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“What’s All the Stir About?” Gerald MacNamara, Synge, and the Early Abbey Theatre

In November, 1909, a few hundred patrons at the Abbey Theatre sat down to watch a satire by Gerald MacNamara, *The Mist that Does Be on the Bog*, performed by the Belfast-based Irish Literary Theatre. This company, founded in 1904 by ambitious amateurs, paid annual visits to Dublin with a repertoire of new Irish drama. In *The Mist that Does Be on the Bog*, MacNamara presents a clever comedy of errors in which Michael and Bridget, two peasant farmers, rent out their Connemara cottage to three Dublin motor tourists. These urban dwellers have come to the West to rehearse a play in line with “the new movement in Ireland,” the Irish Revival. The visitors’ disguise is mistaken for real by a local tramp—who, in fact, is also a wealthy Dubliner and a poet in search of inspiration. The language of the play, as well as the confrontation between the tourists, the locals, and the poet made fun of the Irish dramatic revival and of the institution that had come to represent this wave of cultural pride, the National Theatre Society, Ltd., at the Abbey.

The play has, at most, limited artistic merits. The dramatic structure is inventive, but flawed, and its characterization is witty but shallow. Yet it warrants attention today for its value as an intertextual critique of realism on the Abbey Theatre stage. As such, MacNamara’s satire might be viewed alongside other voices critical of the theater associated with William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, and John Millington Synge. This national institution of drama was frequently held under scrutiny by such journalists as Arthur Griffith of the *United Irishman*, by cultural critics like Dr. George Sigerson and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, and by such Irish-language activists as Pádraic Pearse.¹ MacNamara, however, provided an assessment of the state of Irish and European drama that was more complex than that of his colleagues. Although contemporary audiences largely failed to recognize the play’s criticism underneath its farcical humor, MacNa-

1. See, for example, Sigerson’s lecture for the National Literary Society, “The Irish Peasant and the Stage,” reported in *Freeman’s Journal*, 6 February 1906, p. 8; Francis Sheehy-Skeffington’s lecture, recorded in *Freeman’s Journal*, 25 March 1907, 5; Pearse’s response to the *Playboy* controversy in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 2 March 1907, 8; or Arthur Griffith in *Sinn Féin*, 22 December 1906, p. 1, 14 May

mara was not merely questioning the boundaries of Irish drama; he was also questioning the limitations imposed by the new wave of realism on the stage.²

Gerald MacNamara, a pseudonym for Harry Moscow (1865–1938), was a member of the well-known family of painters and decorators who ran a business in Belfast and in D'Olier Street, Dublin. As a comic actor as well as satirical playwright for the Ulster Literary Theatre and for the Theatre of Ireland, MacNamara understood the power, as well as the limitations, of the emerging drama at the Irish National Theatre.³ To fully understand MacNamara's half-hour satire, the reader must locate it within an international context of modernity and realism on the stage, and place it in the context of the Irish debate concerning the role of a national theater. The Irish peasant dramas that were its target emerged in line with these national and international developments in the theater. The comic potential of *The Mist that Does Be on the Bog* needs to be addressed in relation to the repertoire of the Abbey Theatre. MacNamara explores the limitations of realistic representation using anti-theatrical features that intentionally break or disrupt dramatic illusion. Finally, we need to realize that MacNamara's critique was not an attack on the drama of John Millington Synge per se, but should rather be regarded as a commentary on the commodification of Irish cultural nationalism. To underpin this, MacNamara lays bare the limitations of realistic representation using antitheatrical features that break or disrupt dramatic illusion. In that regard, a surprisingly postmodern insight in MacNamara's satire emerges: an understanding that conventions of realistic representation play a crucial role in the commodification of landscape and culture.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the National Theatre Society built upon earlier attempts to establish an independent Irish theater, specifically those of the Irish Literary Theatre (1899–1901) and of the Irish National Theatre Society (1902–1905). The founders of these earlier national theaters wished to provide an alternative for the “buffoonery and easy sentiment” of the mainstream dramatic fare in Ireland.⁴ Their comments were directed not only at

1910, p. 1. A Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences has facilitated the work on this article.

