

“Holding so Much of the Mind of Ireland” and Writing Modernist Drama: Celebratory Thoughts on the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of John Millington Synge

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J. M. Synge, the greatest playwright of the Irish nation, was born in 1871 and died in 1909. During his short life, in spite of his frequent illnesses since childhood, he pursued a broad diversity of interests including admiration of and enthusiasm for nature, folklore, literature, philosophy, languages, and the arts, which converged into his dedication to writing plays exploring Irish themes by the new century. In his Nobel Prize lecture in 1923, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) spoke about the Irish dramatic movement and his own leading role in it, generously paying homage to the dedicated work of his two friends and fellow-directors of the Abbey Theater. Towards the end of the speech he summarized the central ideas in an appreciative while also elevated poetic style: “certainly I have said enough to make you understand why, when I received from the hands of your King the great honour your Academy has conferred upon me, I felt that a young man’s ghost should have stood upon one side of me and at the other a living woman sinking into the infirmity of age” (Yeats, “The Irish Dramatic Movement” 205). The two were, of course, J. M. Synge, six years Yeats’s junior but long dead at the time of the grand occasion, and Lady Augusta Gregory (1852-1932), who was still very active in her seventies as theater maker, playwright, and translator. Time has shown that of the three Abbey director-playwrights Synge emerged as the most enduring one, as testified by the unceasingly vivid life of his work on the Irish and international stages.

In her autobiographical work, tellingly titled *Our Irish Theatre* (1913), Gregory devoted a chapter to Synge, recalling him as an exceptionally sincere and honest friend, for whose sake, she quotes from one of her own letters, “One never has to rearrange one’s mind” when

conversing with him (121). Nonetheless, this quiet and peaceful man proved to be a deep thinker who absorbed everything around him and transformed it into art, first poems and prose pieces, later plays imagined for stage production. Synge built his plays on the observations he made among country people, especially among fishermen and their families on the Aran Islands where he stayed for weeks on a number of occasions, and the stories he heard from mostly old men and women. Yet these formed only the raw material of his work for the theater, which he deployed strategically to achieve a kind of “transfigured realism,” enriching it with new details to extend the possible, as well as opening up what he had witnessed and heard to problematizing contestations and alternative meanings. Like other acclaimed modernist playwrights, Synge’s drama tends to foster the interaction of diverse generic properties as well as a carefully handled mixture of satirical, parodistic, ironic, grotesque, fantastic, and lyrical modes of writing in idiosyncratic ways. Importantly, Synge’s influence on later Irish playwrights can be noted in several works by Samuel Beckett, Teresa Deevy, Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Marina Carr, Martin McDonagh, and others.

Across the seven plays Synge bequeathed us, each notable for their own unique style and thematic complexity, there recurs a network of motifs which reflect the writer’s outlook shaped by, or developed against, the epistemologies and values he confronted in the contemporary world of his colonized country. Although the young adult Synge turned away from it, his family background tied him to the Anglo-Irish class, once the élite in Ireland but certainly not that any more by the late nineteenth-century, which destined him to become sensitive to, and aware of cultural loss as a result of the onslaught of modernity. On the one hand, he experienced the decline of his own class, portrayed, for instance, in his essay “A Landlord’s Garden in County Wicklow” (1903). On the other hand, when meeting country people, conversing with or even living among them, Synge could not but notice the disappointing effects of modernization and the betraying signs of the related affects in the rural communities he visited. Consciousness of

these effects appears especially in those parts of his major prose work, *The Aran Islands* (1907), which represent the islanders' engagement with the commercial value of what they needed to purchase or what they wanted to sell.

Synge's first play, *When the Moon Has Set* (1901) is the only autobiographically conceived piece in his oeuvre, which only made it to the stage decades later, in our time. In this work the Anglo-Irish landlord is already dead, meeting an early grave because he had been rejected by his beloved, a Catholic girl for his lack of religious devotion; he turned insane upon realizing that her relentlessness destroyed both their lives. However, as it happens in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the younger generation, the dead man's nephew-heir and his distant cousin, marry invoking the powers of nature, with the girl having abandoned her life as a nun for the sake of becoming a happy wife and a future mother. According to this doubtlessly utopian end, devised by a young writer whom his beloved also rejected on religious grounds, the decay of the Anglo-Irish class can be halted through the emotional and spiritual revitalization originating from the union of lovers who come from different backgrounds.

