, or could not muster the courage to embrace. The daughter of the village publican is tied down to her conventional life and social expectations. The vision of a "romancing" life is only a few steps away, but it is not the time yet for Pegeen to take those steps confidently.

In Synge's last play, Deirdre breaks away from the prison of a life tailored for her like a strait-jacket. She is able to make her choice for a life of passion, leaving behind the riches of a golden cage, the court of Emain.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CONTROVERSIAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMAN IN SYNGE'S
PLAYS COMPARED WITH VICTORIAN AND MODERN ATTITUDES: THE
EXAMPLES OF TENNYSON, STRINDBERG AND IBSEN

Every healthy mind is more interested in *Tit-Bits* than in *Idylls of the King*, or any of the other more or less artificial retellings of classical saga stories. (CW II, 350)

Syngé's personal and philosophical attitude towards woman strikes an uncharacteristic note in the male intelligentsia of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both among established views and radical ones. Both Victorian and modern authors provide through different ideological points of view, images of woman that are depreciating and at the same time denote a fear of woman that is more or less crudely exorcised.

One example among the voices of Victorian Establishment is that of Tennyson. In *The Idylls of the King*, Tennyson shows the true concern of his Arthurian to be the "defense of the patriarchal family and the conservative state".¹ The figure he makes out as the threat to the community is that of woman, Vivien or Guinevere. They are responsible for

¹ Stephen Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society* London, Methuen, 1983, pp. 183-4.

man's loss of authority and power in the Arthuriad and also in the wide social context of the propertied élite of the nineteenth century.

The anguish of Obscure Threats

Tennyson is the image of the totally integrated poet, one who represents the anxieties and aspirations of his class. "He held the traditional view that the artist was the voice of a particular group and expressed contemporary problems with traditional craft and wisdom"². In Tennyson's view there were two major problems in his day, and these were related with the rise of the poor man and the higher education of woman. In his poetry it is not just the education but the whole role of woman which concerns him. The Idylls "Enid and Nimue, or the True and the False" were the first he wrote and published in 1857, but he was advised to rewrite the one on Nimue, which was to be called Vivien in the following edition. In these Idylls the presence and attitude of woman are identified as social threats. The weakening of social authority is explained due to socioeconomic reasons and also by these troublesome females. They are seen as the causes of the demise of the King. For these threats he provides resolutions:

he started to write in a medieval (and consequently distanced) mode to deal with the problems that he saw arising from woman and through their relations with man both inside and outside marriage.³

² Stephen Knight, p. 155.

³ Knight, p. 159.

The stories of Vivien and Enid present women either as a powerful threat, or as submissive wife. Both are feared.

Vivien is not only a sexually active woman, she is also one who demands to share her man's knowledge. She challenges not only masculine potency but patriarchal wisdom as well.⁴ The changes in the structure of the family in the nineteenth century intensify the weight of male power in the nuclear family, as there is now only one male adult in it. On the other hand the woman is given some real power through her presence and mediation of all physical needs - she runs the house and tends the family. As the presence of woman is felt in the household physically, the man's presence is felt through authority and economic power, as he is continually absent at work. The story of Enid exorcises the threatening power of the woman at home; she must be the submissive audience of the husband's spontaneous virility. Tennyson made woman the essential threat, the intimate enemy who could be mastered precisely through that intimacy. For his audience the fear of democratization in the family and in society remained strong, and his poem works as a consolation in the face of those fears.⁵

A third woman, Guinevere is a sexually erring wife, who is made to admit her sin and recognize male authority. She is a composite of Vivien and Enid. In the Idyll of her name Guinevere is seen responsible for a crime against marriage,

⁴ Knight, p. 160.

⁵ Knight, pp. 184-5.

the betrayal of her husband, and in later Idylls she will be seen as responsible for the demise of the Round Table as well. Before her arrival in Camelot the court and its natural surroundings lived in pre-lapsarian bliss, at her final departure into religious seclusion, the commonwealth is destroyed and the bonds of fealty have been broken:

Beacon stars on the way to Camelot
white mermaiden swam,
And strong man-breasted things stood from the sea,
And send a deep sea-voice thro' all the land,
To which the little elves of chasm and cleft made
answer

And when at last he came to Camelot
A wreath of airy dancers hand-in-hand
Swung round the lighted lantern of the hall;
And in the hall itself was such a feast
As never man had dreamed; for every knight
Had whatsoever meat he long'd for served.
.... : so glad were spirits and men
Before the coming of the sinful Queen.⁶

The final evaluation of the queen sees her as an erring wife who brings forth not children but destruction and war among kindred. Mordred takes over the throne while Arthur leaves Camelot to fight his loyalist knight:

Well it is that no child is born of thee.
The children born of thee are swords and fire,
Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws,
The craft of kindred and the Godless hosts
Of heathen swarming o'er the Northern Sea;
Whom, I while yet Sir Lancelot, my right arm
The mightiest of my knights, abode with me,
Have everywhere about this land of Christ
In twelve great battles ruining overthrown.
And knowest thou I come from
him,
From waging bitter war with him;⁷

⁶ *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. London, Macmillan, 1894, pp. 380-81.

⁷ Tennyson, p. 388.

In another Idyll, "Pelleas and Ettarre", "sexual sin stemming from woman is made the basis of disorder in the Arthurian world".⁸ The unfaithfulness of Ettarre and Guinevere is seen as the primary disturbance to Arthur's authority.

In the last Idyll he wrote, Tennyson explains the violence of the episode of "Balin and Balan" through the women Guinevere and Vivien. In the final arrangement this Idyll is placed as an introduction to the "Merlin and Vivien" Idyll:

The arrangement of the Idylls as Tennyson now has them binds together his two themes of woman threatening man in the family and woman as scapegoat for political and social disorder. In fact the two themes, separate in their production, now interweave through the whole poem.

Tennyson offered mythologizing solutions to real social and private threats. Using a distanced mode and subject he was able to give an image of detachment and objectivity which otherwise would be impossible to contrive. His solace to the fears of his gender and class was of short duration. Woman and the dispossessed became more and more active in their claims, reducing the impact and popularity of the long poem as panacea to his class's ailments. It ceased to be credible, therefore effective, one of Synge's requirements of art based in history or legend; the King had his power bestowed by right of birth, not because of any self-made authority. The process of reiteration of such a belief was

⁸ Knight, p. 177.

⁹ Knight, p. 182.

a matter of reinforcement of images of inherited power. This reinforcement was the more needful at a time when the classes who inherited property and power were feeling their authority challenged.

Comparing Synge's principles with these, we find him taking a totally opposite stance: one of Synge's requirements for art based in legend was that it had to be effective. For that it had to be credible, establishing some link to present reality or feeling. He refuses to create an ethereal image of the past where problems are dealt with and perforce given a suitable conclusion using the wisdom of hindsight, to glamourize a class he knows is dying mostly by its own incapacity to implement strategies of survival.

If Synge does not embark in a crusade to defend the moribund aristocracy neither does he pledge to be the champion of the Nationalist middle-class. Nor does he identify the shortcomings of his class with any gender threat as some of his contemporaries did. The lengthy reference to Tennyson is justified by his outstanding position as poet laureate and by the candour of his political and social pronouncements. The anguish he expresses at the shifting positions of gender and class, this exorcising of the social fear of woman is also a feature of the modern movements at the turn of the century. Here again, we find that Synge's attitude differs from the ideological position of modernist groups, even if socially

he fits perfectly in the pattern of their social origin, as observed by Raymond Williams.

Liberation of the Male Bourgeois Artist

Williams considers the politics of the modernist movements in the perspective of a change in class subjects and of different levels of opposition to society in general. These movements define themselves against an oppressive society and one of the chains that weigh them down and from which they must get free is female.

The artist of these movements sees himself as the only true aristocrat, all other forms of aristocracy being expanded. From that vantage position artists feel able to relate to both the masses and the bourgeoisie, be it in the family, as a class or in a society ridden with commercialism. This metaphoric assertion of the artist as aristocrat criticising bourgeois self-interested morality is a continuation of the aristocratic stand of authors like Tennyson.

The working classes and the artist who identified with them, criticise the bourgeoisie as a class of employers. Under fire from these two opposite critiques, the bourgeoisie also developed its own morality and philosophy, based on the righteousness of its process of accumulation of property, and of the order necessary to increase wealth. By the turn of the century this class had moved "by its very economic success, into more funded forms."¹⁰ Williams notes

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, 'The Politics of Avant-Garde' in Timms and Collier, Visions and Blueprints: avant-garde culture and radical poli-

this wealth provides a loosening of the economic constraints, and a space of self criticism by the simple realisation that:

the son or daughter of a bourgeois family was financially in a position to lay claim to new forms of liberation; and in a significant number of cases could actually use the profits of the economic bourgeoisie to lead political and artistic crusades against it.¹¹

In a way modernist movements who are seen to attack their own origins are the spear head of the successful bourgeoisie, the one who developed ways of shaping the future to its needs and aspirations. The critique of the bourgeois family (this seen as a hybrid mixture of the old propertied alliance in marriage coupled with personal feeling as also a proper basis for marriage and male domination of woman and children with emphasis on the direct care of the offspring) is for these revolutionary bourgeois artists a covering for a more precise threat - that of a woman and children who constrain and hamper the freedom of the individual:

The sovereign individual is confined by any such form. The genius is tamed by it The male campaign for liberation is often associated, as in the cases of Nietzsche and Strindberg, with great resentment and hatred of woman, Yet, at the same time, the claims of human liberation, against forms of property and other economic controls, are being much more widely made ... by women.¹²

lice in Early Twentieth-century Europe. Manchester University Press, 1988, pp. 1-15, p. 8.

¹¹ Williams, *ibidem*.

¹² Williams, p. 9.

The intersection of this artistic trend with politics is made at first with anarchism, nihilism and forms of revolutionary socialism; these all stress the liberation of the creative individual, repudiating the loss of identity caused by militarism and war. Common to several movements is also the rejection of the existing culture by "resource to a simpler art" - looking at exotic cultures or at the 'folk' and 'popular' element in their own cultures.

In the case of a search for a repressed native culture, the impulse was 'popular', as in the case of Ireland - that culture represented a broader human tradition and belonged to the realm of the untamed, pre-rational and unconscious. There was found the vitality of the naive so valued by the avant-garde. The 'folk' emphasis, when foregrounding a repressed popular tradition, could be a progressive movement.¹³

Here were outlined the attitudes of established culture, and its image of the powerful and unruly woman with the example of Tennyson's Idylls of the King. and the ways

¹³ Williams finds that in countries where there was no radical change of power in the state, there were less evident effects of polarisation. Yeats' version of "The people" turned into a right-wing nationalism. Other alignments of these disruptive principles, though very similar in their initial outlook to the other movements, soon cut a distinct political perspective - those who defended a violent severance from the past, in the terms Futurism did, for instance, allowed for the explicit glorification of violence and the virtues of war, as in Italian Futurism. Some movements related with Expressionism in Germany became then associated with extreme politics - either fascism or communism. Marinetti and Mayakovsky, two Futurists are examples of these alliances: the former found a place in Italian Fascism and the latter joined the programme for a Popular Bolshevik Culture ... Later on both Nazis and Bolsheviks will reject modernists as their creative impetus does not fit well with mainstream politics. Cf. Williams, op. cit.

in which the following modern movements expressed their break with bourgeois culture. From these perspectives it is clear that the image of woman, or the subjects themselves, do not enjoy a better fare with the change, up to the First World War. The emancipation is of the male, of the artist as male creator of virile art, getting rid of an oppressive, constraining effeminate society. Female is not yet a term of reference, identification of the internal or external other, but a term of abuse. Politically modernists are against the effeminate democracy, socially against the constraints of 'bourgeois family', defending in a 'cultural Darwinism' the protection of the strong virile qualities against the emergence of weakening elements as those associated with woman. To Strindberg it seems that "the current aggressiveness of woman" is "a symptom of the regress of the race". This is in clear opposition with the views held by Synge, in his comparison of Irish Saga with Homeric poems on the subject of woman.

Synge was baffled and shocked by the strategies of practical politics and it is easy to admit that he might not approve of some of the methods of the suffragettes and other militant women, even if generally sympathetic to their cause.¹⁴ His code of social decorum and decency was very strict and conservative (nevertheless he knew that his

¹⁴ In his diary Holloway mentions reports from the nurses in the Elpis Nursing Home, the hospital where Synge died, about conversations he held with them, "in his chats with Mrs Huxley, he often spoke on women's suffrage and such up to date matters. Nurse was of opinion that he had much more religion than many who pretend far more". In Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: a selection from his Unpublished Journal. London, Paffar and Simmons, 1967, p. 128.

strict moral conduct was seen as oddly saintly by his peers in Paris, while it did not earn him too much praise or approval at home since it lacked religious fervour). He tried to shape Molly's attitudes and liveliness to the frame he adopted for himself. The observance of a common code of behaviour seemed to him the way of bridging the gap between her working class background and youth and his ascendancy attitudes. This code is glossed over as education and learning. He will try to make his little Eliza into a proper lady and the most educated actress in Europe. The redeeming feature of this Irish Pygmalion is that he is moved by love not by linguistic and sociological experimentation.

As seen above, Synge shares with his contemporaries the common interests in an art that is primitive, not commercial or bourgeois. But for all his reading of Nietzsche, Synge did not share the German philosopher's views on woman or his conception of love which has "war as its means and the deadly hatred of the sexes as its fundamental law."¹⁵

Although Synge is outstandingly against Ibsen's "joyless and pallid words" and opposed to the production of his plays at the Abbey, there are some very striking points in common in both author's attitudes towards their female characters. It would probably be easy to find Synge sidestepping from clear support of the Women's Rights

¹⁵ Quoted in M. Meyers, AUGUST STRINDBERG. London, 1985, p. 205. The unsuccessful cases with his first love affairs did not lead Synge to high hatred of woman, merely to unsuccessful first plays and essays, e.g. "When the Moon has set", "étude morbide".

Movement as Ibsen did in his speech to the Norwegian Women's Rights League in 1898:

I am not a member of the Women's Rights League. ... I must decline the honour of being said to have worked for the Women's Rights movement. I am not even very sure what Women's Rights actually are.¹⁶

This is the open stance he chooses to take, but in his preliminary notes for A Doll's House dated 1878 he expressed his conviction that "A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society" where laws are drafted and administered by men, in the case of this play leading the heroine to lose "faith in her moral right to bring up her children".¹⁷ This situation makes him sensitive to the injustice done to women, and also which is more perceptive, to the loss for men themselves who, by oppressing women, debase themselves of complete humanity:

Modern society is not a society of people; it is merely a society of males.

When liberal-minded men want to bring about some improvement in the position of women in society, they first inquire whether public opinion - men - will approve. It is the same as asking wolves whether they favour new measures for the protection of sheep.¹⁸

The point is made amply clear in these notes dated 1882-3, but as seen above he will not register support to specific activist campaigners. His open public support will be given in more broad social terms. In a speech to a

¹⁶ Henrik Ibsen A Critical Anthology, edited by James McFarlane, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd, 1970, p. 169.

¹⁷ Henrik Ibsen A Critical Anthology, p. 90.