2. Ben Levitas hints at this in *The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism, 1890–1916* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), p. 168.

3. For more information on Gerald MacNamara's work as a playwright, and on other lesser-known talents of the Irish Revival, see Karen Vandeveld, *The Alternative Dramatic Revival in Ireland, 1897–1913* (Bethesda: Maunsel, 2005).

4. Letter to the Guarantors for a “Celtic” Theatre, quoted in Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (1913; Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1972), p. 20.

commercial British drama, but also at the Irish drama of Dion Boucicault and at James Whitbread, the manager of Dublin's Queen's Theatre who specialized in presenting melodramas that relied heavily on the character of the Stage Irishman: the quick-witted but impractical male, often with a weakness for drink. Usually featuring a number of spectacular action scenes—on the edge of an Irish cliff, for example, or at the Lakes of Killarney—the location of these plays satisfied the spectator's appetite to experience, as if at firsthand, an impressive but mysterious landscape, suggesting an early sort of virtual tourism.

The founders of the Irish Literary Theatre argued that Ireland deserved a more authentic representation of its people, its landscape, and its ideas. They rejected the Wordsworthian wild, dramatic landscapes, and substituted a more intimate setting. A new type of Irishman—authentic, imaginative, and “objective”—replaced the prevailing commercial stereotype. Authentic imitation was the motivation not only behind many Irish Revival dramas but also behind a substantial repertoire of European playwrights. “To represent reality as honestly and as truthfully as possible” became the motto of a new movement among late nineteenth-century modernist dramatists, as they confronted dramatic, social, and cultural changes taking place within a context of rapid progress, urbanization and industrialization.⁵ Their realistic drama also served as an antidote against the sentimental melodrama in the commercial houses of entertainment, where the prospect of high financial returns made authors bow down to popular demands.

Although other international examples of avant-garde drama were available to the directors and playwrights of the Abbey Theatre—such as, for example, the symbolist drama of Strindberg and Maeterlinck—realistic peasant drama began to dominate the company's repertoire, as well as that of most other Irish semiprofessional and amateur companies. Poetic drama was staged occasionally, as well as legendary drama; neither of these forms proved as successful as realistic plays with a high “peasant quality.” The humble cottage featuring tenant farmers, industrious women, resilient fishermen, or traveling musicians came to represent Irish rural life. Whitewashed walls, thatched roof, and turf fire became iconic of the Irish landscape. In these ways, the repertoire of the dramatic revival in Ireland breathed the air of cultural

5. Claude Schumacher, in reference to the drama of André Antoine and Emile Zola, in *Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre, 1850–1918*, ed. Claude Schumacher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 3. A number of European playwrights reacted against the dominant mode of naturalism and realism and began to experiment with symbolist techniques and poetic drama, among them the later Strindberg, Maeterlinck, Hofmannsthal, and Yeats. In comparison to Ibsen, Zola, or Shaw, their plays had less impact on twentieth-century drama. See Christopher Innes, *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 20–22.

nationalism initiated by nineteenth-century activists, who invested rural Ireland with idealized qualities of authenticity and purity.⁶ Given the growing urbanization of Ireland and the fact that Dublin was the cultural epicenter of the Revival, it is no surprise that the image of the West of Ireland peasant—the remnant of a previous generation—became an icon for Irish nationalists.⁷ George Watson recognizes that the West served as a “powerful compensatory counter-image, borne out of the resentment against the unflattering image that the English held of the Irish.”⁸ On the stage, and in much of the literature of the Irish Revival, the West of Ireland peasant figure in his rural setting came to represent Ireland and its people. Such constructions of nationhood are not uncommon in decolonizing nations: a shared identity, different from the colonizing power, both justifies the existence and facilitates the emergence of an independent nation-state.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the concept of representation operates on multiple levels. In one sense, “representation” refers to a mimetic relationship between subject and object. The character and setting on stage are a reflection of the outside world, constructions made by the artist in order to communicate with an audience.⁹ Spectators, therefore, come to the theater of realism hoping to recognize themselves or their fellows on stage and to identify with the dramatic performance. If in addition the theater in which these representations are staged is a prestigious one, then such characters, images, and ideas also set an example for the spectators. People in the auditorium feel a certain pride in witnessing their staged self image, and are perhaps encouraged into self-reflection by the example on display. If they feel insulted, or if they do not recognize themselves, they consider the image false. Finally, representation also plays a political role. Representing the nation by means of a single character implies speaking for the nation. Considered in this way, theater

