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PATHOS AND ITS PARADOX: THE VISION OF J. M. SYNGE

BY

WILLIAM K. SCHULTZ, JR.

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts, Major in
English, South Dakota
State University

1974

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PATHOS AND ITS PARADOX: THE VISION OF J. M. SYNGE

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 Thesis Adviser

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the cordial assistance rendered by my thesis adviser, Dr. John Kinyon, during the preparation of this paper. Our discussions of Synge and his contemporaries have only enhanced my appreciation of a critical period in British literature.

I also wish to recognize the helpful suggestions of Dr. Paul Witherington, whose corresponding interest in mythology imparted a definite influence in the conception of this work.

WKS

Man's last high mood

Can pass above this passion of the seas
That moans to crush him. In each man's proper joy
The first high puissance that made live the gods
Lives on the earth and asks each stone for worship.

--Luasnad,
Luasnad, Capa and Laine

by J. M. Synge

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CHAPTER I

THE RECEPTION OF SYNGE: THE CRITIC AND HIS LANGUAGE

The moods of his various plays--laughter and passion and knavery--were what he saw in the world; but the light in which he saw them was his own, a clear hard light, shining neither through rosy nor through smoky glass.¹

For J. M. Synge what Francis Bickley calls the "hard light" of reality and the "passion" of imagination are combined in the character of the Irish peasant. As Bickley again observes, "in this people, as he saw it--and he had no sentimentality to mar his vision--the god and the beast were mixed in just proportions; corresponding to that juxtaposition of exaltation and brutality which figures in his theory of poetry."² It is the poetic richness of Synge's language, too, that juxtaposes the potential of language and the potential of life. It is a rhythmic language that pulsates with the fullness of physical nature, and yet it too retains the somberness to be acknowledged upon witnessing transient life.

H. S. Canby suggests that the poetic style of Synge was a needed stimulus in an ailing English drama. "Indeed, here is a new rhythm for English prose, as beautiful perhaps as the rhythms of the seventeenth century. Its flexible beauty gives just that impression

¹Francis Bickley, J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912), p. 30.

²Ibid., pp. 24-5.

of reality elevated into art which blank verse permitted to the Elizabethans."³ The critic L. A. G. Strong writes that The Playboy of the Western World "has a laughter and violence and overwhelming love of life which no other dramatist has recaptured since the Elizabethans. . . ."⁴ As if describing Synge himself, Strong characterizes the Playboy as "the poet, the man of imagination. The world was too much with him. He got drunk on the smell of a pint."⁵ It is a wild and passionate love of life that provides Synge's characters with their primary motivations. C. A. Bennett reminds the reader that "the presence of something incalculable warns us that we are among a people where the forces of life have not been subdued."⁶

The peasantry of Ireland is a convenient and technologically unspoiled artistic source that Synge utilizes to spark the fiery national imagination. For Synge, the wonder of man is the wonder in each man. "He found the life in a man very well worth wonder, even though the man were a fool, or a knave, or just down from Oxford."⁷

³H. S. Canby, "John M. Synge, A Review of His Works," Yale Review, 2 (July 1913), 771-2.

⁴L. A. G. Strong, "John Millington Synge," Bookman, April 1931, p. 134.

⁵Ibid., p. 135.

⁶C. A. Bennett, "The Plays of Synge," Yale Review, Jan. 1912, p. 196.

⁷John Masefield, John M. Synge: A Few Personal Recollections (New York: Macmillan, 1915), p. 21.

In a faithful glance at the elemental fabric of Synge's character and technique, Bennett maintains that "if his plays live it will be because they are the work of a man who sought his materials in the primitive and the simple and the strong, in laughter and sorrow, passion and joy. And these are the things that endure."⁸ In the drama of Synge exists an exhilaration proclaiming the vastness of life's potential, a potential not dimmed by the certainty of death and decay. "Whatever other quality may be dominant at any moment in Synge there is always along with it, exaltation."⁹

The term "national" will almost certainly appear in any detailed discussion of Synge's work. It is paramount that appropriate connotations of this word be defined as they apply to the efforts of J. M. Synge. It was Synge's desire to contribute to the national literature of Ireland a drama that would reflect both Irish cultural traditions and ideals. The inhabitants of the rural Irish landscape were more than suitable, "for the peasant has national courage and meanness, cowardice and nobility, humor and the lack of it. . . ."¹⁰ Although sympathetic with the activist politics of his fellow

⁸Bennett, p. 205.