¹⁸ Henrik Ibsen A Critical Anthology, p. 97.

workers procession in Trondheim in 1885 he sees hope for the future in the emancipation of the working class and of women. He sees survival exactly where Tennyson saw the dangers to society (more precisely to his class). Ibsen is hoping for a new nobility. This time the heirs are no longer male nor masters, but women and workers, and their value and worth is not measured by piling up assets "not nobility of birth nor of money nor a nobility of learning nor even of ability or talent".¹⁹ The qualities Ibsen hopes for as fit for survival are simpler and more primitive, and those that will create this new aristocracy are from a socially 'new blood' till now unpolluted by the corrupting trade with party politics. Women and workers are here not seen as the threat to the social fabric that the defenders from degeneration and of eugenic purity find them to be. They are not the wild breeders of an unfit race, but rather the only future and hope for society:

An element of nobility must find its way into our public life, into our government, among our representatives and into our press. ... What I am thinking of is a nobility of character, of mind and of will. That alone can liberate us. The aristocracy which I hope our people will be provided with, will come to us from two directions. It will come to us from two groups which so far have not suffered any irreparable damage under party pressure. It will come to us from our women and our workers. The transformation of social conditions which is now being undertaken in the rest of Europe is very largely concerned with the future status of workers and of women.

¹⁹ In a way this is the same evolutionary process that has been analysed above for the ascent of the bourgeoisie, by its acquisitiveness of wealth and prominence and its creation of a status position which allowed them to feel as a new nobility.

That is what I am hoping and waiting for, that is what I shall work for, all I can.²⁰

Synge and Mythical Thought

This endowment of value and status by qualifying the emerging social forces as the 'new nobility' could profitably be analysed by searching into the roots of the process of investing the new with the trappings of old archetypes. It can be seen as a radical appropriation of the seats of power, or rather as the occurrence of the mythical thought process in operation, the deployment of a language that structures the methods of social reproduction.²¹

In the particular situation of Ireland and its representation, women on stage had to be Irish women, and Irish women must embody the plight of the Nation, in images of suffering, endurance, virtue and courage. They are to be mothers and saints, not middle class women trying to ascertain their independence instead of attending to their family or their country's needs. This is the problem with Nora in The Shadow of the Glen, and with Deirdre of the Sorrows. Deirdre makes choices that are her own as an individual and not overtly those of her class or her nation. Even now when he chooses legendary material Synge fails the

²⁰ Henrik Ibsen A Critical Anthology, p. 105.

²¹ In this brief review of concepts of myth and the mythologising process I am indebted to the studies of Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Bourdieu and Roland Barthes. Following the Durkheimian notion that the author of the myth is society and that social interaction is the ritual ceremony, Bourdieu and Barthes develop their own studies of the mythical process and its function.

nationalist expectations of a clear nationalist statement. A modernist stance can be seen in the author's decision to avoid the opportunity of mythologizing Dairdra's choices.

The modernist stance in Synge's use of the legend lies precisely in the subversion of its mythologizing process. He operates at the level of the formation of the mythical gesture, breaking its circularity, avoiding its repetition and reproduction as propitiatory practice, as the myth of sovereignty.

Myth belongs to a sphere of knowledge organized and transmitted by channels different from those of structural logical thought.²² For Pierre Bourdieu myth functions as a language structured by specialists, repeated in ceremonies. This language has also a structuring effect, both in thought and behaviour.²³

Following also the Durkheimian notion of myth as collective representative, Barthes will define myth as something socially determined, a "reflection" in the Marxist sense, an inverted reflexion. Myth consists in overturning culture into nature, or at least, the social, cultural, ideological, historical into the natural.²⁴ To mythological

²² Jean Pierre Vernant, The Origins of Greek Thought. London, Methuen, 1982, p. 59.

²³ Bourdieu, P. 'Thème et structure du champ religieux' in Revue Française de Sociologie. XII, 3, 1971, pp. 295-335.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, Image, Music, Text. Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath, London, Fontana, 1977, p. 165.

thought, daily experience was illuminated and given meaning by exemplary deeds performed by the gods "ab initio".²³

The study of Greek theogonies and cosmogonies and their explanations of the origin and emergence of an orderly world, leads J. P. Vernant to conclude that "above all they [myths] were myths of sovereignty". Myths are a divinization of sovereign power, based on the repeated performance by a king of the feats of the gods. This repetition is propitiatory to the renewal of nature and social order. A king so empowered would rule both the social hierarchy and natural phenomena. In every domain, whether natural, social, or ritual order was the product of the victory of the sovereign divinity.²⁴

Myth can therefore be understood as a means of consolidation of power, and to this purpose it had to be adapted to the necessities of nationalism in Ireland. The myths reclaimed by the nationalists were not common to the British colonizer, so using such material was from the start a declaration of difference. As the objective of the nationalist movements was to get a share in the power of the land, or its undivided possession, there was in this struggle no place for argument over the nature of this power or its quality once deployed by nationalists. The simple fact that it would be native to the land gave it legitimacy, and the circumstance that it would take the seat

²³ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*. London, Harper and Row Inc, 1963.

²⁴ Vernant, *Ibid.*

of the invader, ensured that the image of power would be recognized universally, as the oppressor was. The change is one of operants, of deployers of power, not of its intrinsic nature or ideology. Myths and legends can be used to convey in images of antiquity the sovereign power that must be restored.

The movement from myth to legend is a separation from the sacred into a freer form of reproduction. The legend no longer uses the same sacred words uttered by the primordial god or king. The author however has to be very sensitive to the position of the audience vis à vis this particular stage of the evolution of mythical thought. When Yeats makes use in Countess Cathleen of expressions and images of the Catholic faith in a freer form, the religious anxieties of the orthodox created an uproar. But for the older legends, the mythical story is no longer valued for itself but as a symbol, paradigm or framework of reference in which to shape events in a propitiatory tone, giving present urges and anxieties a recognizable traditional shape:

Ideology most typically presents itself to the text as "life" rather than category, as the immediate stuff of experience rather than as system of concepts. Much literature allows ideology to enter the text in relatively "pure" form, rehearsing its categories in ways which to some degree disengage them from the contingencies of the 'lived'.²⁷

²⁷ Eagleton, p. 81.

The modern heroines in Synge's plays

Nationalist literature will use this process as a reinforcement of the belief and allegiance to partisan causes, keeping alive the hope and readiness for the proper moment to enact its liberation. In speeches, poems and articles, Cathleen Ni Houlihan calls her children to a sacrificial death for her freedom. Synge circumvents the temptation of presenting strongly contrived ideological constructions as 'natural' emanations of a cultural tradition as he presents his version of the Deirdre legend in a radical new light. As he always suspected, the nationalist groups were not interested in going too far introspecting into the deep meanings of their ideological instruments of liberation. If they did they would find out that, as they probably wished they were not so radical nor disturbing of the status quo.

As long as the woman protagonists of Synge's plays evade this symbolic role of assuming the plight of the Nation and choose instead to state their own grievances, or to search in their own lives the reasons for oppression and ways of liberation, they will be seen as reactionary ascendancy utterances in the terms of immediate partisan politics. In spite of this immediatist shortcoming, they will challenge, unsettle and shock because their utterance challenges received and established ideas of the feminine shared by Irish and English, by Catholic and Anglican alike.

The disturbing imperiousness of Saga women was kept in perspective as a matter of folk-lore, remnants of a

primitive dark world. It was maintained as such in the transcription of the legends. When they became physically materialized as in the plays of AE and Yeats they were turned into more docile consorts. Synge demythologises by translating this imperiousness in modern terms, the will to decide about their lives, and growing awareness of their own power.

In Shadow Riders and Deirdre women are characters who reach a higher level of consciousness, understanding and independence through suffering and isolation. The desolate solitude of a loveless marriage, the tragic severance from her children, realization that 'death should be a poor untidy thing, though it's a queen that dies', these are the painful realizations of mature women utterly defiant of conformity to prescribed roles.

These are the women who inherited the noble attitude of their noble forebears. They are not images of sovereignty. They prefer to be real sovereigns even if only of their own selves, of their lives.

In a review of Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirtheama for The Speaker of 1 June 1902, Synge makes an interesting comment on the quality of the woman in these stories, which he uses to date the origin of the legends as probably later than the Homeric poems:

Most of the moods and actions that are met with are more archaic than anything in the Homeric poems, yet a few features, such as the imperiousness and freedom of the woman, seem to imply an intellectual advance beyond the period of Ulysses. (...) the heroes who fight beside or for

these women, . . . , are all large and living figures. (CW II, 367)

Synge once admitted to feeling uncomfortable about passing judgement on works of art for fear he would appreciate something above its universal value, or that later he might change his mind. In the comparison above he shows to be an attentive and discerning reader. But, quite probably, the reasons he then invoked for finding the Gaelic legends more recent, would be used by a modern educated reader to prove just the opposite, in the light of the research of anthropologist and feminist studies. The independence, imperiousness and freedom of the women point, like other more archaic features to a pre-Homeric age, to a society in which the matrilinear line is still a strong link. The 'Three luminaries of Ulster' are the sons of the king's sister, Usna, and the bard sings about the fate of the Sons of Usna, not the wrath of Conor.

Leaving aside the precise historical collocation of the legend what is relevant to note at this stage is the fact that images of strong, powerful women denote, in Synge's opinion a factor of progress, evolution, even enrichment of the male heroes who are "large and living figures".

The relatively 'pure' form in which ideology is found in Tennyson's Idylls makes the poem an anthology of the private and social masculine "angst" of his class in relation to the emerging social groups - women and workers. It is also chosen here because the poetic manipulation of the legendary material is a good term of comparison with

Synge's own manipulation of the story of Deirdre in his Deirdre of the Sorrows. In the chapter devoted to its study here, Synge's play is compared to contemporary versions of the legend, emerging as the only one which refuses the deployment of received cultural forms of the legend.

Synge's Deirdre is the story of a woman who is faced with a tragic personal choice - to see her love wither or to die. She is placed in a context of historical predestination - prophecies were uttered about her not only as an individual but at the social level. Her choice here is personal but simultaneously universal - like the mood of the play. Synge wants to undercut differences in rank, culture, nationality and even time, trying to present as universal or elemental the emotions expressed in the play.

In all of his work, and in the review quoted above, we can find a clear ideological alignment which puts Synge closer to Ibsen, despite his rejection of the Norwegian's style and involvement with contemporary urban society, which to Synge was not the location for his poetic Irish drama. Irrespective of these differences, to Synge as to Ibsen the advancement of women, or the recognition of their power does not constitute a threat to the masculine identity. The men who qualify as companions to these women have in them the power of a deeper perception of nature and of their own being. It is not justified to say that he envisages the advancement of women as an improvement of the masculine society. This would be a continuation of the theories of the enlightenment which defended the education of women with a

view to their role as mothers and first educators of the male citizen. It becomes clear that in the plays the lucid attitude of Synge's women towards their expected roles implies a choice for definition of the self for its own sake and not as a mediation. This is why Nora Burke is not moved by Michael Dara's marriage proposal nor is Deirdre interested in becoming Conchubar's queen. They have something better to do: be their own selves and live their own history.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS: FROM MYTHICAL FATE TO TRAGIC CHOICE

Ireland, where, for good and for bad, the past is so living and the present so desirous to live.

I want to do something quiet and stately and restrained...¹

While still revising the Playboy Synge had in mind to try something quite different for his next play. The embarrassment of the 'Playboy' riots had hurt him deeply; unlike W B Yeats, he had no stomach for a fight although he did not betray his principles to endear himself to the nationalist taste. In terms of theatre business it would be wise however to let the wolves rest. And this was also a time to develop some of his other interests which the production of the earlier play had delayed.

During these years his interest in Celtic antiquity had not diminished. Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirtheama had impressed him well; indeed the compliments he paid her work were one of the rare occasions on which Synge praised a fellow writer. Her collection of folk tales was important mainly as a means to make available to all classes,

¹ The first quote is from Synge's review of Stephen Gwynn's The Fair Hills of Ireland. in the Manchester Guardian. 16 Nov 1906, published in CW II. p. 386. The second is from a letter to Molly, December 1906, in CW IV. p. xxvii.

especially the English speaking population "the beauty and wonder of the old literature". Being addressed to the general public Lady Gregory's stories kept the beauty of the early text by the use of a literary medium which was to be her most important literary contribution to the period - the use of the dialect. Synge recommended "The Sons of Usnach" to Molly as of particular interest. But Synge had not only praise for these literary translations of the saga material. He had his own theory on translation and did not agree with Lady Gregory's genteel omission of some cruder or barbarous features, and much less with the 'facile parody' as he calls parts of A H Leahy's translation of the *Book of Leinster*.²

Synge was a scholar among the other Irish National Theatre Society members, and it was this trait that interested W B Yeats in the first place when he met Synge in Paris. His knowledge of Irish antiquity and literature was more profound than that of his peers. The courses with Professor De Joubainville brought to his acquaintance the Old and Middle Irish literature in the original texts as available to scholars on the Continent.

Although it may have been a new experiment "chiefly to change < his > hand", his interest in the story of Deirdre had been developing for a number of years. As far back as 1900-1901 one can find a translation on this subject in Notebook 48.³

² *CW* II. p. 372.

³ Professor Saddlemyer refers to this translation exercise in Appendix C - Deirdre of the Sorrows, in *CW* IV, p. 393, under the title *Related passages in Notebooks*, noting that "there is no further

The Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language had published The Fate of the Children of Uisnach in 1898, a version of the legend written in the 17th century by Andrew MacCurtin. Synge took this book with him to the Aran Islands and there made a translation of the old saga, as he was learning to speak the language. This edition in Irish of Andrew MacCurtin's narrative also included a translation into English with glossary and notes. The Dairdre story was one of Synge's favourite legends and this translation appears to have been made before any of his plays were written.

One would think that his interest in Irish texts could hardly estrange him from the nationalist intellectuals, but in a way this it did, for the objective of Synge's translation was different from that of the Society's. Synge showed no interest in publishing his 'Dairdre' translation. It was an attempt to create a medium for truly genuine expression of Irishness, a proper language for his characters. He always struggled to convince critics that his characters spoke as the people he found through his walks in the country.⁴ The depth of his knowledge was

evidence that he used this as the basis for his dramatisation of the story six years later". She also gives notice of his interest in the saga by the existence of three later articles published in L'Européen, Paris, 1902, The Speaker, London, 1902, and The Manchester Guardian in 1905.

⁴ Dr Lorato Todd makes the experiment of giving a native Irish speaker passages from the Shadow of the Glen to put into "good idiomatic Irish". "The translator had no difficulty whatsoever in offering an immediate Irish equivalent ... a number of phrases which are strange to an English reader are directly calqued from Irish." in The Language of Irish Literature, Macmillan Education Ltd., London, 1989, pp. 11-13.

inadmissible to the nationalists and other critics and the reason may be found in his particular knowledge of the structure of Old and Middle Irish, which the great majority of nationalists lacked, and must have influenced Synge in his creation of a language "racy of the soil". Synge felt that this old language had been the medium for his literary ancestors, a language that had then reached its maturity, just as he felt the English language in the Ireland of his age was now becoming a mature means of expression after having been an alien code for centuries.

The peculiarity of Synge's style which put him at odds with his contemporaries may well be related to his involvement with these 'saga people' of whom he claimed one knew so little. Such a profound knowledge of the old language was not common amongst nationalists. It would be difficult for them to admit a person of Synge's extraction to have wider and deeper knowledge of their legendary and heroic heritage. The arguments on the strategies of language were often for the exclusion of precisely the kind of people Synge embodied for the Nationalist press - the Anglo-Irish landlord class. In the translation of *Oidhe Chloinne Uisnigh*, Synge evolved his own personal style. It was not just the environment of the Aran Islands, the stories of Pat Dirane, his language lessons with the local people that provided Synge with the material and means for his creative work.

This translation pairs with his first play "When the Moon Has Set" as the two early components of his literary

production. It would be through drama that he would create his most lasting contribution to Literature, but for that he had to give up the mere introspective study of his personal or class misery. What is lacking in this play is the detachment of the subject, a more convincing dialogue, a language that will taste as fully "as an apple or a nut". This particular style Synge will find in his various contacts with the Irish language, and the translation of the old saga is one of the first consistent exercises on the matter.