6. George Watson, *Irish Identity and the Literary Revival* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1979, 1994), pp. 21–22.

7. For an introduction to nineteenth-century Irish nationalism and the construction of a shared identity, see Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*. (Cork: Cork University Press / Field Day, 1996). Leerssen calls the idyllic construction of Irish individuality “auto-exoticism,” pp. 37–38. Luke Gibbons emphasizes that “it was urban-based writers, intellectuals and political leaders who created romantic Ireland and perpetrated the myth that the further west you go, the more you come into contact with the real Ireland.” *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press / Field Day, 1996), p. 85.

8. Watson, p. 21.

9. For brief discussions of the terms “mimesis” and “representation,” see: Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre. Terms, Concepts and Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), pp. 214, 308–10; Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, ed., *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 11–17.

becomes a microcosm of the world, in which the actor-spectator relationship is similar to that between an elected politician and the general public. Actors, playwrights, and directors, therefore, carry the responsibility of giving a voice to the concerns of the man or woman in the pit. In the nineteenth-century national theaters, and, later, in Ireland's Abbey Theatre, this responsibility became the modern theaters' *raison d'être*.¹⁰

MacNamara's literary satire came forward in this context. His target could not be mistaken: after all, *The Mist that Does Be on the Bog* premiered on the very stage of the Abbey Theatre, and his text pointedly referred to a company called "the Cloister Theatre."¹¹ The playwright chose to scrutinize three key features of the realistic drama in the Abbey Theatre repertoire: the imaginative language, the rural setting, and the principal characters of tenant farmers and Travellers. The opening setting is as follows:

A cottage in Connemara. Half door on back wall. Door right. A turf fire left. A stool, table, dresser, spinning wheel, fishing net, etc. on walls. Window close to half door back. An old woman seated at the fire mending a pair of socks. (MDB 58)

The similarities to Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) are inescapable:

*Cottage kitchen, with nets, oil-skins, spinning wheel, some new boards standing by the wall, etc. Cathleen, a girl of about twenty, finishes kneading cake, and puts it down in the pot-oven by the fire; then wipes her hands, and begins to spin at the wheel. Nora, a young girl, puts her head in at the door.*¹²

For audiences watching MacNamara's play on the first night in 1909, the curtain opened onto a scene that seemed familiar. A farming couple sit by the fire and discuss chores to be done. MacNamara leads his spectators to believe that they are about to watch another piece of Syngean rural drama that will tell urban audiences about country life. The old woman is named Bridget, her husband Michael. When Bridget reminds her husband to put a card in the window that says "to let," the audience realizes that this playwright at once creates and breaks their familiar image of the country cottage kitchen. These local farmers do not engage in land cultivation or imaginative music, but are trying to profit from the new phenomenon of tourism in the "real Ireland":

10. Loren Kruger theorizes this new role of theaters in the introduction to *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 3–29.

11. Gerald MacNamara, *The Mist That Does Be On The Bog* in *Journal of Irish Literature: The Plays of Gerald MacNamara*, ed. Kathleen Danaher, 17, 2–3 (May–September, 1988), p. 61; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (MDB 61).

12. John Millington Synge, *Riders to the Sea* in *The Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 96.

MICHAEL: . . . I clean forgot about the card. (*picks it up*) “To let—furnished”—but it’s small good that card has done in the days that’s gone.