⁹Cornelius Weygandt, Irish Plays and Playwrights (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), p. 168.

¹⁰S. G. Ervine, "The Irish Dramatist and the Irish People," Forum, 51 (June 1914), 946.

countrymen, Synge does not incorporate any emphasis on political nationalism into his drama. "He shared the political convictions of the Irish nationalists, but ignored them in his writing."¹¹

In the Preface to The Tinker's Wedding Synge considers what he believes to be the necessary artistic perspective of dramatic art:

The drama is made serious--in the French sense of the word--not by the degree in which it is taken up with problems that are serious in themselves, but by the degree in which it gives the nourishment, not very easy to define, on which our imaginations live.¹²

It is impossible to read the plays of Synge without recognizing some didactic concern, but Synge implies that it is the truth to be discovered in the observation of real experience, rather than any contrived scheme of his own, that suggests moral considerations. This belief is a primary concern of Synge in The Playboy of the Western World. Synge would no doubt be amused by the attempts of moralists to analyze the play in a limited, didactic way. The rollicking spirit of Synge, represented by Christy, is a devastating assault on those who would attempt to define a moral position for another human individual. The drama of didacticism is not sufficient for Synge because it is his contention that an appreciation of life itself must precede any attempt to discern ultimate human objectives. "He understood that it is

¹¹Herbert Howarth, The Irish Writers 1880-1940: Literature Under Parnell's Star (London: Rockliff, 1958), p. 219.

¹²John M. Synge, The Complete Works of John M. Synge, 8th ed. (1910; rpt. New York: Random House, 1960), p. 177. (All subsequent references from this edition.)

not so much the ultimate object of life as life itself, which bewilders and fascinates us."¹³ To view life only in terms of anticipated objectives is to examine it backwards through the looking glass. The scope of the human imagination is thereby limited and the potential for human discovery and understanding is reduced.

In an attempt to account for his keen observations of rural Ireland and its people, Robin Skelton explains that Synge was "believed to be a simple, though eloquent, recorder of peasant life," but, "he was, in truth, intent upon the creation of universal myth from particular experience."¹⁴ It is the purpose of this paper to study the human pathos defined by the relationship between joy and sorrow as Synge moves from "particular experience" to "universal myth." After a sketch of the maturing playwright and a glimpse of the prevailing literary climate of Ireland when his work was introduced, Chapter II, "Acceptance as Choice: Synge's Heroic Moment," will attempt to show the process of symbol formulation as it pertains to Synge's concept of art. The paradoxical pathos revealed by Synge's vision in this chapter will then be examined in greater detail in Chapter III, "The Blazing Straw: A Study of Synge's Paradoxical Deirdre of the Sorrows," the most brilliant exponent of this artistic perspective. Properly

¹³"J. M. Synge, A Sketch," Spectator, 1 April 1911, p. 482.

¹⁴Robin Skelton, The Writings of J. M. Synge (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 173.

suggesting a comic tone, Chapter IV, "Tragicomic Art," will give a necessary tribute to the tragicomedies often discovered in the plays of Synge. In the concluding chapter, "Death and the Hero," a final overview of the plays will attempt to assess the significance of Synge's vision as a heroic ideal.

Synge's concern with the common speech of the common man causes him to be inescapably linked to the poetic theory of Wordsworth. From an early age Synge was a student of the teachings of the glorious nature that Wordsworth had earlier proclaimed. Indeed, instead of remembering the mysticism of Yeats, Frank O'Connor reminds the reader of Synge's easily recognized admiration of Wordsworth. "It seems to me possible that when we read Synge's prefaces, which so often seem to echo Yeats, we may find that they are really--saving the syntax--echoing Wordsworth."¹⁵ It is nature's fecundity that provides for Synge both the wildness of the roaming tinker and the peace of Wordsworth's "philosophic mind."

It is here that Robin Skelton can again lend an appropriate insight. Skelton suggests that Synge "had grown to believe that simplicity and intuition could lead to ecstasy more directly than philosophy."¹⁶ This perspective is promoted by Synge's notion of

¹⁵Frank O'Connor, "All the Olympians," Saturday Review, 10 Dec. 1966, p. 31.