Somehow the theory that justifies the writing of Deirdre of the Sorrows as the brooding of a dying man over his own death is contradicted by the existence of this translation.

SOURCES OR INFLUENCES

According to Adelaide Duncan Estil, Synge may have had access to fourteen different versions of the legend. As mentioned above, there was a quite active publishing of recensions and versions of the legend in his lifetime. It is difficult to say how many different versions Synge read, as it is also difficult to say how many times he must have heard the story told in his walks through the country. Toni O'Brien Johnson in her study of this play compares Synge's with the old versions he may have used, and the MacCurtin translation in particular mainly, to prove Synge's scholarship in this area, analysing the use of themes, character development and style. Johnson claims that

"Overall, from the point of borrowed features, the Old Irish original appears to have been more influential on Synge than Keating's rendering of it".⁵

Synge's play starts with Deirdre falling in love, ready to choose her own destiny. Other alterations of emphasis and structure include Deirdre's dreams of foreboding and her repeated advice to Naisi not to return to Emain. In these matters Synge's play differs from all the others who make extensive use of the dream themes and imagery.

Johnson rightly infers that these differences in Synge's text are due to the differing conception Synge makes of Deirdre as character and of her inner motivations. To develop this point to more profitable insights one should also have first hand knowledge of the texts obviously familiar to both Synge and O'Brien Johnson. Johnson's opinions are followed here and her scholarship appreciated but, for the present study, a synchronic comparison will also be necessary to find how Synge's work did not live up to the expectations of his public. The way in which the source material was reproduced or altered gives an instance of the different sensibility, ideological position of Synge vis à vis the nationalist Establishment.

Besides the antiquarian editions there were also published several new versions of the legend during Synge's lifetime. It will be interesting to compare Synge's treatment with the new versions offered by Douglas Hyde,

⁵ Toni O'Brien Johnson, p. 85.

A.E., W B Yeats, and Lady Gregory. W B Yeats and A.E. wrote for the stage as well, and clearly in Synge's mind was a comparison of his work with theirs, as he says in a letter to Frederick Gregg, " I am half inclined to try a play on 'Deirdre'-it would be amusing to compare it with Yeats' and Russell's". To another critic, the American Louis Untermeyer he wrote:

I am at work on a Saga play- after the Play boy (sic) I wanted a change from Peasant Comedy- or thought I did- on the Deirdre story that Yeats and so many others have treated herein one way or other.

What seems to be common amongst all these authors is that they all were acquainted with the popular version of the legend, the one relating to the traditional medieval manuscript. They were all imbued with some measure of romantic nationalism, which if nothing else the choice of this subject would testify to. What interested the dramatists in particular in this story of a young woman and three warrior brothers brought to death by the revenge of an old king who acts out fate unaware of the fact that he is also part of it, was the poetical remoteness of this tragedy. The image of the young Deirdre choosing death rather than submit to the old king is a basic tale of heroic defeat that could be used to create a poetical parallel to the contemporary political situation.

Deirdre of the Sorrows is a play with no particular or striking formal innovations (even a bit leaden in its first production). Weldon Thornton remarks that in this play

* CW IV. xxvii, and Letters. II, p. 227.

Synge has no interest in challenging received ideas, nor in playing with the audience's expectation. "Synge keeps his eye on the careful and consistent development of his own conception of the story without any finicky wish to 'épater le bourgeois'".⁷ Thornton is right in saying Synge makes no formal innovations in this play, but as will become clear in the course of this work, his play is the only one that re-writes the legend with a radical modern vision.

REWRITING THE PAST OR REVIEWING THE PRESENT

The purpose of making old sagas the medium for rallying forces around a common past is one that allows for lengthy re-working of the source material. In this way, some traits of the former legend are blurred or discarded, be it language, events or character, so as to allow for the introduction of contemporary issues, around which the author wants to create an image of perennity, echo the foundation or ancestry that justifies the place of those issues in the front of events. Or in a totally opposite fashion, by setting legend and myth in a new perspective, separating the mythical value from the event around which it was constructed, to explode the crystallisation of ideological structures and its mechanisms.

The avowed purpose of such work as that of Lady Gregory and Douglas Hyde is to bring Irish people closer to their legendary past, their rich heroic literature which had been ignored, vilified and repressed. They are aimed at the

⁷ Thornton, W, p. 145.

general public. Douglas Hyde chose to include in his A Literary History of Ireland a version he had found unpublished in Belfast, but he himself had already tried his hand at the subject when he won the Vice-Chancellor's Prize in English verse at Trinity the year before Synge joined the college; at that time the story of the tragic queen seemed to be a totally obscure subject for most of his colleagues at Trinity. It was Hyde's hope that by awakening the intelligentsia to its own literature, it "might to some extent bridge the gap if she would between the two nations".⁸ The version he transcribed is not dated precisely, but he finds it "fairly old,... by far the amplest and most graphic version of them all, ... an admirable example of the late extension and embellishment of the ancient text".⁹ From the nature of the "embellishments", long descriptions of feasts, development in the construction of the love theme and description of characters according to stereotypical canons of beauty, this version seems to date from the late Middle Ages.

One can also find with this the translation of the beginning and ending of the primitive legend from the Book of Leinster, the oldest known version of Deirdre's story. These two texts tell the story central to the destruction of the Red Branch of Ulster, putting strong emphasis on the changing attitude of the High King. Conor, the High King by

⁸ Douglas Hyde, A Literary History of Ireland, London, Ernest Benn Ltd., 1899, p. 303.

⁹ Hyde, p. 304.

saving the life of an infant whom the druids prophesy will bring destruction to the society of warriors, and pledging to marry her, finds himself involved in internal warfare with the younger members of the Branch.

The disturbing agent of the solid brotherhood of warriors is represented by the beauty of this young woman, Deirdre for whose possession the bonds of loyalty are broken.

Before Deirdre was called to marry Conor, she was brought up "in a fortress of the Red Branch", away from the sight of any warrior, Conor included, and:

prosperous was Conor's sway, and valiant was the fame (i.e., famous was the valour) of the Red Branch, defending the province of Ulster against foreigners and against every other province in Erin in his time, and there were no three in the household of Emania . . . ¹⁰ more brilliant than the sons of Uisneach . . .

But this young beauty "beyond every degree surpassing" fell in love with Naoise, the son of Uisneach and Conor's dearest hero. She beseeches her nurse Lavarcam to bring him to her. This young girl has the same determination as Synge's Deirdre or as the 'innocent damsels' of the Arthurian Cycle. She will succeed in avoiding the imminent union with Conor:

When Naoise beheld the splendour of the girl's countenance he is filled with a flood of love, and Deirdre beseeches him to take her and escape to Alba. But Naoise thought that too hazardous, for fear of Conor. But in the course (?) of the night Deirdre won him over, so that he consented to her,

¹⁰ Hyde, p. 306.

and they determined to part on the night of the
 morrow.¹¹

They will return to Emania to meet their death beguiled by Conon's offer of pardon taken to them by Fergus. This treason and breach of pledged word of the king is the cause of warfare within the Red Branch and of the defection of Fergus and his party into Connacht. Here D. Hyde quotes Keating who concluded that this was the cause of:

so many wars and enmities between the people of Connacht and Ulster, so that the exiles who went from Ulster into banishment with Fergus continued ... constantly spoiling, destroying and plundering the Ultonians, on account of the murder of the sons of Usnach. ...¹²

The demise of the band of warriors expressed here includes several themes common to texts that give account of the end or struggle of a particular society, using a mythified process as explanation. These explanations are often encoded, as in this case in the story of the woman whose presence shall bring destruction to the military society, the land that will be laid waste and be the prey of the ravages of neighbours or defenceless to attacks from invaders due to the fall of its leader. The stories of The Mabinogion, the *Matter of Britain*, *The Quest of the Grail*, and presumably many other epic legends of this period identify external threats to the structure of the society in images of feminine danger or beauty.

¹¹ Hyde, p. 110.

¹² Ibid.

FATE OF THE SONS OF USNACH

Lady Gregory wrote the story of Deirdre in the context of the story of the men of the Red Branch.¹³ It starts with the prediction of the fate of the unborn child to her father Fedlimid by Cathbad the Druid. In this case it is the real father who has a little refuge built for Deirdre and Lavarcham. This version avoids the unnatural circumstance of Conchubar fostering a child to be his wife and makes the old king also prey of the prophecy involving the life of Deirdre.

Reading through the "Fate of the Sons of Usnach", in its simple narrative language, one can find endorsed in it all the mythologising elements of an epic narrative. The stories that Lady Gregory collected and lovingly reproduced to form her book and this legend in particular, bear the stamp of undivided allegiance to the myths that are most potent in the national collective unconscious of the Irish, namely that of the sovereignty goddess recast as Mother Ireland.

Living in an isolated valley surrounded by an apple orchard Deirdre will grow in beauty and gentleness, instructed in all the knowledge of nature by her foster-mother. The story follows the patterns of other medieval romances. The isolation of the two women is broken by the appearance of a lost hunter to whom Deirdre gives shelter and who is revived by the sight of such beauty. He warns of

¹³ Lady Gregory, Cuchulain of Muirthemnos the Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster Arranged and put into English by Lady Gregory with a preface by W. B. Yeats, Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe, 1970.

the dangers she may run if other men, such as Naoise and his brothers see her. These Deirdre identifies immediately as the three warriors she saw in a dream. In this version the stray hunter is the agent who brings together Deirdre and Conchubar, with an eye on the reward for such a precious find to a high King who "was used to lie down at night and to rise up in the morning by himself, without a wife or anyone to speak to".¹⁴

Taken from the place where she grew at one with nature, Deirdre is not a woman to be taken against her will even if she is still young in years. She will not marry the king until a year and a day have passed, during which she will be prepared to become a queen. This delay provides the opportunity to meet the three men in her vision, and Deirdre follows them as she sees them:

And it is what happened, that love for Naoise came into the heart of Deirdre, so that she could not but follow him. She gathered her skirts and went after the three men...¹⁵

In Douglas Hyde's version and in the plays, the hero Naoise is free from the tragic responsibility of the choice, emerging as a tragic hero facing a destiny that was brought upon him. It is not him who seeks Deirdre. A.E. makes him go to Deirdre "wrapt in a dream". The circumspection of Naoise displayed in other versions is in Lady Gregory's story shown by his brothers who try to avoid the meeting, as they fear Naoise would take the king's promised spouse if he

¹⁴ Lady Gregory, p. 95.

¹⁵ Lady Gregory, p. 97.

saw her. Deirdre calls after him three times, and the third call cannot be ignored by Naoise or be mistaken for the sound of Conchubar's wild ducks, geese or swans:

So Naoise turned back and met Deirdre, and Deirdre and Naoise kissed one another three times, and she gave a kiss to each of his brothers. And with the confusion that was on her, a blaze of red fire came upon her, and her colour came and went as quickly as the aspen by the stream. . . . and he gave Deirdre there and then, the love that he never gave to living thing, to vision, or to creature, but to herself alone.

.....

"Harm will come of this," said the young men. "Although there should harm come," said Naoise, "I am willing to be in disgrace while I live. . . ."¹⁶

The description of the exiles' life in Alban bears witness to the different steps of settlement, from settling and hunting for survival up to the service to the Scottish king.¹⁷ Despite the care to hide Deirdre from outsiders, her beauty becomes an added threat to their security as Naoise is often sent in the service of the king of Scotland with the secret hope that he might die in the fight and enable the king to have free access to Deirdre. Having overcome the obstacle of the difficult tasks and fights they are free to settle and make dwellings for themselves in a place of idyllic plenty, display wealth among their peers

¹⁶ Lady Gregory, p. 98.

¹⁷ "But at last they get out of Ulster and sailed to the country of Alban, and settled in a lonely place, and when hunting on the mountains failed them, they fall upon the cattle of the men of Alban, so that these gathered together to make an end of them.", Gregory, p. 98.

and give their children to be fostered in the house of kings.¹⁸

The possession of Deirdre is disputed by kings. Naoise, the elder brother, nephew of the High King, will acquire the most beautiful possession fit for the couch of a king. Living with Deirdre in Scotland he will eventually be able to set his own court, where he had three houses for himself which are defined through their functions. They can be signs of wealth and a large train of warriors, or just a sign of cultural division of the spheres of social life, attributing different domains to each, in order to avoid pollution of vital functions and to enhance status:

It is how the sons of Usnach lived; they had three houses, and the house where they made ready the food, it is not there they would eat it, and the house where they would eat it, it is not there they would sleep.¹⁹

Deirdre is the 'good searched for', which will cause destruction. This image of the goddess of sovereignty for whose love whole hosts will perish is transmitted in Lady Gregory's version of the saga as a powerful creature, endowed with a vision which men neglect due to her gender. She is desired as a possession and object of love, but her omens and forebodings are strongly rejected as trivial female squeamishness when they oppose the bellicose drive of

¹⁸ "... and they could kill the salmon on the stream from out their own door, and the deer of the grey hills from out their window. But when Naoise went up to the court of the king, his clothes were splendid among the great men of the army of Scotland, ...", Gregory, p. 99.

¹⁹ Gregory, p. 101.

the hero warriors who only accept the facts they can test at the point of the sword.

Deirdre's warnings are seen as the voice of the outsider, a woman, who opposes the exclusive structure of the Red Branch, and discredits the values upon which it is created, i.e. defiance of threats and danger as tests to the courage of the hero, and above all a strong code of honour to the pledged word and to the word and person of the High King, binding this male warrior society. In fact Deirdre's warnings not to return to Emain are rejected by Fergus in the strongest terms:

A thing that is unpleasing to me, and that I would never give in to," said Fergus, "is to listen to the howling of dogs, and to the dreams of women; and since Conchubar, the High King, has sent a message of friendship, it would not be right for you to refuse it.²⁰

Naoise, for all his love could not make himself listen to the repeated warnings of his wife; love of land and fellowship of his comrades-at-arms weigh heavily in the exiled warrior.

AE's Reverie of Deirdre

A.E.'s Deirdre is a play in three acts and covers the same time span in the legend as Synge's: Deirdre has been living in seclusion with Lavarcan under the King's orders and the time for Concochar to take her as queen is approaching fast. In neither play is the young girl keen on the prospect. These are the points that can be found in

²⁰ Gregory, p. 102.

common in the heroines of both plays. The way Deirdre sees herself and is seen by the others differs radically. Deirdre in A.E.'s play is a very young girl, naïve, ductile and insecure. She still clings to her "dear foster-mother" requiring explanations for the events relating to her isolation in which she has so far been living contentedly. Lavarcam the druidess understands all the omens, dreams and other portents which for young Deirdre are totally unfathomable even if she is from the Sidhe. Lavarcam instructs her foster-daughter in what lies hidden for her, but Deirdre's real initiation is made through her meeting Naisi. It is the love of a mortal hero that raises her to her full immortal stature.

As a woman in Alba Deirdre is seen by Fergus as an affrighted lady "who shakes like the white wave trembling before its fall".²¹ Before the arrival of Fergus in Alba, Naisi admits to Deirdre that her vision of him longing for Ireland and his comrades is true. Even if longing for his motherland, the news of the king's pardon brought by Fergus caution Naisi to inquire further how this change in the king's sworn revenge came about. But once he is convinced his reaction to Deirdre's fears is violent:

Naisi.- Deirdre! Deirdre! It is not right for you, beautiful woman, to come with tears between a thousand exiles and their own land! ... What would the bards sing of Naisi - without trust! afraid of the outstretched hand! - frightened by a woman's fears! - By the gods before the clan Uisne were so shamed I would shed my blood here with my own hand.