BRIDGET: Put the card in the window when you are bid. (*Michael puts up card*) Didn’t Father Doran tell us and him just coming from Dublin that all the quality in the big world do be searchin’ the country over for cottages just like this—and them in their motor cars? (*Motor horn toots.*)

MICHAEL: Preserve us if that isn’t a motor at this present moment.

BRIDGET: Well—is it scared you are, Michael Quinn, scared of the sound of a motor and you never done talking about this “scientific age” since you were made chairman of the new Technical School at Lisvarna? (*Gladys and Cissie appear at the door*)

MICHAEL: It’s one thing to hear a motor horn when the sun do be shinin’ in the blue canopy of heaven and the young ewes do be dancin’ in the corn—but it’s another thing to hear the toot of a motor horn when the black clouds do be restin’ on top of the Slieve Girnin and the white mists do be comin’ up from the bowels of the sea. (*Enter Cissie and Gladys.*)

CISSIE: Oh! Gladys—isn’t this delightful—such a picturesque cottage—such poetic language. (MDB 58)

Michael’s comic description of the motor car recalled for many members of the audience the well-known passage in Synge’s *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903), in which the unhappy Nora complains about the monotony of her life:

NORA: . . . 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 seeing 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 streams roaring with the rain.¹³

In the same way as the tooting motor horn infiltrates the Synge-like poetic speech of the peasant couple, the tourists who arrive in the motor car take over the country cottage for a little holiday. The motor car heralds the interference of modern life into Michael and Bridget’s rural existence and calls to a halt the idyllic representation of that rural life. This intrusion of twentieth-century technology in Michael’s poetic speech is comic, but there is a serious side to this episode: MacNamara exposes the limitations of the stylized language of peasant drama to give full expression to the complexities of modern society. The Travellers who arrive in this vehicle are themselves blind to this incongruity. They call the cottage “picturesque” and the local speech “poetic.” The spectators

13. Synge, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, in *The Complete Plays*, p. 90.

in the Abbey Theatre, witnessing this scene, are city folk, too. Would they realize the gap between modern Ireland, of which they are a part, and the rising nostalgia for the West of Ireland? Perhaps not yet; MacNamara might have to take the satire a little further.

To expose the contradictions between a modern, urban sensibility and rural life, MacNamara also reverses the audience's expectations of the Dublin tourists. Cissie, Gladys, and Gladys's husband Fred agree to rent the cottage—but as soon as the farmer and his wife are out of sight, the audience discovers that the three have actually arrived not for a holiday, but in order to rehearse a little peasant play in its "real" environment. The girls take out their folk costumes, putting on aprons and handkerchiefs; the man puts on rags to play his part of the tramp. Here, MacNamara brings the backstage work of the Abbey Theatre actors onto the stage and discloses the transformation from actor to character. City actors playing rural characters epitomize the process that Luke Gibbons has described as the romantic construction of rural Ireland by urban-based writers, intellectuals, and politicians.¹⁴

Cissie, Gladys, and Fred rehearse their lines. They present a plot which is also strikingly similar to Synge's account in *Riders to the Sea* of the old woman waiting for her son to return. Their acting continues until Cissie spots a tramp walking toward the cottage. Here, MacNamara's metatheatrical play is lifted onto a new level: the actors of the Belfast company playing Dublin actors playing a character, will interact with another Belfast actor, playing the character of a tramp: "Wouldn't it be a good idea," suggests Cissie, "now that we are in costume, to pretend to be cotter folk?" (*MDB* 61) Thus, within the play, the distinction between reality and play-acting becomes blurred.

On the stage, the actors pretending to be real peasants, bring what seems to be one of the Travelling People into the rented cottage. The girls engage in pleasant conversation with the tramp, Clarence, and practice the unfamiliar peasant speech as they would improvise on the stage. To their delight, the tramp responds in the same kind of quaint language—a confirmation that their language approximates the West of Ireland patois. Now the moment has arrived for MacNamara to dismantle the image of the tramp. Cissie has learned that in rural Ireland, tramps are not just homeless people, but artists with the gift of the old bards. She asks their visitor whether he, too, is a poet:

CLARENCE: And what makes you think that I am a poet and me with a ragged coat?