While this utopian juvenile play opposes the inevitability of loss, just a few years later *Riders to the Sea* (1904) followed suit fully in the tragic mode. It is Synge's only play set on the Aran Islands, portraying the precarious activities of hard-working fishermen and their families, culminating in Maurya's loss of her last living son, Bartley. As Stephanie Pocock Boeninger claims, in the postcolonial context "Synge uses the drowned body to gesture toward the shifting forms of cultural memories," while "missing bodies suggest the void that is left when cultures and traditions are forgotten" (54). Personal tragedies, thus, are shown in Synge as impacted on by social changes which tend to undermine traditional ways of life, identity-sustaining customs, and the younger generation's respect for the unquestionable wisdom of the old. In *Riders* there are several examples of the waning of old values; suffice it to pinpoint that Bartley does not heed Maurya's words trying to keep him home and give up his plan to sell horses at the Galway market,

because a sea journey in bad weather can be very dangerous. Also, there is some latent conflict between Maurya and Catherine, her elder daughter, whom she does not even call by her name, a motif returning in Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (1985) where the grandmother's (a Mother Ireland figure like Maurya) similar attitude changes by the end, suggesting that the peaceful accommodation of the conflict-ridden past and its repercussions in the present is possible. The only other tragedy of Synge, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (completed by Gregory and staged posthumously in 1910), is set in mythological time. This reinterpretation of an old story also brings cultural loss to the fore, suggesting that the death of young people and the fall of Ulster and its traditions are due not so much to the fulfillment of a prophecy, as it happens in the original legend, but to selfishness, hostilities, and betrayal, which tear the community apart.

The Shadow of the Glen (1903) is set in Wicklow and its characters are rural Irish people. Here the effect of modernization is present, primarily, in the form of strong patriarchal rule and concomitant moral requirements, appearing to be a local copy of imperial oppression. Individual desires are curtailed, especially in the case of women whose ambitions to achieve freedom and to stay aloof from social constraints and expectations are occluded. The protagonist, Nora, can be seen as a kind of New Woman who has her own ideas and would like to live in a less lonely way with a man of her own choice. After she has left in the company of the Tramp, her old husband, Dan, and Michael, the young man she thought of as a suitable partner for her earlier, engage in drinking together without a word about Nora's future of becoming exposed to all sorts of weather conditions and dangers on the roads. Once Dan has abandoned pretending he is dead, Michael is no longer interested in a Nora without inheriting her husband's property and money. Ultimately, in *The Shadow* Synge portrays the dehumanizing tendencies of the modern capitalistic pursuit of material goods which fragment even rural Irish communities.

In *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), it is again the women, Pegeen and the Widow Quin, who suffer most from the strict patriarchal order that ties them to certain roles.

These roles prove to be oppositional, contrasting the decent woman and the whore: Pegeen is destined to be the wife of a meek but well-to-do farmer, while the Widow is ostracized and excluded from the village community for attacking her husband with a rusty tool that most probably caused the man's death afterwards. Christy Mahon's appearance brings a major change for a time; he parades as a brave man who dared to kill his father, his oppressor, telling and retelling the story of his enviable deed with increasing zest. Once he is unmasked as a liar, the villagers turn against Christy, paradoxically imitating the violence Slavoj Žižek calls "objective"—in contrast with "subjective" violence committed by individuals—which authorities employ to punish transgression of the laws of the modern state (qtd. in Poulain 18). Apparently, the Mayo villagers fear that witnessing Christy's second attempt at patricide without interfering may bring trouble on their own head, therefore they unconsciously behave as if they were appointed local agents of enforcing colonial rule. These people, Pegeen among them, demonstrate moral distortions manifest in an unhealthy mixture of cowardice and vengefulness, a long-lasting result of being subject to the imperial system and its sophisticated ways of oppression.