²¹ A.E., Imaginations and Reversals. Dublin and London, Maunsel & Roberts Ltd., 1921, second edition, p. 290.

Deirdre.- O stay, stay your anger! Have pity on me, Naisi! Your words, like lightning sear my heart²²

The woman who can look within Naisi's heart is subdued into making nothing more than a faint plea for tender words. Naisi's decision to return to Ireland, Deirdre's advice either to seek protection before danger is imminent or to fight are cause for disagreement between the couple, creating their first argument in Alba. Waiting for the king or their now certain death, A.E.'s couple play at chess continuing a game started by Concochar. Naisi blames her again for showing despair at the sight of fight, as someone who did not play her part "as it ought to be played". Deirdre assumes her inferiority compared to the mettle of the warriors of his clan, and by extension of the Red Branch. The goddess of the first act now admits her inferiority before the man she has been trying to prevent from walking to his death like sheep to slaughter:

Deirdre.-Your pride is moulded and set like a pillar of bronze. O warrior, I was no mate for you. I am only a woman, who has given her life into your hands, and you chide me for my love.²³

This image of Deirdre as a petty housewife is the beginning of her demise. Through his love she is raised above death, into the land of Youth, for love of him she annihilates herself in a whimper. This Deirdre is cast from the images of women A.E. can conjure up in his own head. Her character dissolves in tears and her death comes without

²² A.E., p. 294.

²³ Ibidem.

blood but only a deep, immaterial sigh over her dead hero. There is nothing left of Deirdre but a thin painful emotion.

How domesticated a heroine Deirdre has become since she jumped towards her death out of a chariot in the version of the Book of Leinster, or even in Lady Gregory's as she used Naisi's ring to buy a knife from a fisherman in order to kill herself.

Yeats' Deirdre

W B Yeats's play strikes a similar political note even if the character of Deirdre is not so reduced in its strength. The heroic suffering of the beautiful queen appealed to Yeats and provided once again a chance to offer the Dublin audiences a moment of nationalist emotive rapture. This play had a Maeterlinckian symbolic quality which Sturge More compared to the effect of 'a religious mystery'.²⁴ The action takes place somewhere out of bounds, an imprecise "guest house built for travellers / from the seashore to Conchubar's royal house".²⁵ The remoteness and distance of theme is conveyed by a poetically blurred locality. This is a meeting point of displaced people and allegiances. The musicians have just arrived to Conchubar's Kingdom, and only report the stories collected on the road. Once the travellers from Scotland arrive the house will be guarded by "dark men", mercenaries or slaves from Libya.

²⁴ W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge More: Their correspondence 1901-1937, p. 11, quoted by Professor K. Worth The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett. London, The Athlone Press 1978 (1986) p. 141.

²⁵ 'Deirdre' in The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats. London, Macmillan, 1982, p. 172.

Their remoteness allows W B Yeats to construe them as violent strangers who will not reason with mercy, and who will only behave as unthinking war machines.

Fergus the deposed High King has staked his honour and his friendship with Conchubar in the bringing back of the young exiles.

Naoise is driven to Conchubar's court through the word of Fergus, his foster father, his trust in the word of the king and in the strength of their social and moral codes. These who espouse the ideological structure are the more deceived. They think themselves safe for belonging to the Red Branch and find reassurance in deploying the patterns of behaviour that will make them recognized as honourable, and worthy of the King's pardon. For the King however this meeting is the opportunity to settle a quarrel in his own terms. As Naoise idealises the values which unite him to his society, the King uses them for his private interests:

Conchubar. - One woman and two men; that is the quarrel that knows no mending.²⁶

Both A E and W B Yeats make Conchubar invoke reasons of state to justify or cover up his inner drive for revenge. Yeats shows the King making display of unacceptable mercy to the young lovers, when Naoise is already trapped and arrested. Dairdre has been defeated by both Fergus and Naoise's arguments of the King's honour and followed them to Ireland aware of the danger which the musician's words

²⁶ Collected Plays of W B Yeats. p. 194.

confirmed - there is preparation of a bridal bed in the King's home, so her return will certainly mean separation from Naoise.

She does play at chess as in the previous play and fails to keep up the serenity and cold blood of the seamew queen.²⁷ But Deirdre's red blood shows even more courage and resourcefulness when she pleads with the King to let her go with Naoise, or in the last resort to let him go free. She is prepared to plead for her love, to coax the old king but she has also made herself ready to die by taking a knife from one of the musicians. The ruse by which she tricks the king into letting her come near Naoise's body, makes Conchubar exclaim in derision the lonely fate of an old King: "And every common man can keep his wife, / But not the King".²⁸

Yeats's play conveys the sense of threat to the young couple by an alternation of presence and absence. When they arrive there is no message or welcome to meet them at the guest house. On the other hand there is the ominous presence of "those dark men, / with murderous and outlandish-looking arms".²⁹ Naoise holds to his belief in the word of a King to stop doubting like Deirdre. She is

²⁷ In Yeats's play a couple had been playing at that chess board in similar circumstances. The seamew queen in that case waited for death playing chess with her husband showing no sign of fear, like her husband. Once again the woman has to be otherworldly to match the valour of a warrior king - she has cold fish blood.

²⁸ Collected Plays of W B Yeats, pp. 202-3.

²⁹ Collected Plays of W B Yeats. p. 175.

already divided between trust in her husband and in her own feelings:

 Myself wars on myself, for I myself -
 That do my husband's will, yet fear to do it -
 Grow dragonish to myself.³⁰

Once again the premonitions of the young queen, a result of her primitive upbringing are justified as opposed to the cultured attitude of both Fergus and Naoise. Fergus, both in AE's play and W B Yeats's disparages Deirdre's particular knowledge by comparing it with the base animal element. They do not doubt the King's word, but she does and the reason:

Fergus (...) It is but Natural
 That she should doubt him, for her house has been
 The hole of the badger and the den of the fox.³¹

All the authors contemplated here deal with the story in a mythologising way with the exception of Synge. This equation of woman with primitive, untamed, nature and man with a well organised society whose codes are upheld by all, is only one of the comparisons detrimental to women which constitute an instance of this mythologising process. The stature of the woman Deirdre however is diminished in its strength, even if the claims at other-worldliness persist. They keep the godlike characteristics for their beauty, elevation of tone, but the apparent subliminal conception of a godlike creature is at odds with the authors' concept of

³⁰ Collected Plays of W B Yeats. p. 178.

³¹ Collected Plays of W B Yeats. p. 179.

women. Even a goddess has to look frightened, be full of unexpected moods and unexplained presentiments

The sorrows that were predicted happen in a way that justifies the legend. In fact, the destruction of the Red Branch comes from internal strife and Ulster will be at war with its neighbours who welcome the hosts that fled from Ulster. The motive can be interpreted as the rashness of a jealous old king who sees his own private person as the image of power and authority that must be revered at all times. The annunciation of Deirdre's arrival as the doom of the sons of Usna can be seen as the mythologised tragical explanation of the neutralizing of a powerful group within the Red Branch. Usna is the High King's Sister and her sons will be on a par with Conor's, or more outstanding if their feats make them soar above Emain as the three luminaries of the Red Branch.

Tragic end of a winter-spring war or ugly disposal of powerful opponents, whatever the original motives and factual source of the legend, the character Deirdre is always given a causal role in the tragedy by her mere existence.

The mythical images of the estranged hero, and the imperative calling of Mother Ireland are very strong rallying themes for the Irish nationalist. Such a legend is without doubt a "story will be told forever". In it lies the possibility of justifying by means of the past, the current misfortunes of a land that fails to become "a nation

once again", as each new attempt at self-determination is torn down by the English Parliament or the English Army.

DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS

Synge creates a heroine that is on the one hand deprived of the mythical aura of a goddess and without revealed knowledge, but at the same time strong and tall and powerful as a force of nature, like the woman who struggles to survive in the bleak west of Ireland. Instead of thin figures of mist and dream, Synge's Deirdre is a solid woman standing in front of tragedy on strong legs.

Synge's Conception of Historical Plays

The decision to make Deirdre a play about an unsophisticated young woman is also related to Synge's understanding of legendary material and the limits of its use in a realist age, for a realist stage. Besides his well known invective against 'Springdayish Cuchulanoïd drama', of symbolist hues and mists, he gives more insight to his attitude in the draft for an essay on Historical or Peasant Drama found in Notebook 33 and reproduced in C.W.IV. Appendix C, p. 393. Here he gives more precise reasons for his dissatisfaction with 'historical fiction'.

Unlike the Elizabethans who imagined the ancients as living contemporaries, Synge finds himself in a time awoken to 'the sense of historical truth' in Europe. This awareness makes historical fiction impossible and insincere if it attempts to use contemporary language for people known

to have been different. Nevertheless "it is possible to use a national tradition a century or more old which is still alive in the soul of the people see Walter Scott" (sic). This is the limit Synge sets for verisimilitude - there must be a common ground of experience, shared by the community and the author for that fiction to be tolerable:

It is impossible to use a legend < such > as Faust which from the outset defies historical reality - in the making up of such an absolutely modern work On stage this is so most of all. (CW IV, 394)

The drama that deals with old commonplace realities (drama of swords) which bears no relation to present life is for Synge a doomed art. The dramatist has to write based on the reality he has with the beauty he perceives, undecorated and unlocalised, including the ugliness of present life.³² Until the world is made beautiful again "the only possible beauty in drama is peasant drama, You cannot gather grapes of chimney pots". (CW IV, 439)

The more reason, according to these principles for writing a play on the old saga people using the peasant language he created for his other plays. The genesis of the creation of such a mode of expression here documented makes it the more apt vehicle for characters who embodied the nobility Synge could find in some peasant communities, in their stoical endurance of permanent hardship and in their joyfulness of spirit and language, in their primitive life.

³² One might be inclined to see in these lines something akin to expressionist drama, a school that had no particular representative in England.

With his knowledge of old Irish and his close contact with the modern utterance of the language of their forebears, Synge was sure he had the right medium for his 'saga people': restrained, stately but in touch with the realities of common life in rural communities.

Besides the refusal to reproduce a distanced, romantic view of legend characters, the treatment of this material in *Deirdre* raises more fundamental questions on the function of mythical material on stage. The plays and narrative versions of the Deirdre legend all repeat the received assumptions the legend carries. These are mainly the individuation of a threat to a community in the image of a woman - a mask of beauty for an unavoidable threat.

The archetypal image of Deirdre as a goddess who determines the life of men is also loaded with the motif of the sovereignty goddess. The sovereignty goddess can assume the mask of Maeve, Devorgila, Deirdre. The Elopements associated with these queens can be explained in the light of the struggle for power and domination, as the abduction of the beautiful queen represents the challenge of established power. These patterns of the legends related to the women referred to above can be projected on an even broader scale as the local rendering of the myths of Persephone and Hades or in the clash of "senex" and "adolescens amans" as the eternal struggle of Winter and Summer.

Creation of the Character

Undoubtedly it is the woman Deirdre who is the most important element in Synge's play. The reasons for focusing on the human quality of the character have to do with both Synge's aesthetic principles and his personal involvement with life. Molly gives a body and a voice to this artistic conception of the female. Maire O'Neill the Abbey actress and /or Molly Allgood the young working class catholic, are two facets of the feminine which brought to Synge's life the liveliness, exuberance and freshness he found in many peasant girls.³³ He wrote Pegeen Mike for her, and no doubt (even if less universally acknowledged) her own speech patterns were part of his linguistic material. For the Deirdre play he had plans different from his previous production. "I want to do something quiet and stately and restrained and I want you to act in it" he told her in a letter written in December 1906 while finishing the Playboy. Something quiet, but not airy or elevated. The matter of the play is different but the language used has much in common with that of the other plays.³⁴ The number of unique words or expressions occurring in Deirdre is similar to that in Shadow. Wall and Tinker's Wedding.

The wilfulness of Deirdre, her noble arrogance he found in Molly's young character who inspired the most lively lines of his female protagonists. Still there were

³³ When Molly came to the Abbey her sister Sara Allgood was already a promising actress, and the young sister used another family name as stage name, Maire O'Neill.

³⁴ Cf. Alan Bliss, 'A Synge Glossary' in Sunshine and the Moon's Delight. pp. 297-301.

contemporaries of Synge who could stand as models of the defiant young woman who takes destiny into her own hands. The reasons for the strength of Synge's female characters are often biographically explained by his strong attachment to his Mother, a woman of strong views and indomitable faith.³⁵

In his drafts and scenarios for this play Synge noted down the mood, movement of characters and the current that should underline each scene, as he had done for his previous plays. Early in the drafting of *Deirdre*, a scenario which Professor Saddlemyer dates as November 1907, includes the following note on the main current of each character, which no subsequent material seems to have altered.

Characters

Deirdre (very central and strong)

Naisi -----

Levarcham (wisdom)

Conor (Indifferent life) (CW IV, 370)

The strength and wisdom of the female characters stand out against the telling vacuity of a blank for Naisi and Conor's uncharacteristic mood. In these notes the male

³⁵ There are in the political scene individuals who provided similar images of independence courage and determination of purpose Maud Gonne, Ann Parnell, Countess Mackievics, Lady Gregory. Maud Gonne, could easily stand for such a Deirdre, as she was already in Synge's days the embodiment of Cathleen Ni Houlihan in the play of the same name which Yeats wrote for her. Her militant nationalism made a current public image and an emblem of her towering figure. Maud Gonne rallied around her large numbers to the nationalist cause, even though a considerable number of them, including Yeats were more enthralled by her charismatic, valkyrie-like figure than by her radical politics. Although a socialist in his political convictions Synge and Maud Gonne were declared opponents, he of her political tactics, she of his theatrical non-alignment.

roles seem a backcloth for the realisation of a female character, the three-dimensional character that aims at stannity. There are, of course currents and emotions associated to Naisi and Conchubar, but despite the innumerable drafts that acts and scenes of this play underwent, there seems to be no change of mind about the importance of Deirdre as motive and causal force of the play, as a woman who dreads the predicament of her too human nature - the coming of old age and the end of a love that "had no match". She stands out with her own values, not endorsing the male, warrior principles. In that same draft, the curtain scene for Act I on the exit of Naisi and Deirdre has the note "(PS) (Determination for love and life in spite of fate)".³⁶ Naisi is also more moved by personal reasons than in the other plays, by love and life than by the mere acting out the strictures of fate. But Naisi is still primarily an Ultonian warrior. In spite of his present happiness in Alban (Act II) the thought of Ireland might make him return to his homeland. In this same scenario, Deirdre comes too late to secure the brothers' promise not to return:

Is Naisi happy ? He is. Would anything take him away? Ireland might. Brothers come back, Deirdre tries to make them swear they will not leave Scotland. Fergus' horn. Scene with him. Strong climax in which Deirdre is overruled. They all go out for Ireland. Curtain (PS) (Inevitable sweeping into the current of life). (CW IV, 370)

In the later drafts Synge has the intention of making Deirdre change Naisi's mind in the opposite direction, as he

³⁶ CW IV. Appendix C, p. 369.

made an oath to stay in Alban. They will return to Ireland for personal reasons, not because legend or duty dictate their return.

Placed between the choice of richness in Emain or "a love will have no match", and later between the security of exile or the certainty of death, she always takes the ominous alternative, and in so doing, Deirdre is true to her nature. Since her death is foretold, she is determined to shape the terms in which it will occur to make it a story of eternal love and beauty. The girl who appears onstage carrying "a bag of nuts and twigs" for the fire is a wilful country lass who has no wish to be constrained in more genteel surroundings:

Conchubor. [showing arrogance in spite of himself]. And it's that the way you're picking up the manners will fit you to be the Queen of Ulster?