CISSIE: Sure, it's a tramp you are, and I have heard it said, that when the bards died out, in the years gone by, they left their spirit to the tramps in the west.

14. Gibbons, p. 85.

CLARENCE: And you think, kind lady, that I have the gift of the bards upon me?

CISSIE: Sure it's as plain to be seen as the staff of pike for the beautiful words pour from your lips like a delf jug and it full of buttermilk. (MDB 63)

The poetic dialogue between Cissie and the tramp sets the man's heart on fire. For him, Cissie—who uses the name Moira—epitomizes the ideal of the country girl. He declares his love to her, but feels that he must reveal his secret. Like Cissie, Gladys and Fred, he, too, has been concealing an urban, middle-class identity beneath the disguise of tramp:

CLARENCE: Moira, I have not come here disguised in order to deceive you—I had an object—I am writing a play. I could weave plots equal, if not superior, to any folk play I have ever seen—but—I am weak in what is called local colour—so I came here. I feared that had I been dressed as I usually am—in Dublin, I could not have gained your confidence, so I came disguised—as a tramp.

(MDB 64)

MacNamara's sense of irony could not be more appropriate. Cissie thought Clarence was a tramp, and therefore a poet of the old bardic tradition; in fact Clarence is an aspiring poet, pretending to be tramp. The city girl has less interest in the urban artist than in the homeless tramp she had believed him to be. She reveals to Clarence that she and her companions are merely actors from Belfast, similarly engaged pretending to be peasants.

In one way, it is a pity that MacNamara reveals the characters' real identities to each other so early, just midway through the play. Much more fun could have been extracted from the plot if the spectators knew, but the characters were ignorant of, each other's true identities, or if Clarence had been the only one to reveal his secret. However, there is a purpose to this dramatic weakness. It allows MacNamara to let the playwright-tramp mistake the real peasants—Michael and Bridget, the farmers who put up the sign in the window—for actors, too. The tramp-playwright believes that Michael is Cissie Dodd's father, not only in the peasant play they are rehearsing, but also in real life. This gives rise to more hilarious incidents—such as when Clarence, still madly in love with Cissie, asks Michael, the local farmer, for his daughter's hand. The old couple are confused, Clarence is flustered even more, and asks the peasant couple a strikingly postmodern question:

CLARENCE (*To Bridget*): For heaven's sake, tell me—are you real?

BRIDGET (*Angry*): Real, is it? Am I real? Michael Quinn, do you hear me insulted in my own house? (*To Clarence*) Let you be walkin' out of this now, and all your friends with you. Be off now. (*She tries to pull him to the door*).

(MDB 68)

Clarence's faked identity as a tramp was already ridiculed in the make-believe play with Cissie, but here, his identity as playwright is exposed as well. He observes, but does not understand; he takes part, but says the wrong thing; he falls in love, but is laughed at; he tries to make sense of things, and is ejected from the house. The myth of imaginative peasants and authenticity in the West of Ireland, as well as the myth of the traveling poet, are all unmasked as artificial constructions of Irish nationhood and as failed constructions of artistic sensibility.

The reports on the actual production of this play in 1909 suggest that MacNamara's satire fell short of the effect it could have achieved. The audience laughed, but did not examine why they were laughing.¹⁵ Accounts by those who saw the play indicate that the actors struggled with the variety of accents: the company was from Belfast and impersonated the roles of Dublin actors, who, in their turn, took on the roles of country folk. Understandably, spectators were a little confused.¹⁶ In addition, the play had its structural weaknesses, and a much stronger plot could have been developed. Nonetheless, the mere fact that *The Mist that Does Be on the Bog* was written, staged, and witnessed, proves that—even at this very early point in its history—the so-called authenticity of the Irish dramatic revival, as well as the Abbey Theatre's claims to national representation, were being called into question. MacNamara remained a minor voice and his critique did not gain any momentum; but it is significant that he raised such concerns so distinctively long before others did.