The Well of the Saints (1905) and *The Tinker's Wedding* (1908) are linked through respective characters who hold a dominant status as representatives of religious beliefs: an ascetic looking, itinerant saint in the first play, and a settled Catholic priest in the other. Opposed to them are a blind and homeless couple and a tinker or traveler family of three, who live on the margins of society not sharing the ambitions of the majority culture. The blind couple in *The Well* are viciously mocked and made fun of by the settled people, whereas the tinkers in *Wedding* are viewed and judged in ways which involve stigmatization. Synge came to know vagrants and nomadic people in Ireland and saw parallels between their outsider status and his own love of freedom from stereotypes and social constraints. Mary Burke says that "for Synge, tinkers and tramps are the custodians of local and autonomous values within a broader rural

order that is acquiescing in the conformity and homogeneity required by modernity, prosperity and the Catholic Church's imposition of standardized devotional practice after the mid-nineteenth century" (45). In *The Well* Martin Doul, having regained his eyesight for a short period of time, is forced to earn his living by taking part in the capitalist economy he meets with in the household of the well-to-do smith, a leader of the village. After the Doul couple have lost their vision again, they reject a second curing from the saint; for their disobedience they are severely punished by the community, which expels them from the village and the crossroads where they like to sit idly. The rigid standards of the modern Catholic Church are heavily satirized, even the carnival style is used in *The Tinker's Wedding*, where a priest is exposed as greedy, hypocritical and discriminative, not at all superior morally to the travelers.

Irish and international scholarship has been producing an enormous amount of reference literature on the work of Synge, demonstrating an increasing tendency in the field since the millennium. Reasons for this phenomenon are complex, including the urge of literary and theater critics to redefine the overlapping goals and devices of revivalism and modernism in the postcolonial Irish context. Earlier, the Irish Literary Revival and Irish Modernism had been distinguished from each other in the critical literature addressing literary and dramatic trends, for instance in relevant chapters of volumes two and three of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991). Just over two decades later, in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* Rónán McDonald presents a different critical standpoint, claiming that the Irish Revival can be considered as an "incubatory moment" of modernism, since both revivalists and modernists seek "alternatives to modern epistemologies; both are attracted to primitivism, and mythology and the occult" (51, 52).

Attempts to revise the relationship of the two trends have led several scholars to the works of Synge, which can be studied in the context of both the Revival and modernism in Ireland. *The Aran Islands*, the major prose piece in Synge's oeuvre, written before his canonical

plays but published only in 1907, is a case in point. On the one hand, it is a travelogue, based on the writer's observations about the culture, customs, and life-style of communities in the western-most part of the country, the Aran Islands, which were in the focus of interest during the Revival attracting many visitors who produced ambitious accounts of their experiences. On the other hand, Synge's *The Aran Islands* bears characteristics of modernist generic indeterminacy as it is more than a travelogue and anthropological study in that it integrates elements of autobiography, particularly a concern with the observing self's subjective experiences. Writing about the Aran people and his own attitudes to them, in Giulia Bruna's interpretation, Synge "deconstructs tropes such as 'transvaluation' and 'textual attitude' as well as strategies of 'othering'," favoring instead a kind of "contact perspective" (20), which emphasizes the potentially dialogic and transformative nature of the traveler's relationship with the island-dwellers.

Surprisingly, Synge's work as part of the modern Irish theater is not mentioned in the chapter "Modernism and Irish Theatre 1900-1940" written by Richard Cave in a recently published handbook. (True, there is a whole chapter on Synge and, as a pivotal figure in Irish theater, he haunts many of the others in the same book.) Nevertheless, Cave presents a useful list of seven areas which encompass related characteristic features to be detected in the modern theater. Importantly, most of these can be applied to a detailed discussion of Synge's modernism. Considering just two of the areas, the playwright's whole oeuvre offers examples verifying their relevance to his body of writing. "Stylization, . . . avoidance of closure within forms, and a consequent embracing of silence, uncertainty, the void" (Cave 122) appear in the stylized Hiberno-English language of *The Playboy* (which influenced Marina Carr's Midlands plays later), the blending of the comic and the tragic in *The Shadow* and *The Well*, whereas the last sentences in *Deirdre* depict a void with dead bodies and the feeling of despair. The other selected area from Cave's list refers to "self-reflexivity," interrogation of "the fundamental

nature of the medium,” and “enthusiasm for parody and pastiche” (122), which can be detected in Christy’s storytelling to an onstage audience in *The Playboy*, the performance of keening and the fusion of temporalities in *Riders*, the highly comical and carnivalesque scene in *The Tinker’s Wedding*, and the parody of the wake in *The Shadow*.