Deirdre [made a little defiant by this tone]. I have no wish to be a queen. (CW IV, 191)

It is abhorrent to her nature to marry Conchubor, in spite of all the riches he bestows on her. Jewels, rich dresses, mats and hangings, silver skillets and golden cups are fit for her character but she will down all these riches only when the time is come for her choice to be made. She is not a mere beauty fit for the couch of a king, she will soon discover she is a queen in her own right.

From wilful young girl Deirdre will assume the stature of a queen when she feels the threat of Conchubor's preparation to receive her. The first crux of the play is

the determined opposition to Conchubor's will in Act One. In none of the other plays is Deirdre put face to face with the king at this stage, to tell him plainly that his offer to be her comrade and "stand between <her> and the great troubles are foretold" is summarily refused:

Deirdre. I will not be your queen in Emain when it is my pleasure to be having my freedom on the edges of the hills. (CW IV, 195)

Her opposition to Conchubor does nothing but make him more firm in his resolve; pleading, clinging to him as the stage directions instruct gets her no respite. Asking Lavarcham for help proves useless. At this moment Nature comes to her mind as the only protection from fate - the safety of the hills and the elements, which the enforced seclusion had made her closer companions. There alone can she find help. The stormy night will bring to her doorstep the needed rescue, and she will prepare for the occasion:

Deirdre. Are the stepping stones flooding Lavarcham? Will the night be stormy in the hills?

Lavarcham. [Looking at her curiously]. The stepping stones are flooding surely, and the night will be the worst I'm thinking we've seen these years gone by.

Deirdre. [tearing open the press and pulling out clothes and tapestries]. Lay these mats and hangings by the windows, and at the tables for our feet, and take out the skilllets of silver, and the golden cups we have, and our two flasks of wine.

Lavarcham. What ails you?

Deirdre. [gathering up a dress]. Lay them out quickly; I'm going into the room to put on the rich dresses and jewels have been sent from Emain. (CW IV, 199)

Synge noted down for this act (Determination for love and life in spite of fate) as the psychological underlying current.³⁷ In some of the earliest extant plans of scenes and related emotions Synge put "Deirdre character" as the stronger element characterising the scene between Conchubor and Deirdre. The following scene of Dairdre and the women has no particular notes in the right hand column, it is just a pressing together of events to lead to the following love scene with Deirdre and Naisi.

Deirdre & women short Women & Sons of Uisne strong	} scene
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Love scene Deirdre and Naisi	defiance of destiny welcome to destruction (CW IV, 370)
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Yet it is in this short half scene that Dairdre's first and most defiant statement is uttered. At this precise moment she is investing herself with the power of queens, to rule over her fate and the fate of men. Before she goes out into the inner room to down the robes of her chosen grandeur, she assumes publicly this choice. She orders the preparations for the ceremony and gives her startled servants the reason:

Deirdre [gathering her things together with an outburst of excitement]. I will dress like Emer in Dundegalga or Maeve in her house in Connaught. If Conchubar'll make me a queen I'll have the right of a queen who is a master, taking her own choice and making a stir to the edges of the sea Lay out our mats and hangings where I can stand this night and look about me. Lay out the

³⁷ CW IV, p. 369.

skins of the rams of Connaught and of the goats of the west. I'll put on my robes that are the richest for I will not be brought down to Emain as Cuchulain brings his horse to his yoke, or Conall Cearneach puts his shield upon his arm. And maybe from this day I will turn the men of Ireland like a wind blowing on the heath. (CW IV, 199)

Lavarcham recognises her inner strength and does not defy her; she is seen as a queen not by birth or marriage, but by her innate authority:³⁸

Lavarcham. Hang that by the window. That should please her surely. ... When all's said it's her like will be the master till the ends of time. (CW IV, 201)

For all his moonish irreverence, there is a queen waiting for Naisi when he is in the mood to defy all powers. Her appearance will show that her transformation has been completed. Unlike the other plays, the young hero is sobered by the realisation he is in Conchubor's house. As he decides to leave and search for the night's pleasure in another little cabin between the ashtree and the rocks, he receives his summons, "... Do not leave me, Naisi, I am Deirdre of the Sorrows". (CW IV, 207)

It is in Synge's ironic style that such important moments should be played visually and kinetically using silence and the image of entering the scene or leaving it as a marker of the turning point.

The moment Bartley stands at the door in silence, waiting for the blessing his mother will fail to give in Riders to the Sea is the turning point in that short play

³⁸ Cf. Nicholas Grene, Synge A Critical Study of the Plays. p. 164.

and the point of no return in the larger tragedy of Maurys's struggle with the devouring sea. His mother's silence is the sign that sends Bartley to his death. When Deirdre calls Naisi we are similarly aware of doom but also of choice, the will to live, determination for love above death. It is a queen who calls Naisi, and because of that she is obeyed by Naisi, his brothers and Lavarcham:

[Deirdre comes in on left royally dressed and very beautiful. She stands for a moment, and then as the door opens she calls softly.]

Deirdra. Naisi. . . . Do not leave me Naisi, I am Deirdra of the Sorrows.

Naisi. [transfixed with amazement]. And it is you who go around in the woods, making the thrushes bear a grudge against the heavens for the sweetness of your voice?

Deirdra. It is with me you've spoken surely. [To Lavarcham and Old Woman.] Take Ainnle and Ardan, these two princes, into the little hut where we eat, and serve them with what is best and sweetest. I have many things for Naisi only.

Lavarcham. [overawed by her tone]. I will do it, and I ask their pardon I have fooled them here.

Deirdra [to Ainnle and Ardan]. Do not take it badly, that I am asking you to walk into our hut for a little. You will have a supper that is cooked by the cook of Conchubar, Lavarcham will tell you stories of Maave and Nessa and Rogh.

Ainnle . We'll ask Lavarcham to tell us stories of yourself, and with that that we'll be well pleased to be doing your wish. (CW IV, 207)

In typescript 'H' Synge had added a description to Deirdre's entrance "her excitement turned into a sort of dignity which is new and surprising to herself".³⁹ She is

³⁹ CW IV, p. 206, note 3.

recognising her full personality, expanding with excitement and pleasure.

Deirdre's will now rules the play, the development of plot, the location, even the set design. The play has some modernist touches in this clear assumption of a role which points towards Pirandello, and also on the determination of character to shape the action. Where it goes against any modernist pattern or maybe beyond it (CW If Synge's belief that the independence of women is concurrent with a more civilized society is to be trusted), is in the fact that the protagonist is a female:

Deirdre. [Sitting in the high chair in the centre for the first time]. Come to this stool, Naisi. [Pointing to the stool.] if it's low itself the High King would sooner be on it this night, than on the throne of Emain Macha. (CW IV, 207)

This feminine assertiveness would be considered "typical of the English" by Strindberg as he finds English society to be dominated by patriarchy. He does not seem to make any separation as far as colonies or dominions are concerned and finds its democratic stance to be an effeminate trait, which does nothing but numb the resolution and character of masculinity, and the progress of civilization and art.⁴⁰

As Deirdre assumes her role she has to win Naisi, his love, his determination and his defiance of fate in his renunciation of obedience to the king.

⁴⁰ From a letter from Strindberg to Nietzsche; no further reference available.

The sudden urgency of the decision is one of the moving levers of this action. Pressed by his age and solitude Conchubor is determined to have Dairdre on his throne without delay. The young ones also find the time is short to achieve all they expect from life.

For Naisi the choice is between his heroic promise as a warrior and fleeing with Dairdre. In an undated draft Synge makes Naisi expand on his choices:

Naisi. ... There isn't many'd have the heart to say this to your like maybe but I and my two brothers aren't lives that any'd do well to be casting away. Isn't it a short space only Dairdra < we > have to be young and triumphant and brave? (CW IV, 208, n 6)

In the final version this concern of Naisi's is expressed as a continuation to Dairdra's proposal:

Dairdra. ... [she looks up at him] ... for it's a sweet life you and I could have Naisi. ... It should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest if it's for a short space only.

Naisi [very distressed]. And we've a short space only to be triumphant and brave. (CW IV, 209)

The destiny of a warrior is to be "triumphant and brave". Naisi expects to achieve this within his society. Dairdra's appeal will operate gradually on his resolve. Her words entreating Naisi to save her from life in Emain follow a progression of intensity and determination punctuated by stage-directions. He should not leave her to an old man, then "[More quickly]" she will not go even if the price to pay is "silence and a near death". Dairdra is prepared to face all adversity as long as she achieves her own

greatness, derived from her will and not from submission.

To make this statement she separates herself from Naisi:

...[She stands up and walks away from him.] I'm a long while in the woods with my own self, and I'm in little dread of death, and it earned with richness would make the sun red with envy and he going up the heavens, and the moon pale and lonesome and she wasting away. (CW IV, 211)

Her moving away from Naisi allows space for the grandeur of the metaphor to operate on him. It is this greatness and the courage to achieve it that will unite the young lovers, as Deirdre demystifies the great dangers impending upon them as the mere common lot of humanity. United by common fate, they must find support in each other:

...[She comes to him and puts her hands on his shoulders.] Isn't it a small thing is foretold about the ruin of ourselves, Naisi, when all men have age coming and great ruin in the end?

Naisi. Yet it's a poor thing it's I should bring you to a tale of blood, and broken bodies and the filth of the grave. ... Wouldn't we do well to wait, Deirdre, and I each twilight meeting you on the side of the hills?(CW IV, 211)

This conciliatory move is rejected by Naisi himself when he realizes that their separation is imminent. At the prospect of losing Deirdre definitely he grows defiant of all rules and authority. Deirdre checks his resolve by repeating the question he had put to her before. The lovers resent the tragic end brought to the other by their choice rather than their own:

Deirdre. ... Won't I be in great dread to bring you to destruction, Naisi, and you so happy and young?

Naisi. Are you thinking I'd go on living after this night Deirdre, and you with Conchubor in Emain? (CW IV, 211)

Ainnle is called to join the two young lovers under the auspices of the elements, the sun, the moon and the earth. It should be noted here how Synge reached the final form of this curtain line.

As Professor Saddlemyer notes, 'Originally Synge closed the Act without bringing Ainnle and Ardan back on stage: "I went out hunting this morning and I have won yourself Deirdre the crown of conquest of the world. [they go out]"' (CW IV, 214). There is a considerable change of weight and focus in the scene. In the rejected version, Naisi the hunter warrior is allowed to exult on the value of his catch. The hunter who would no longer hunt hares has won a much more valuable trophy. However high the praise, it is in a tone discordant with the situation in the final version. Here the current is the image of two lovers brought together by a decision to defy authority and augury, in which Deirdre is the moving force. In this case as in others where a comparison of different versions can be made, there is a clear case of evolution, a development of a female autonomy and supremacy in some cases, as the search for an equitable relation between partners.

Synge's Manipulation of the Legend

Synge, like all other authors manipulates his source material in ways that express his own *weltanschauung*. In this act Deirdre is defined as a woman who assumes her individuality. Her regal nature comes from assuming her own role in life. Refusing the throne of Emain Macha, she

becomes nonetheless a queen, not an emblem of sovereignty but a sovereign. Dairdre also loses her premonitions and supernatural knowledge. The image of the young warrior expressed by the colours "black as the raven", "white as the snow", "red as blood", appear not in a vision or dream, but as product of her own hands. It would be probably far-fetched to develop the point that Dairdre is the creator of her men, husband and brothers, but it is fair to say that Naisi is no common "miles gloriosus".

Naisi surpasses all his peers in excellence in his warrior renown; in this play he ceases to be only a warrior type, assuming in a original way the humanity of the lover. He has to chose between two loyalties, to his king and to his love, these being two external collocations of an inner conflict. The couple that leaves for Alba create new values unto themselves, which will be put to the test in Act II. In all versions of the legend Dairdre and Naisi run away to Alba to live the love that would be impossible in Ireland. In the second Act Synge's Dairdre will shape the course of events, clearly opposing the pattern of other versions.

Living happily for seven years in Alba, enjoying wealth, status and progeny, the exiles are visited by Lavarcham and Fergus. Entreated to return to Emain with offers of peace from Conchubor, Naisi will refuse. In other versions and in earlier drafts of this play, Naisi makes an oath not to return. In the final version the oath disappears. Lavarcham urges Dairdre to make Naisi swear not

to go back to Emain, but by now Dairdre distrusts the power of oaths to stop the course of events.

The opening scene of Act Two is a conversation between Dairdre and Lavercham, in which the old nurse finds the young woman despondent. The exhortation to make Naisi promise not to return does not appease her anxiety. Independent women are challenged in their choices. Nora Burke contemplates the solitude of her loveless marriage in Shadow of the Glen and the probable solitude of any other marriage in that situation/ place. Dairdre also contemplates the succession of days but with the anxiety that they may finish too soon. This anxiety comes of living each day measuring its excellence and fearing its end. It is not caused by exile but by too high expectations from life. The impossibility of permanent happiness brings closer the grimness of death.

Alba is the "locus amenus" of this idyll but there are no moments of bliss to be witnessed. Those reported are all overshadowed by the sad recognition of what lies in store for the lovers. The "happy and sleepy queen" is almost overcome as she confides to Lavercham that the fear of the end of love is not extrinsic as the loss of the lover but something of a loss in Dairdre herself. "[With distress.] ... It's well you know it's this day I'm dreading seven years" (CW IV, 219). Her fear finds no comfort in new places or new company. Dairdre's climax in this scene is the realization that there is nowhere to hide when you try to run away from time:

Deirdre. I've dread going or staying, Lavarcham. It's lonesome this place having happiness like ours till I'm asking each day will this day match yesterday and will tomorrow take a good place beside the same day in the year that's gone and wondering all times is it a game worth playing, living on until you're dried and old and our joy is gone forever. (CW IV, 219)

The place where they live happily does not prevent the fear of loss from sticking to her soul like a wet mist, unseizable but present.

Old Women and Madmen: Grotesque Wisdom

Deirdre is not comforted by Lavarcham's suggestions of a "aurea mediocritas" contentment with the pleasures of old age. The character Lavarcham offers in Notebook 47 other remedies for what she diagnoses as conjugal weariness:

L. And what things is it all you now [she pauses and looks at her inquiringly then with a sort of insinuation]. Seven years is a long time with one man. Maybe there'll be better men in Emain Macha. I was great that way and I the age of you!

D. [with sad amusement]. If anything harmed Naisi it isn't I would live after him. (CW IV, 218, n 7)

Syngé chooses to remove this insinuation here given to Lavarcham. He will make use of it later, in Owen's dismal attempt to win Deirdre. This choice can be seen as a 'civilizing' attempt, containing the grotesque excess that would clash with the idea of wise old woman as well as interfere with the concentration of emotion and with the unity of mood and action of this play. Mary Byrne the old woman in Tinker's Wedding can easily refer to her sexual mores as she is presenting the values of her society in opposition to those Sara Casey wants to endorse by getting

married. In Deirdre the suggestion would not be understood as a further instance of the independence of women who could change companions within a socially accepted form. It would rather divert the attention from Deirdre's climatic speech. (CW IV, 218, n 6)

Deirdre has not come to the end of this love, she only lives in fear of its loss. In Notebook 47 the author makes notes for a theme between Lavarcham and Deirdre which will be toned down and emptied of its grotesque challenge to current views of female decency, which by now, after the cases of Shadow and Playboy had been made amply explicit by the public.

The mention of open admission of female promiscuity is given to Owen. Lavarcham is only allowed a curt remark in the dialogue with Deirdre:

Lavarcham. ... [starting out with temper.] Yet there's more men than Naisi in it, and maybe I was a big fool thinking his dangers, and this day, would fill you up with dread.