In his short play, MacNamara signals two important ideas. The first is that the Irish landscape, represented by the country cottage, is not an authentic object, but rather, a commodity that can be bought and sold. Irish peasants are not the innocent, witty and good-natured folk of the well-known stories and dramas, but people with a commercial interest who want to take their share of the country's economic progress. Likewise, the Irish traveler or tramp is an artificial construction that exists mostly in the minds of actors and of playwrights. Country folk simply think this tramp is a man who has lost all sense of "reality."

Second, MacNamara's satire also demonstrates that the Irish peasant play is unable to express the complexities of Irish life and to address the reality of progress and modernization. MacNamara was an urbanite from Belfast; he,

15. The *Freeman's Journal* found the curtain-raiser "highly diverting" 27 November 1909, 9; the *Irish Times* described it as "genuinely amusing" 27 November 1909, p. 8; and the *Irish News and Belfast-Morning* considered it "another one of the one-act gems" 8 March 1910, p. 8. None of the papers suspected any serious criticism of the state of drama behind MacNamara's playful banter.

16. *Irish Independent*, 27 November 1909, p. 7.

and many other Irish people like him, did not recognize themselves in the national drama of the Abbey Theatre. Dublin audiences—the individual members of which were often just one or two generations removed from rural life—did not fit into that picture either, but among these Dubliners there was a general feeling that the lives of their ancestors were more authentic than their own modern, urban lives. MacNamara alerts us to the danger in blindly accepting this peasant drama as representative for the entire nation, because even realistic representation is a convention with its own limitations.¹⁷

The means by which MacNamara explores these boundaries are anti-realistic features. By blurring the distinction between the different levels of play-acting, he renders the “fourth-wall” convention useless. Intertextual references to the controversial Abbey Theatre production of Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*—the title of Fred’s forthcoming play, for example, is *What’s All the Stir About*, a clear reference to the disturbances at Synge’s play—as well as the actors’ asides and soliloquies, also break the dramatic illusion. In addition, the parody of Synge’s dialogue lays bare the degree of artificiality in this language, while the play-within-the-play reveals the mechanisms of realistic representation. Many of these techniques either predate the realistic movement, or characterize the investigations of realistic conventions that are typical of twentieth-century postmodernist theater. In fact, MacNamara’s indirect criticism of the commodification of Irish culture would be echoed decades later in a range of post-modern critiques. The commodification of art through mass consumption, for example, is the focus of Walter Benjamin’s seminal 1937 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” and Jean Baudrillard continues to explore the process from reality and representation to the point when the real “is no longer what it used to be” in our own time.¹⁸

Many in the audience must have interpreted *The Mist that Does Be on the Bog* as an attack on Synge’s dramatic oeuvre. Synge’s debut play, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, portrayed an unhappy woman isolated in a County Wicklow glen. *Riders to the Sea* portrayed the hardship and devastation in the lives of an island fishing family. In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge made his own talent for imaginative speech also the talent of his protagonist, Christy Mahon, whose eloquence and charm make him the hero of a rural community in County

17. Criticism of the so-called objective status of realism would not be voiced until a few decades later. A useful article in this respect is John Gassner, “Forms of Modern Drama,” *Comparative Literature*, 7, 2 (Spring, 1955), 129–43. See also Christopher Innes, *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1–27.

18. For an introduction to their ideas, as well as to other theories of modernism and postmodernism, see Peter Brooker, ed., *Modernism / Postmodernism* (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 45–49 and 151–62.

Mayo. Although there is a strong satirical dimension to *The Playboy*, its presentation as a realistic comedy as well as Synge's emphasis on its authenticity locate the piece well within the peasant play tradition.¹⁹ Synge's plays were full of rural folk and traveling artists: precisely the sort of characters exposed by MacNamara as false. When *The Mist that Does Be on the Bog* was performed in November, 1909, Irish audiences were still coming to terms with Synge's premature death in March of the same year. This, along with the play's structural weaknesses may explain their lukewarm reception. Nevertheless, MacNamara's play can be considered a tribute to Synge's literary and dramatic oeuvre rather than a critique of the late playwright. The object of derision is the institution of Irish drama, rather than the work of an individual artist.