Signifying that Synge’s modernism is no longer a disputed question, three recent book-length studies of Synge’s work include the very term “modern” already in the title. In his introduction to the collection of his own essays, *Synge and the Making of Modern Irish Drama* (2013), Anthony Roche raises the issue of the never really dormant authenticity debate, stressing the need to perceive Synge’s modernist drama “not [as] an unmediated reflection of social reality but a self-consciously constructed dramatic artifact” (5). Further on, Roche discusses affinities between Joyce and Synge, stating that “for Joyce as for Synge” the “Mother Ireland” character appears as “a fertile, sexually active woman in her prime” (120), a far cry from a dispossessed symbolic figure. Through Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*, Synge’s Nora Burke and Widow Quin, the modernist privileging of the body over the mind is represented, Roche suggests, going as far as adding that “the Molly Bloom who gets the novel’s final chapter and word is under the sign of Synge” (121). H el ene Lecossois’s *Performance, Modernity and the Plays of J. M. Synge* (2020) negotiates the performative elements in Synge’s plays and the ways in which they intervene in the rigid distinctions between styles and genres. Opposed to mimesis, Lecossois summarizes, “[t]he tension created by the combination of different performance traditions in Synge’s plays sets theater’s double into particularly sharp relief while exposing the fragility of illusionist staging” (200). Se an Hewitt’s monograph, *J. M. Synge, Nature, Politics, Modernism* (2021) focuses on the combination of these three concerns in the playwright’s oeuvre, labeling Synge’s modernism as “rebellious”: rebellious in the sense that “Synge was, in fact, open to social modernization, though he did oppose schemes of modernization that he

saw as homogenizing capitalist and ‘inorganic’” (9, 12), imposed on the Irish by the imperial state.

In addition, there are recent book chapters which contextualize Synge’s work in international modernism as comparable to the other authors whose textual experiments they scrutinize. John Brannigan in his *Archipelagic Modernism* (2015) deals with Synge mainly in the section titled “Folk Revivals and Island Utopias,” placing him among some of his European contemporaries who were also inspired by island communities and their culture. Viewed against the larger tableau, the critic claims that “Synge is explicit in articulating the morality of the islanders [the inhabitants of Aran] as indicative of a distinct stage in human evolution, . . . between savagery and modernity” (Brannigan 42). The frequent presence of liminality rather than attempts at expressing certainties in his literary representations also supports the idea that Synge is one of the early twentieth-century modernists. Innovatively, Stephanie Pocock Boeninger’s inquiry into postcolonial memory in Irish and Carribean writing draws parallels between Synge’s *Riders* and Nobel Prize winning author Derek Walcott’s *The Sea at Dauphin* (1970), the latter being a kind of loose adaptation of *Riders*. However, the two authors diverge regarding their concern with the cultural position and role of postcolonial memory, Boeninger maintains (85-86).

Why does Synge possess such an uncommonly enduring popularity in Ireland and the international theater world, while his work continues to inspire the writing of books and critical articles from well-informed new or renewed perspectives? Part of the title of the present celebratory piece, “holding so much of the mind of Ireland” quotes Yeats’s words about the oeuvre of Synge voicing and embodying the national spirit and Irish identity (“J. M. Synge” 169). These revivalist values, grounded in what Synge observed and heard among the people, became transformed and more meaningful by the writer’s openness to continental influences,

as well as by his modernist experimentation with form, language, genre, and style, which characterize his outstanding achievement in early twentieth-century literature and theater.

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