Deirdre [sharply]. Let you end such talk is a fool's only, when it's well you know if a thing harmed Naisi it isn't I would live after him. (CW IV, 219)

Lavarcham's more veiled remark to which Synge had added the stage direction "with reproaches that she does not mean" is bitterly cut short by Deirdre (CW IV, 218, n 2). The explicitness of the old woman's remark was reduced in the same measure that Deirdre's reply was strengthened. This inverse proportion stresses the note of Deirdre's moral rectitude as far as contemporary expectations of female decency were concerned. An example of a virtuous woman to

which Deirdre could compare is Emer of the six graces as Synge mentioned in the review of Cuchulain of Muirtheanne.⁴¹

Lavarcham has reached her old age through her wisdom and activity: she is sometimes known to be some sort of druidess or traveller. She keeps the traits of a wise woman, but her wisdom comes from experience rather than from otherworldly sources. Lavarcham is easily seen as the prototype of the active woman, the traditional gossip, who comes in advance of both Owen and Fergus, to warn of the dangers coming upon Deirdre and Naisi. As she does not find an active response to her advice, Lavarcham reproaches the young woman for the suffering she is causing her, in a lament which Synge noted to be her climax.⁴²

In Act Two Deirdre is given advice by the old woman, Owen the fool and Fergus, the most deceived of all witless messengers.

The warnings of Owen include all the desperate consciousness of the fool who loves his lady in vain, and despairs. He comes from Ulster brought by "The full moon I'm thinking and it squeezing the crack of my skull. Was there ever a man crossed nine waves after a fool's wife and he not away in his head?" (CW IV, 221)

The philosophy of Owen's comment on Naisi and Conchubor calls for comparison with that of the Nature's children,

⁴¹ CW II, p. 369.

⁴² CW IV, p. 220, note 3.

like the Tramp in Shadow. Christy, the Douls, the tinkers, all those who in the comedies take to the roads. It is said that Deirdre is a tragedy because the hope of happiness in Nature, the promise that the final exit scenes of the comedies sustain, is here followed to the tragic realization that there is nowhere to hide from oneself.

There is no comic relief in this tragedy: the inexorable movement of time brings closer the death foretold. The attitude of the characters towards the imminent horrors is of a mournful acceptance but with an intimate expectation that it may be avoided.

Owen maps out in very crude terms the logical development of Deirdre's fears. The love that makes seven years seem a "short space" to Deirdre is an anachronism to Owen, "are you well pleased that length with the same man snorting next you at the dawn of day?" (CW IV, 223). All the force of the grotesque image of physical decay and decay of a relationship is here given in harder colours than Deirdre pictured for herself, as it is given added strength by the hopelessness of his passion:

Owen [sharply]. Well go take your choice. Stay here and rot with Naisi or go to Conchubor in Emain. Conchubor's a swelling belly, and eyes falling down from his shining crown, Naisi should be stale and weary; yet there are many roads, Deirdre [he goes towards her], and I tell you I'd liefer be bleaching in a bog-hole than living without a touch of kindness from your eyes and voice. It's a poor thing to be so lonesome you'd squeeze kisses from a cur dog's nose. (CW IV, 223)

The realization that Deirdre is absolute for Naisi and will not confide to him her anxieties brings Owen to the

recollection of his father's untimely death in a fight with Naisi. Death was the only way in which Owen's father could avoid the image of old age which Lavarchan, once his companion now offers, of someone who would "scare a raven from a carcass on a hill". Animal similes abound in his speech, mixed together with images of decay and of the old queens:

Owen [with a burst of rage]. It's Naisi, Naisi is it? Then I tell you you'll have great sport seeing Naisi getting a harshness in his two sheep's eyes and he looking on yourself. ... [With a sad cry that brings dignity to his voice.] Queens get old Deirdre, with their white and long arms going from them, and their backs hooping. I tell you it's a poor thing to see a queen's nose reaching down to scrape her chin. (CW IV, 223-225)

Owen as a fool brings in the grotesque image of death, and of life as well. The others look at death in terms of escape, horror, noble struggle against unequal odds. It is Owen who will call in the less poetic images of death, destruction, decomposition. He has been living in the bogs, alone among bad weather, animals and a cold moon.

Owen leaves Deirdre giving omens in riddles, which reinforce her despondency.

The following scenes are those in which Synge moved furthest away from the sources altering not only attitudes towards Deirdre but also action itself.

The "sureties" that Fergus brings from Conchubor with the signs of all the other heroes do not impress either Deirdre or Naisi. He reaches them, however by spelling out the fear of a betraying look that might show their love is

ending, which both separately admit to have. By making Deirdre overhear Naisi's avowal, her fear materialises. It is Fergus who makes the exiles return, but ironically he is not aware of the reasons that make them accept his offer. They do not go in search of the pardon and loyalty of Conchubor's word, or the safety enjoyed in the company of comrades, eluding memories of a love which lost its passion:

[Deirdre comes out of tent with a horn of wine. She catches the beginning of Naisi's speech and stops with stony wonder.]

Naisi [very thoughtfully]. I'll not tell you a lie. There have been days a while past when I've been throwing a line for salmon, or watching for the run of hares, that I've had a dread upon me a day'd come I'd weary or her voice [very slowly] ... and Deirdre'd see I'd wearied.

Fergus [sympathetic but triumphant]. I knew it, Naisi. ... And take my word Deirdre's seen your dread and she'll have no peace from this out in the woods.

Naisi [with confidence]. She's not seen it. ... Deirdre's no thought of getting old or wearied, it's that puts wonder in her ways, and she with spirits would keep bravery and laughter in a town with plague.

[Deirdre drops the horn of wine and crouches down where she is.] (CW IV, 227-229)

Fergus leaves the scene with a no for an answer. His arguments did not move Naisi to leave. Again it is not in the dialogue itself that is materialised the evolution of the plot and its separation from the traditional story. It is a part of that scene, the stage direction of a mere silent witnessing. It is not what Fergus says that matters, but the fact that his presence made the lovers share the fears they would most wish to hide from each other. The silent presence of Deirdre overhearing the conversation is

the turning point of the play, the moment it becomes the tragedy of Dairdra, the story as she will have it told.

Dairdre's Choice

In Act One after Conchubor leaves, Dairdre shows Naisi there is no way left for them but to leave, if they want to be true to their nature. Now the lovers are set against a choice of similar importance but of more sombre tones. They are faced with the natural evolution of their love, and must chose the way their story should be told.

By now the audience has been given separate statements from Dairdre and Naisi about their innermost fears. At this point their choice is mutual, but it is Dairdre who urges forward to a quick end. Her arguments follow the inexorable movement of time bringing them closer to the death foretold, even if this time through their own path.

The plight of the young couple is tragic yet Synge contains it within human proportions. The author here manipulates the plot so as to break the circularity of the myth. Before Owen and Fergus, the harbingers of doom, arrive the audience is made clearly aware of the reasons that will cause Dairdre and Naisi to return to Emain and to a certain death. As they are aware that there is no escape from the weltering effect of time, the couple decides to join again the society from which they had escaped, "to rejoin the familiar world of men (which means to re-enter history)", in Moore's words. The loss of confidence in each other gives a clear image of the decline of love which both

struggle to avoid but find inevitable. This choice, like all tragic choices, is no choice at all: it is a progress into destruction or tragic freeing from intolerable constraints:

So, as Synge is at pains to make clear, they do not go because Fergus convinces them that Conchubor has a change of heart; they go because they have to.⁴³

Their love found a sympathetic environment in the hills and forests of Alban, but when fear undermines the lovers's inner strength, nature loses its protective power. Deirdre's argument is a sequence of balanced alternate conjunctions of absence of location and a sense of running out of time:

There's no place to stay always (...) .It's a long time we've had, but the end has come surely... There's no safe place, Naisi, on the ridge of the world. (...). It's this hour we're between the day-time and a night where there is sleep for ever ... (CW IV, 231)

To all these arguments Naisi protests his commitment to move forward, to illude the passing of time, but Deirdre's argument meets his inner fear. His manly courage pulls him to external defiance of the threat, his interiorisation of doom needs the courage to look for a certain death, before love grows cold between them. This to him is the ultimate death:

Deirdre - [shaking her head slowly] There are many ways to wither love as there are stars in a night of Samhain, but there is no way to keep life or love with it a short space only. ... It's for

⁴³ Cf. John Rees Moore, 'Synge's Deirdre and the Sorrows of Mortality' in *Sunshine and the Moon's Delight*, edited by S B Bushrui, Gerrards Cross Colin Smythe, 1972, (1979), p. 100.

that there's nothing lonesome like a love is watching out the time most lovers do be sleeping. ... It's for that we're setting out for Emain Macha when the tide turns on the sand.

Naisi - [giving in]. You're right maybe. ... It should be a poor thing to see great lovers and they sleepy and old. (CW IV, 233)

It is the couple who decides to return; as Dairdra had answered to Owen and Fergus, she would go "where Naisi chooses", leaving "the choice to Naisi". Obviously the realization that the time has come for them to go was heavier on Dairdra, as examined above. Nonetheless Naisi reasserts their position; "I and Dairdra have chosen, we will go back with Fergus", in the face of Owen's despair at their decision to leave for Ulster (CW IV, 235). The tragedy is Dairdra's but the plight is of the couple who now have only to chose the terms of their death.

For the brothers who all this time lived with the runaway couple as servants in a court, this decision is hard to accept. They oppose their brother's decision and it is their queen who must restore peace among them:

Ardan. Why are you going?

Dairdra [to both of them and the others]. It is my wish. ... It may be I will not have Naisi growing an old man in Alban with an old woman at his side, and young girls pointing out and saying 'that is Dairdra and Naisi, had great beauty in their youth'. ... It may be we do well to put a sharp end to the day is brave and glorious, as our fathers put a sharp end to the days of the kings of Ireland, ... or that I'm wishing to set foot on Slieve Fuadh where I was running one time and leaping the streams [to Lavarcham], and that I'd be well pleased to see our little apple-trees Lavarcham, behind our cabin on the hill, or that I've learned Fergus, it's a lonesome thing to be away from Ireland always. (CW IV, 237)

There is no simple answer to Ardan's question. The options Deirdre offers are not in obedience to fate, but a series of personal choices. Synge refuses to offer a preordained logic and causality to Deirdre's choice, offering in lieu of the mythical accomplishment of fate the assumption of one's destiny. Even for such a self-assertive character as Deirdre, the statement of individual will, "my wish", sounds too imperious, and therefore has to be qualified by a number of ancillary reasons, some of them only conjectural. The reasons given at the end of the second act are addressed to the expectations of her interlocutors. To the brothers, her wish to keep the image of the couple as that of permanent beauty, and of their stay in Alban as "brave and glorious", to the old nurse the longing for Slieve Fuadh where they lived happily Deirdre's childhood days, and to Fergus she makes a sign of having accepted his own arguments of feeling homesick. From all these hypotheses she conceals the one that is most central to her choice: her resolution not to see her love wither and die.

Maxwell sees Synge's work as a departure from the legend, whilst incorporating the prophecy "It is not developed as in the legend, where magic and protents assist it to its fulfillment. Here humans alone determine the outcome of love."⁴⁴ Nicholas Grene rounds up his appreciation of Deirdre's motives to go back to Ulster in a comment that transports the whole issue into a further

⁴⁴ D E S Maxwell, *Modern Irish Drama 1891-1980*, Cambridge, CUP, 1984, pp. 56, 57.

remove from reality/ credibility. He already finds the play unsuccessful, and the choice to go back "a literary one", since life expectancy should be under thirty. It is however difficult to find in this play characters with the awareness to see themselves as literary constructions.

Deirdre is a woman who refuses the wealth and splendour of Emain to have " her freedom on the edge of the hills". One can find Deirdre possessed of indomitable courage, willfulness, passionate feelings and capacity of expression and persuasion. Omens and prophecies were traits of the heroine kept in the earlier drafts of the play, still following closely the sources, but were removed from the present Deirdre in later drafts. It is therefore plausible that making literary choices about her life would not be within the realm of Deirdre's capacities. In these circumstances the 'literary choice' has to be that of the author, the only entity who can rightly be expected to carry this epithet. There is no reason to believe that Synge was in the possession of this information about the life expectancy of the saga people. As there are characters in the play that are "about sixty", as Conchubor and Fergus, and Lavarcham is "about fifty", Lavarcham tries to persuade Deirdre to leave Emain and Conchubor because she still has "a score of woman's years in store for" her, it can therefore be taken as plausible that the image of a woman dying in her late twenties to be that of a person in her youth.

Deirdre's farewell to Alban concentrates all the anxiety and sense of impending tragedy. Traditionally these *lais* were the most popular parts of the legend. They are descriptive, visual pieces of narrative. All the places associated with their happiness in Alban are invoked, Woods of Cuan, Glen Laid, Glen Massin, Glen Arcan, spreading as it were the sadness of leave-taking through the land. In the final version a more dramatic solution is reached. Now alone, Deirdre has no need of rationalising such pain and anxiety which had to be concealed till now. She addresses the woods as an intimate friend to whom as a sign of farewell she makes her most intimate confidence. The end of her happy days in Alban are come, she fears of all her days in fact. Owen's death, making a grave of the place she has till now associated with the brightest happiness, gives her the full image of death, not just an heroic escape but "... a poor untidy thing, though it's a queen that dies."

Act Three differs from the sources and its contemporary versions in the fact that it presents strong personal clashes and a total absence of magical intervention.

Although there are inconsistencies throughout the play which presumably would disappear with further revision by the author, what he has left us is not the realm of future hypothesis for the final text, but an already large quantity of drafts and notes through which the evolution of the characters can be followed. Even after many corrections Synge was often not satisfied with his solutions to some scenes. To prove this are the number of question marks in

blue pencil, apposited to the text. In this play many of the last drafts still bear this mark for further revision. According to Prof. Saddlemyer's annotation, in Act One there are two, in Act Two, the most re-written of all, six and in Act Three, there were still eleven question marks to tackle.

The visual presence of the referent in images of death is one of the points often revised. The image of the grave, the instrument of Deirdre's death and Emain burning are elements of the dramatic and theatrical text to which Synge paid renewed attention, and which differ in detail and ideological pattern from his source.

In Lady Gregory's version as in the primitive legend, the prophecy gives Deirdre "a little grave apart". In the end, as she laments the loss of the three brothers, Deirdre asks the gravedigger:

O young man, digging the new grave, do not make
the grave narrow; I will be with them in the
grave, making lamentations and ochemes!⁴⁵

The same inconsistency persists in Synge's play, the reference to the "little grave" for Deirdre in the first instance together with the calling of attention to the common grave for Deirdre, Naisi and the men who die for love of her. It is an image which recurs throughout the play. Probably this is not an inconsistency which would necessarily suffer emendation had Synge lived longer, as Toni O'Brien Johnson believes:

Doubtless, had the play been completed, Deirdre's
grave apart in the first act would have been

⁴⁵ In *Cuchulain of Muirbhenn*, p. 113.

synchronized with the final reality of a shared grave.⁴⁴

It is obvious that Synge's play diverges here from the primitive original of a delay of a year between the death of both lovers, as it will also refuse the adulcorated romantic version of Deirdre dying of 'broken heart strings'. But this does not change the terms of the prophecy. Deirdre does not change the prophecy itself, but rather her role in it. We do not have to deal here with a new prophecy, but with the transformation of the object of the prophecy into its subject. As in other realms more directly political, this is the case of subverting a structure rather than discarding it utterly or reproducing it with external "folkloric" changes and adaptations whilst preserving its original ideological value.