Comparing Synge's drama with his prose puts MacNamara's response into perspective. MacNamara's comic portrayal of Clarence, the poet, is clearly inspired by the enigmatic persona of Synge; but Synge's *The Aran Islands* (1907) makes clear that he understood his position as an outsider, the artist who observes but never fully understands or participates in the lives of his "subjects." When the Islanders go to Mass, Synge goes out walking; when Synge fails to communicate with the locals, he takes out his wallet of photographs to entertain them.²⁰ Synge did not try to hide these illustrations of not-belonging. However, when Synge's dramatic work is put on stage, realistic performance leaves the author invisible. On stage, the mediating person must remain hidden to maximize the illusion of truthfulness and objectivity. Paradoxically, then, the author's on-stage absence grants him the status of authority—a status, perhaps, to which Synge might not have aspired.

Synge was not blind to the demands of modern society. Throughout his works—in his correspondence with Stephen MacKenna, the plays in draft, the articles for the *Manchester Guardian*, as well as his published travel journal, *The Aran Islands*—he acknowledges the confrontation between traditional Ireland on the one hand, and progress and prosperity on the other.²¹ One passage in *The*

19. Take, for example, the following phrases from Synge's preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, all of which emphasize the conventions of realism: "In writing 'The Playboy of the Western World', as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers." "[I]n countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form. . . ." "On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy." Synge, *The Complete Plays*, pp. 174–75.

20. Synge, *The Aran Islands in Collected Works, II: Prose*, ed. Alan Price (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 82, 138.

21. The *Manchester Guardian* articles, collected as *In Wicklow, West-Kerry and Connemara* (Dublin: Maunsell, 1911), are reprinted in Synge's *Collected Works, II*. For Synge's letters to Stephen

Aran Islands in particular displays the same sense of incongruity that MacNamara achieved when referring to the tooting motor car:

This morning, when I had been lying for a long time on a rock near the sea watching some hooded crows that were dropping shellfish on the rocks to break them, I saw one bird that had a large white object which it was dropping continually without any result. I got some stones and tried to drive it off when the thing had fallen, but several times the bird was too quick for me and made off with it before I could get down to him. At last, however, I dropped a stone almost on top of him and he flew away. I clambered down hastily, and found to my amazement a worn golfball! No doubt it had been brought out some way or other from the links in County Clare, which are not far off, and the bird had been trying half the morning to break it.

The passage is telling in itself, but the next sentence in the narrative leaves no doubt that Synge interpreted this incident as an inevitable encroachment of modernity into the simple lives of the Islanders:

Further on I had a long talk with a young man who is inquisitive about modern life, and I explained to him an elaborate trick or corner on the Stock Exchange that I heard of lately.²²

Notably, such references to progress and modernity occur in Synge's letters, prose, and manuscript drafts of plays, but not in the final versions of his dramas. It is likely that Synge and the other managers of the Abbey Theatre found such features inappropriate for dramatic work that was to be performed in a national theater. The representational value of peasant drama on the national stage insisted that traditional, rural life, and not urban or modern concerns, epitomized a national Irish culture. Yeats and Lady Gregory were never really interested in social-realist drama of modern life, and chose to promote the peasant quality of Synge's plays. Through a combination of self-censorship and lack of support from his fellow directors of the Abbey Theatre, Synge never completed his own satirical dramas-in-progress, which bore the working titles of "Deaf Mutes for Ireland" and "National Drama: A Farce" into a final draft for the Irish National Theatre Society.²³

Synge's own extraordinary treatment of tramps as violent, godless creatures in *The Tinkers' Wedding* provides another example of the playwright's own interrogation of the conventions of peasant drama. Although published in 1907,

MacKenna, see *The Collected Letters of John Millington Synge*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983).