Therefore the prophecy has to be reproduced in the exact canonic words as it was done *ab initio* by the druid, while the play goes on to materialise the heroine's choice of dying with her companions. This is the natural follow-up of Deirdre's premonition "... And it's in the quiet woods I've seen them digging our grave, throwing out the clay on leaves are bright and withered", offering Deirdre the physical image of beyond-the-tomb unity with Naisi. (CW IV, 231)

⁴⁴ Johnson, p. 91.

To Rave and Rend before the Grave

The discovery of the grave on stage in Act three has been prepared for by references in the previous acts, by Deirdre as mentioned above and by Owen who in his despair of unrequited love chooses the privilege of being the first to die for Deirdre: "Dead men, dead men, men who'll die for Deirdre's beauty, I'll be before you in the grave!" (CW IV, 235). In an undated fragment Synge noted on the finding of the grave "make important" (CW IV, 248).

Just like the embroidered figures in Deirdre's tapestry as metaphor for the image of Naisi, a physical, untranscendent way of bringing in the image and fears of the grave have its referent physically brought on stage. The two other visual referents of death are the instruments of Deirdre's death and the invocations of the destruction of Emain by fire.

The first sight of the grave makes Naisi aware of the plots Conchubor has laid out which will bring his death and that of his brothers, who by now have been severed from the couple. Critics tend at this point to blame Dairdre's anxiety for the development of the next events, as she begs Naisi to run away and protect her. There is another point to be made earlier concerning Naisi's despondency at the sight of the grave. His musing about Deirdre's life after his death startles her. This would be the final giving in to fate which she has always resisted. He feels the separation from his brothers as an unfit way to die, "Isn't it a hard thing that we three who have conquered many a

not die together?" To Deirdre it is rather the contemplation of the end of their days:

Deirdre [sinking down] And isn't it a hard thing that you and I are this place by our open grave, though none have lived had happiness like ours those days in Alban that went by so quick. (CW IV, 249)

She sees her life totally united to Naisi's in such a way that life after him is an impossibility. To all his visions of her life without him, Deirdre protests she will not see that day, "I'll not be here to know if that is true", "I'll not be here", "Let you not be saying things are worse than death". As Naisi compounds her life with images of Spring and new love as a natural development of events, Deirdre proposes the reverse situation to him, sinking him deeper in despair:

Naisi[a little recklessly]. I've one word left. ... If a day comes in the west that the larks are cocking their crests on the edge of the clouds, and the cuckoos making a stir, and there's a man you'd fancy, let you not be thinking that day, I'd be well pleased you'd go on keening always.

Deirdre[half-surprised, turning to look at him]. And if it was I that died, Naisi, would you take another woman to fill up my place?

Naisi[very mournfully]. It's little I know. ... Saving only that it's a hard and bitter thing leaving the earth, and a worse and harder thing leaving yourself alone and desolate to be making lamentation on its face always. (CW IV, 251)

Here the stronger character and determination of Deirdre come out. The theme of togetherness, defiance of death as final barrier between two lovers is made stronger in her awareness of imminent death:

Deirdre. I'll die when you do Naisi. I'd not have come from Alban but I knew I'd be along with

you in Emsin, and you living or dead. ... Yet this night it's strange and distant talk you're making only. (CW IV, 251)

Till the moment Conchubor comes in Deirdre has been reassuring Naisi of the reasons why they are there facing the open grave. All sense of union in death has deserted him. The image of the open grave brings to Naisi the feeling of " a great space between two friends that love". In truly romantic rapture Deirdre offers the opposite view of the grave, the final union, "... maybe it's that grave when it's closed will make us one forever ..." (CW IV, 251)

Her spirits are high till Naisi has to leave her. She attempts to change the course of events by proposing friendship to Conchubor. But the dice had long been cast in the plot devised by the old man.

Naisi's gloomier vision of death can be seen to be autobiographical musings of the permanently ailing Synge. The recurrent postponements of his marriage plans were usually caused by his ill-health. When writing his final drafts of the play, he may have been more aware of imminent death than ever before.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Before going to the Elpis Nursing home where he came to die, Synge showed his nephew where he kept his papers, something he had not done before

He arranged things about the room silently, then said that he would like to show me where he had left his papers. We went upstairs to his bedroom. He opened the old painted wardrobe and showed me where he kept his manuscripts and letters. Everything we went through under the shadow of his unspoken belief that he would never handle them again.

Synge is making here apparent two different attitudes towards death, which are no more than two attitudes towards life. While remaining together seems to be Deirdre's main objective, and therefore separation the worst threat, to Naisi the point is to die honourably, i.e., fighting beside his brothers, as he had lived, and the worst pain becomes the thought of leaving Deirdre alone and unprotected.

The dialogue with Conchubor brings Deirdre to her last attempt to redress the pattern of the legend searching for a common ground of understanding between the two antagonists. Although the odds are very much against any hope of a peaceful settlement, there is at the moment Deirdre makes a plea for a new friendship based on the levelling power of the sight of the grave, a glimpse of hope and belief in the power of humanity:

Deirdre. I'll say so near that grave we seem
 three lonesome people, and by a new made grave
 there's no man will keep brooding on a woman's
 lips, or on the man he hates. It's not long till
 your own grave will be dug in Emain and you'd go
 down to it more easy if you'd let call Ainnle and
 Ardan, the way we'd have a supper all together,
 and fill that grave, and you'll be well pleased
 from this out having four new friends the like of
 us in Emain.

Conchubor [looking at her for a moment]. That's
 the first friendly word I've heard you speaking,
 ... (CW IV, 253)

As Conchubor is almost moved to make peace with Naisi, the treason that he had unrelentingly plotted takes its course.

It is the death call from Ainnle that will pull the couple apart. The "hardness of death" has come between

them. The better proof of Deirdre's realization is the way in which Naisi reacts to her words. Now that death is visible to them not through images, but as impending reality, the grave becomes a safety, no longer a threat, and the only danger that of dying too late, to outlive their dream, surviving into a life of despair; to the very end Deirdre is consistent in her attitude:

Deirdre. We've had a dream, but this night has waked us surely. In a little while we've lived too long, Naisi, and isn't it a poor thing we would miss the safety of the grave, and we trampling its edge? (CW IV,255)

The words of Deirdre which will help Naisi meet his death have been often misinterpreted, as the ultimate "hypertrophied romanticism"⁴⁸ or defining Deirdre as "a predator, a monster".⁴⁹ It is not uncommon of Synge to change the perspective in a character, making the audience feel detached from a character with which it had identified before. But this is hardly the case here. Naisi has been torn by the images of loss of Deirdre, as he feels clearly that Conchubor's plot is to kill him to have Deirdre. He has to meet his own death, the accomplishment of his life, rather than die for Deirdre, or be killed as fugitives. Michael Begnal appraises the various critical opinions on the final scenes of the play in his essay on Deirdre of the Sorrows, giving a final appreciation of this moving scene which is more adequate and offers more insight into the motivations of the character:

⁴⁸ Thornton, p. 152.

⁴⁹ Skelton, p. 146.

Realizing that Naisi is torn between two courses of action, in essence she forces him to do what he knows is right, allowing him to retain his dignity and nobility in the face of death. Rather than acting irrationally or egoistically, she knows exactly what she is doing: "It was my words without pity gave Naisi a death will have no match until the ends of life and time" (CW IV 257). She is thinking of him, and not of herself, when she sends him out into the battle, and in this way she puts his needs before her own.⁵⁰

As he wisely observes, Deirdre's words after Naisi's death are not selfglorifying or mythologising, but rather centre on the loss of her lover in her long, dignified, lament.

It is at the sight of the grave that the couple will separate with death between them but with an unrelenting feeling of having lived their passion to its bitter end.

The apparent incongruence some critics find in Naisi's frantic subjunctive speech, "... if I went on living from this day ..." does not exist in terms of plot or development of the situation. The question "is it realistic?" is inappropriate at this stage. To prefer death instead of life at any price, is something both Deirdre and Naisi agree to be a better choice. Once they have put into words the end of their seven year old dream, they will effect it in a way that will tell of their story as they would like it to be told.

Deirdre has a recurring need to assure herself of the image she will leave of her story. That seems to be her

⁵⁰ Michael H. Segnal, 'Deirdre of the Sorrows' in A. J. M. Synge Literary Comparisons. E. A. Kopper Jr. ed., p. 93.

most pressing responsibility towards history, that her story will be told as one of great love and happiness. Helping Naisi in an exacting way to meet his death, she rebukes him for packing her together with "women that have loved are cruel only":

Deirdre[bitterly]. I'm well pleased there's no one this place to make a story that Naisi was a laughing-stock the night he died. (CW IV, 257)

Naisi leaves prepared to meet death, in the same raging despair as Owen in Act two. As Owen rushes out blaming those dead men that will bring Deirdre to her death, Naisi blames Deirdre and her cruelty for the destruction of the court, "mockery is in your eyes this night will spot the face of Emain with a plague of pitted graves." (CW IV, 257)

All the communicative verbal discourse has been used up. Instead of the melodramatic parting of the lovers, they find the coldness of bitter words more suited to the pain of loss and separation. Their only other means of communication is through death, no longer the verbal images and metaphors, but metonymic and referential. In other versions and even in previous drafts there is long reasoning and often elaborate steps to provide Deirdre with the means to take her life. Lady Gregory has Deirdre run to the seashore and there purchase a knife from a fisherman. Here it is Naisi who provides her with the means to join him in the grave, leaving behind his belt and cloak. In previous drafts (typescript 'I'), Naisi mentions his sword and knife, which he leaves behind to go and meet death bare-handed. In the final version he leaves holding a drawn sword. The

actual instrument of Deirdre's death is only referred to in the relevant scene, metaphorically. The knife which Deirdre holds up, close to the grave is "a little key to unlock the prison of Naisi". (CW IV, 269)

Unlike the other plays, there is comparatively little show of actual death in this play where five people meet their death, if compared to the display of bodies and other indices of death as in Riders. Shadow and even Playboy. Synge's earlier intention was to end the play in a "Rider-like" tone, with Deirdre dragging herself to the grave.⁵¹ But the final drafts eliminate the cruder practicalities of the young queen's death, making it into a long lament for the end of her lover.

The images of total destruction are brought to the scene visually by light cues, [a red glow seen behind the grave], and by references made by Deirdre and Lavarcham. The vision of destruction of Emain follows the pattern of grotesque mixture of animal and vegetation imagery of decay. As Lavarcham has been unable to stop Conchubor, she can foresee the result of his machination in an almost incantatory tone:

Lavarcham . . . , but I'll walk up now into your halls and I'll say [with a gesture]... it's here nettles will be growing, and beyond thistles and docks. I'll go into your High Chambers, where you've been figuring yourself stretching out your neck for the kisses of a queen of women, and I'll say it's here there'll be deer stirring, and goats scratching, and sheep, waking and coughing when there is a great wind from the north. (CW IV, 247)

⁵¹ CW IV, p. 256, note 4 (b).

The places associated with power will be covered with weeds, and the private chambers where dreams of lasciviousness were entertained will be windswept and roamed through by animals, deer, goats and sheep.

Deirdre, in a similar pattern sees the outcome of the destruction of Emain now set ablaze by Fergus as during the final scene, contrasting with the images of:

weasels and wild cats crying on a lonely wall
 where there were queens and armies, and red gold,
 the way there will be a story told of a ruined
 city, and a raving king and a woman will be young
 for ever. (CW IV, 267)

The "naked and bare" trees and the moon will naturally be associated with the white and coldness used to refer to the dead bodies of the three brothers.

The choice of metaphors and colours for the images of death follow a recognisable pattern. The sites of power, wealth and authority become a desolate waste land, echoing the destruction associated with the death of the fisher king. Those associated with the lower human appetites, the common denominator between man and beast, become windswept and roamed through by deer, goats and sheep, as in a retributing Dantean Inferno.

As the play comes to the end, Conchubor is dragged down by loss and defeat, as Deirdre rises to the final step of her progress. While Fergus tries to defend her "I have destroyed Emain, and now I'll guard you all times", Conchubor holds to his spurious military strength hoping it will win him Deirdre as it would a besieged citadel:

Deirdre. Do not raise a hand to touch me.

Conchubor. There are other hands to touch you. My fighters are set round in among the trees. . . . my whole armies are gathering. Rise up, Deirdre for you are mine surely. (CW IV, 265-267)

These are the last outbursts of strength by the high king who soon will find himself "out of [his] wits with Emain in flames, and Deirdre raving", and asking to be led away from the scene of his total defeat like an old man led by a servant.

The way Deirdre keens the loss of Naisi and faces her death, puts her a degree above the confrontation of cantankerous old warriors:

Deirdre [Stands up and sees the light from Emain]. Draw a little back with the squabbling of fools when I am broken up with misery. (CW IV, 267)

This elevation beyond the narrowly lived experience and the capacity to be divested of the accessory and circumstantial is probably what grants some of Deirdre's words this prophetic tone. She is able to see herself as accomplishing her design in life, and sorrow as the last step in a fulfilled life:

Deirdre [in a high and quiet tone]. 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. . . . [With a sort of triumph.] . . . It was the choice of lives we had in the clear woods and in the grave we're safe surely. . . . (CW IV, 267-269)

The fateful predictions about her life have been replaced by a sense of deep fulfillment and happiness- her power to move kings, to be chosen by wise Conchubor and

bravest Naisi "It was sorrows were foretold, but great joys were my share always" (CW IV, 269).

Deconstructing the Myth

The death of the young queen is a dignified and elevated confrontation of opposites. The liberties taken with the source material are here vindicated. In an undated typescript of the scene between Deirdre and Naisi, Synge tries to bring Owen's death forward closer to Deirdre's.⁵² This would provide an extension of the theme of equality of human beings before death. It might as well develop the unrequited love theme of the fool for the young queen, or stress the nothingness of Conchubor, who becomes a king "of dead men", as in the latter passages in Notebook 47.⁵³ As they remain as drafts and notes these can only serve as material to the study of the hypothetical character, as studied in the chapter on the fool.

The characters which Synge modifies in a more significant way are those of Conchubor and Deirdre, and these are the ones which have more importance in the present study. In terms of stress, Synge has shifted the mythical and national to the tragic and personal. In a maze of large social issues which could encompass the nationalist militancy, Synge had only space and breath for what he found

⁵² Naisi. It would be a good thing if all was done.

Deirdre. It would Naisi... I went and looked on Owen in the trees. Death should be a troubled nasty thing no matter who may die. CW IV, Appendix C, p. 392.

⁵³ cf. CW IV, pp. 392-3.

to be Irish and individual - that was his way of reaching the universal.

Conchubor is divested of political impact, unlike the other two plays studied. There are no reasons of state invoked, or defence of old laws and tradition. Here Conchubor is nothing but a rich, decrepit and ailing old man who is not able to buy love through his offered riches, in contrast with love of the two young ones. His deceit will bring global destruction as stressed by Fergus who worked as his ploy, so his responsibility is universal, but the motive remains utterly and meanly personal.

These flawed images of instituted masculinity do not serve as an instrument for the ongoing nationalist struggle but are images for another, larger and more enduring confrontation: that of the emancipation of women. Synge may not have been an active suffragette supporter, but his vision of women denote a perception of the feminine as valid, autonomous Subject. As the images of power are presented in their masculine, decrepit but still threatening guise, the images of the feminine subject, in this instance Deirdre, (but also Nora, Maurya, Sara Casey, Pegeen, the Widow Quinn and even Mary Costello) present a determination and constancy of purpose which validate the claims to recognition of individuality made by Synge's militant female contemporaries.

The young woman stands throughout the play loyal to her own principles and choice of love and independent from the

restricting boundaries of society or even time. This stance could easily be termed as escapist by Synge's contemporaries, but it does nonetheless reiterate a point often enough not to be eluded, and that is the liberation of woman from the straightjackets which both imperialists and nationalists offer her.