22. Synge, *The Aran Islands*, p. 175.

23. Both plays are reprinted from manuscripts and typescript in Synge's *Collected Works, III: Plays, Book I*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), pp. 218–19, 220–26.

the play was not found suitable for a “national” production until the Abbey Theatre finally staged it in 1971.²⁴ Plays on the national stage are perceived differently than plays staged in the commercial theaters, or books read in the privacy of one’s home. National drama fulfilled a prestigious, exemplary role in Ireland; there was a consensus that “authentic” peasant drama offered the best reflection of national life. If realistic representation is an artificial convention—as MacNamara demonstrates—then the repertoire promoted by the Abbey Theatre directors would lose its claims to authenticity.

Irish audiences were not ready for such self-reflection at the time *The Mist that Does Be on the Bog* was produced. Even later generations would continue to struggle with plays that contested the realistic mode, or dramas that went against the grain of traditional peasant drama. In 1926, for example, Denis Johnston’s expressionist play “Shadowdance” was rejected by the Abbey Theatre’s directors. Its dream-play structure and anti-realist parody of Robert Emmet and revolutionary politics were judged unsuitable for the national stage. The piece, however, became a success on the more experimental stage of the Gate Theatre in 1929, and was notoriously renamed after Lady Gregory as *The Old Lady Says “No!”*²⁵ More recently, Martin McDonagh’s *Leenane Trilogy*, which premiered in 1997, presents rural Ireland as a dystopia of isolation, cruelty and crime. McDonagh continued to subvert idealizations of Irish country people in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997). The last in particular ridicules the manner in which today’s audiences remain all-too-willing to believe in images of Stage-Irishry. Like MacNamara’s blurring of different levels of fictionalization, McDonagh first leads the audience to believe that Cripple Billy’s death scene is real, and, later, reveals that this “reality” is merely a melodramatic screen test for a Hollywood movie.²⁶

McDonagh’s plays mark a significant departure from the Irish peasant play tradition, but their impact draws precisely on the continuing prevalence of idealized representations of Irish rural life. One need only look at the promotional literature of the tourist industry for a demonstration of how the image of Irish country cottage has retained its power.²⁷ There are still occasions when

24. David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, *J. M. Synge, 1871–1909* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), pp. 296–97. The authors point out that *The Tinkers’ Wedding* was in fact staged by an English company in London shortly after Synge’s death in 1909.

25. Denis Johnston, *The Old Lady Says “No!”* ed. Christine St. Peter (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992).

26. Martin McDonagh, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 63.

27. See, for example, Harvey O’Brien, “Culture, Commodity and *Céad Mile Fáilte*: U.S. and Irish Tourist Films as a Vision of Ireland,” *Éire-Ireland*, 37, 1–2 (Spring–Summer, 2002), 58–73.

an author who questions such images is seen as undermining the associated ideals of family life, morality, and artistic integrity. In MacNamara's time, this identity was still under construction. Spectators attended the national theater to have their views on Irish nationhood confirmed, not to see them contested. MacNamara's satire was a little too much ahead of its time to realize its full potential.

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Nuacht faoi Údair: News of Authors

The weaver and author Meghan Nuttall Sayres presented her graceful reflections on continuity and change in Irish crafts in "Conversations in Donegal: Mary McNelis and Con O'Gara," in *New Hibernia Review*, volume 5, number 3 (Autumn, 2001). Later this year, Cork University Press will release Sayres's new book drawing on this and other interviews and field work with the artisans of Tapéis Gael in Gleanncholmcille, as *Weaving Tapestry in Rural Ireland: Tapéis Gael, Donegal* (ISBN 13: 978-0-9535353-3-0). The volume includes color and black-and-white photographs by Laurence Boland.

Readers attentive to the lively world of present-day poetry may have already dipped into Dr. Sarah Broom's ambitious *Contemporary Irish and British Poetry: An Introduction*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2005 (ISBN 1-4039-0675-0). A portion of Broom's monograph appeared in these pages as "Learning About Dying: Mutability and the Classics in the Poetry of Michael Longley," in volume 6, number 1 (Spring, 2002).