As always even in a play as "quiet and restrained" as Deirdre of the Sorrows. Synge invokes the expectations of the audience to join in the experience of a well-known story, laid in what would look at first conventional patterns, to shake it out of its comfortable complacency, challenging more and stronger cornerstones of domination and subjugation than the nationalist intelligentsia could ever bargain for.

It is not only "the profoundly disturbing nature of Synge's fully conscious critique of Irish actuality"⁵⁴, but his dissection of its mental structures, and the style, almost a methodic procedure, in which these challenges are offered the audience.

⁵⁴ Cairns and Richards, Writing Ireland. p. 78.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

... for Anglo-Irish Drama - it is the beginning of the end...¹ (Pearse)

I want to work for the cause of Ireland in my own way.² (Synge)

The starting point for this research was my interest in the plays of Synge and what seemed a totally inadequate response from his audience, for whom I had the highest respect. They were the generation that had carried through the Easter Rising, and those who survived had led the country to independence. The question was how could such a "middle-of-the-road" character as Synge be at the same time so disconcerting. My first assumption was that the nationalist opposition would have some reason which prevented them from appreciating the plays on their own merits, reasons which may have been literary or dramatic as well as political. The story of the reception of The Playboy of the Western World is in complete opposition to the fate of its protagonist: having been reviled both in Ireland and in the United States as an insulting image of Irishness, it later became a model for Irish Drama. Over fifty years after its first performance, the Abbey Company on their visit to Rome, presented a copy of the Playboy to

¹ Padraic Pearse, (editorial) in An Claidheamh Soluis, 9 February 1907.

² Synge, letter to Maud Gonne, in Letters, I. p. 47.

Pope¹⁸⁴¹ In one stroke the "insult" of Irish virtue received political sanction and the highest religious *nihil obstat*. In the interim period between the first performance of the Playboy and its reception by the Pope, the Protestant-Irish Ascendancy and its heirs - the Ulster Protestants - would be as violently opposed to its form and content as were the earlier nationalists and their press in perceiving it as a voice threatening their values.

If one considers that such a turn of fortune has taken place nearly three generations after the first productions of Synge's plays, and two generations after the negotiations for independence started, it becomes clear that the specific colonial situation in Irish politics at this time played a very important role in the actual shaping of the controversy and that the ground of English colonisation has shifted.

The work of Michel Leiris, Fanon, Memmi, Nandi and Said have produced a new strategy of deconstructing the colonial situation, looking at colonial, social and artistic issues from a novel point of view - specifying the colonised as the authoritative voice. In any colonialist situation there are various ideologies and strategies fighting for hegemony. Literary and artistic production in general must be evaluated within this frame of conflicting forces.

Looking into the ways in which ideology operates in Synge's plays, it becomes clear that the things which the contemporary nationalist audience found offensive in each play, were not the specifics, but the broader issues. The

offence was not whether the Irish wife in a true Wicklow cottage does or "does not go out with the tramp", as Griffiths argued, or if blind Irish beggars would refuse the grace of a miracle, or even if parricide is a cause for admiration. Rather the disturbing quality of the plays is to be found in Synge's approach to his source material, to the facts, folk-lore and legend, in his creation of protagonists, mainly female, and his particular use of language. The major characters of his plays, the peasant, the tramp, the woman have different ideological weight. Both the woman and the tramp are liminal characters who occupy very different positions in the ideological structure from that of the peasant. The ideological transfer that identifies the concept of "people" with the referent "catholic peasant farmer" was produced by the Davisite reverence for "the people" and was appropriated by the nationalists as a strategy to attain ideological hegemony:

... a prominent - if not too freely acknowledged - identifier of the "people" was their Catholicism and also their peculiar, rurality oriented, values which in sum constituted familism - a tight nexus of practices which together helped to make stem inheritance operable and thus, through the concentration of holdings,³ made the survival of the tenant farmer possible.

In terms of the image of national identity, the women function as adjuvant of this process.

As I argued it was not only the aesthetic horizon of expectations that was challenged when the production of

³ Cairns and Richards, "Reading a Riot: the 'Reading Formation' of Synge's Abbey Audience", Literature and History. p. 222.

Synge's plays at the Abbey clearly steered the direction of the movement from the symbolist, experimental plays of Yeats towards a more naturalistic style. I would like at this point to follow Cairns and Richards comment on Pearse's diatribe against Synge and his later recantation. During the Playboy controversy, Pearse said that for the Abbey Theatre it was the beginning of the end. Later he was to change his mind, and granted Synge some worth as an Irish artist. His first perception was right, Cairns and Richards conclude, that it came indeed at the end of the potency of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy's political and cultural hegemony. Yet, Synge played a role in this decline, unwittingly. The voice he so clamorously makes heard was recognized as representing with truth and passion a poetical vision of Irishness, only when the stigma or threat involved in Synge's blatant Anglo-Irish stock was totally devoid of political weight. Even if some of the nationalist leaders came from the same class as Synge, and of the same religion, (Davis, Parnell and O'Connell) they would not identify him as an "organic intellectual". When the nationalist political hegemony was clearly established it was possible for nationalists to concede and to "rehabilitate" Synge.

If, following Gramsci, we admit that "there does not exist any independent class of intellectuals, but every social group has its own stratum of intellectuals, or tends to form one"⁴, we can say that Synge belongs to a group of the Anglo-Irish bourgeoisie which by its way of life and

⁴ Gramsci, Selection from the Prison Notebooks. London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p. 61.

political sympathies, renounced the ideological foundations of its class: political unionism, economic landlordism, religious evangelical Protestantism. Such a choice for Ireland had to be acknowledged by other nationalist groups, who claimed a race primacy for Gaelic or Irish-Irish, and who were understandably wary of the Ascendancy's motives. In addition most of these 'convertites' did not approach the nationalist fold with humility. Instead it was their claim that they were the one class prepared and equipped with the knowledge and qualities to rule Ireland.

Synge however was well aware of the dwindling fortunes of the Anglo-Irish and was also sceptical about the "double-chinned vulgarity" of some nationalist policies. On the most pressing issues concerning national identity Synge could not identify with either side. One such issue was the revival of the Irish language, and the methods of the Gaelic League to reach this end.⁵ Synge refused the backguardism of Unionists and also the opportunism of some more progressive members of the Ascendancy who were trying to jump onto the train of political change. Opponents of the National Irish Literary Theatre claimed that the theatre, in using the word National, was following this line to promote the hegemonic ideals of the Ascendancy.

⁵ As early as 1893 Stopford Brooks was urging writers to translate old Irish material into English so that people could have access to their literary tradition. On the other side of the political divide, D P Moran defended the creation of a linguistic "cordon sanitaire" to prevent the threat of Anglicisation. Among nationalists this view prevailed even after independence: Corkery did not find English an adequate means for the expression of Irishness. On this issue, see Richards, 'The Changing Landscape of Fact: English as "Necessary Sin" in Contemporary Irish Literature', 1989.

As Raymond Williams observes the younger bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century created a internal voice of dissent, the modernist movement, of which naturalism in practice its first phase:

What is most clear in modernist naturalism ... is its challenging selection of the crises, the contradictions, the unexplored dark areas of the bourgeois human order of its time. ... Moreover their social bases are directly comparable, in that each is the work of dissident fractions of the bourgeoisie itself, which became grouped - especially from the 1890s - in new independent and progressive theatres.⁸

Viewing Synge's productions one can see the emergence of a dissenting voice within the aesthetic modernist movement which complements an equivalent political attitude to colonialism. Synge is therefore in some respects, and in this perspective, a "modernist who refuses".

What is refreshingly new in this approach is the different openings it provides for further research. This study of Synge's work can be articulated on three different levels: the ideological/political, epistemological and literary.

Synge's work marks the approaching end of imperial/colonial rule, since it can now be universally claimed that the voice that spoke through his plays was indeed that of an Irish subject: the periphery took centrestage, the voice/

⁸ 'Theatre as a Political Forum', in Visions and Blueprints, ed. Timms and Collier, 1988, p. 311.

language of domination became the means of self-affirmation.⁷

The production of Synge's plays at that time provided a platform for the voicing of a deep-rooted resentment against the colonial power of the Ascendancy and against the entrenchment of supposedly radical positions.

The use of the legends and history of Ireland in the theatre helped more people and interests than Yeats to claim a share in the inheritance of the Celtic twilight. As Irish History was not taught at school, the use of this material had also a didactic function, clearly expressed by Lady Gregory. Learning about their culture and History gave the people an image of their past to which they could relate, establishing their identity as separate from that presented by the prevailing British History. To use legend and the mythologising of situations in the way Synge does is to expose the ways in which power and authority fashion and explain reality to reinforce their relative position in the power structure.

This analytical view of the legend which deconstructs the power reinforcing mechanisms of myth, bringing the past to the present, making the life of heroes and heroines no longer a predetermined and well-explained path, but a

⁷ Not ignoring the problems involved in the fact that using English as a means of expressing Irishness was in fact translating a reality, thereby expressing the immediate experience in a twice removed medium.

question of personal choice still to be made, is I think the most radical aspect of Synge's plays.

Synge's approach to the Deirdre story marks an end to an epistemological era. To write a tragedy where the protagonist refuses the reasons of gens/ class to claim those of individuality is to discount the work/ operation of mythological thought, to favour logical thought and individuation. Using mythological imagery implicitly or explicitly to explain reality or promote active engagement in its change, even if this has an overtly revolutionary intention (as in the struggle for independence) is to use the same instruments which have bolstered up colonial domination. The hope for a Messiah who would come to deliver Ireland from the yoke of foreign domination is a "practical politics" use of the mythologising strategy rather than a literary one: the empowering of any social force or structure (party, movement, charismatic leader) with the trappings of deified images of mythical deliverers - Moses, Christ, Cuchulain. This belief is comforting to a nation under domination, it lends the belief that the oppressed can engender their own liberation or liberator, that they still possess transcendence, courage, national unity.

Yeats' use of the legendary past has been criticised as being an instance of mythologising the author, Chuhulain being another of the ever-changing masks of the poet. His plans for a National Theatre reviving old legends and his dream of a symbolist theatre were altered by the arrival of

Synge. The reluctant success of the Abbey Theatre was achieved through the production of peasant plays of a naturalist tone, and later with O'Casey's realist and expressionist plays.

Besides his new contribution of peasant drama, Synge looked at the old legends in a totally different way from Yeats and the other authors. The theme of the old Mother witnessing the death of all her children, unable to protect them, the anxiety of young women seeing life waste away, the irresistible rise and fall of the village playboy hero, a stranger who makes his mark in a village starved of dreams by the lack of a year king, the young women who bring about the destruction of a warrior group, all these are common recurring themes which Synge brings to the stage in a quite new light. The interest in the study of mythology in the nineteenth century covered as wide a spectrum as possible, and enabled scholars to make comparative mythological studies of different cultures, establishing as it were a large base of collective mythological thought common to all cultures. These studies fascinated Synge who followed his courses at the Sorbonne eagerly. Literary criticism intent on establishing Synge's work as of recognisable stature, has worked consistently at finding in his plays and poems traces of universal, recurring myths, thereby confirming that his work possessed the qualities and virtues of all perennial literature. If indeed myths are part of a collective matrix of unconscious source material, they will always eventually surface in an author's work, and there is little virtue in

this since it is unconscious, collective and unavoidable. If these eternal presences in his works are due to Synge's study of ancient literature and mythology, then the praise is due to his scholarship. But none of these qualities are sufficiently disconcerting to justify the wrath of an angry audience. The way these themes are treated subvert the "matrixes of expectations" of both audience and reader. Synge brings to us the moment of creation of the mythical gesture and exposes it as a matter of choice between two opposites. Rather than rewriting myth, Synge explodes it.

In the course of this work I had often to resist the temptation of extending, projecting my view of Synge's work into a more contemporary frame. It would not be accurate to say that Synge offers an "alternative" vision of life. The radically new contribution of his work is the statement of "otherness", independent, non-missionary or visionary. His apology and eulogy are not to advertise, promote a new system, but the necessary homage to a world he is painfully conscious is disappearing. He stakes his hopes for the future in a radical societal change that would promote the welfare and independence of Ireland, therefore disengaging himself from immediate involvement in partisan politics.

Although varying in mood, from comedy and farce to tragedy, all of Synge's plays challenge the basis of colonial discourse and also of the "hypermasculinist" discourse of the colonised. His work is genuinely new because it brought to the Irish stage the naturalism of the first genuine raw experience of life outside the rose tinted

glasses of nationalist complacency. The study of the Literary Revival as an area where the conflict between the voice of the central hegemony and that of the ascending one is fought makes it an important area of study for those interested in understanding how a culture fashions its ideological basis. The process is nowhere more apparent than at a period of radical change.

From the issues raised in the various chapters, the areas that offer themselves for immediate further development, beyond the scope of this dissertation, are the study of gender and myth. The women characters are the stronger characters, the ones who propose more radical challenges, not just because they are socially more repressed, but because their propositions are newer. Synge's sympathy for the cause of women is best expressed in his work, as like Ibsen, he did all he could "in his own way" to help others see women as really acknowledged members of society.⁸

Recent publications on the study of the Deirdre legend, analyse it as a false myth of sovereignty.⁹ Of all the legendary themes Synge contemplated putting into play, the

⁸ Joseph Holloway quotes in his diaries Synge's conversations about women's suffrage with the nurses in his last stay in hospital. In Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre, ed Hoqan and O'Neill, London 1967, p. 128

⁹ The very recent article by Máire Herbert 'Celtic Heroine? The Archeology of the Deirdre Story' in Gender in Irish Writing, starts from the principle that the story of Deirdre is not a myth of sovereignty, because it brings forth destruction rather than reinforcement of power. This is not the place to refute her argument, but I think the same research could be used to prove that it is indeed a myth of sovereignty.

Deirdre legend was his first choice. The ambiguities inherent in a structure at the moment of rupture, be it in the language or the social structure as a whole, is reflected in the fluidity of an artistic medium, in the boundless choice left for the creation of the artist's universe. The myth of Deirdre seems to me to be the last attempt to explain reality using a system of knowledge that no longer accounts for all the forces in operation: the possession of the sovereignty goddess no longer validates the strength and security of established power.

This aspect of the myth is seen to be obsolete in Synge's dramatisation which is more concerned with the power and responsibility of individual choice. If, in the end, Deirdre's choice leads to disaster, this does not validate or visualise the extension of the power structure. It continues the theme handled by Synge in many of his plays - the threat posed to society by those who refuse to accept its conventions and values and are prepared to suffer for their rejection. In Deirdre the outsider is a woman and the society which places women in a repressed and restricted category, particularly if this category may appear to be one of idealisation, will always be in danger of internal disruption. Synge's plays does not give any fully realised view of feminine emancipation, but it reflects a stage along the road.

If as proposed above ideology is present in the silences of the text, the next challenge that Synge's work poses is to analyse the masculine silences. Are the male

characters just a statement of ^{the} inadequacy of the political system, that drains all able menfolk away, or is it a more universal claim, because more personal, that of the inadequacy of the roles that society expects men to perform.

In all the plays people who take to the roads, carrying with them the "love [which] is the flower of the world" (CW III, 175) go in pairs. If Págeen is not ready yet to take the step, she is aware of it, and Deirdra makes her companion bold to take the choice. The study of the ways in which self-definition and self-affirmation of the male in a "hypermasculinist" ideology is designed, will certainly bring new insights into the work of "that quiet man", John Synge.

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In this thesis I have followed the Modern Humanities Research Association Style Book, third edition, London 1981.

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