¹⁶Skelton, The Writings of J. M. Synge, p. 13.

nature as the ultimate metaphor for the potential of life available to each man. Only the accessibility of nature can be defined by Synge as its simplicity. The compelling evidence of spontaneity that nature offers as its doctrine is for Synge more acceptable than the philosophy of process.

Synge's desire to become a critic of Continental literature was easily adapted to the simplicity in his chosen life style. To complement his love of travel and the availability of little money, Synge adopted the ways of a wandering waif. Although originally venturing to Germany to pursue musical ambitions, "before leaving Germany he visited Munich and Berlin, and there became acquainted with the works of Heine, and with modern German and Austrian drama."¹⁷ Maurice Bourgeois perceives definite influences upon Synge in this contemporary German drama. Most notably, "it is extremely likely that Synge gained much of his fine sense of constructive technique from the earlier Gerhardt Hauptmann."¹⁸

His continental itinerary now brought Synge to Florence, Italy. Synge's studies of Petrarch were later to become evident as he produced translations of some of his verse. Synge determined, however, that the final step necessary to establish himself as a Continental critic was to journey to France and acquaint himself with the contemporary French literary scene. In the manner of Arthur Symons "it

¹⁹Maurice Bourgeois, John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre (New York: Macmillan, 1913), pp. 16-7.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 17.

was then his intention, native Irishman though he was, to become for the benefit of English and Irish readers an interpreter of French art and thought, from the French standpoint, and, as far as he could, in the French language."¹⁹ In an effort to establish his name he wrote two reviews for the Daily Express of Dublin. The first was a review of Maeterlinck's La Sagesse et le Destinée which appeared on December 17, 1898. The second review, a study of the work of Anatole le Braz, was published on January 28, 1899. Synge was to spend four more years criticizing French literature, many of his offerings being contributed to the Speaker, later known as the Nation. Two authors of such reviewed works, M. Pierre Loti and Anatole France, particularly fascinated Synge.

It was just before leaving Paris in 1903 that Synge became well-acquainted with James Joyce. "In Paris he spent a good deal of time with James Joyce, who at first disliked Riders to the Sea, but later admired it enough to translate it into Italian."²⁰ Indeed, Herbert Howarth recognizes three characteristics in Joyce's writing that were learned from Synge. "Among the Syngianisms are the following: absorbing the objective scene into the voice; dramatising the comedy of filth taken from life; marrying comedy with poetry."²¹ Howarth

¹⁹Ibid., p. 18.

²⁰Robin Skelton, J. M. Synge and His World (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), p. 78.

²¹Howarth, p. 241.

tactfully points out that the contemporary critic can only speculate upon "possible points of contact" between the work of Synge and Joyce, but it may be valuable to note that "the Complete Works of Synge were among the books that Joyce retained after the 1938-9 sale of his library, but that was the Random House edition of 1935 and its retention proves only his affection for the works and the memories surrounding them."²²

Before returning to Ireland in March of 1903, Synge associated with Arthur Symons, G. K. Chesterton, John Masefield, W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory in their London circle. Synge particularly valued his friendship with John Masefield. Masefield later attempted to aid Synge in the publication of The Aran Islands.

Several years earlier Yeats had suggested to Synge that he should travel to the tiny Aran Islands just off Ireland's coast to study the barren existence of the Islands' native inhabitants. It was Yeats' conviction that Synge's abilities were better suited to the creation of a new national literature forged from the fabric of Irish common life than to the criticism of Continental literature. Finally heeding the advice that Yeats had imparted to him in 1896 or 1897, Synge first visited the Aran Islands in May of 1898.

Tempered by his imaginative capabilities, Synge's visits to the Aran Islands acquainted him with a bleak life and poetic language that

²²Ibid., pp. 243-4.

produced the six plays upon which his reputation stands. His dramatic offerings were first presented at Dublin's Abbey Theater. The Abbey opened on the night of December 27, 1904 by producing Yeats' On Baile's Strand and Lady Gregory's Spreading the News. While at first only contributing plays to the Abbey's productions, Synge soon joined Yeats and Lady Gregory as one of the three directors of the newly formed Irish National Theatre Society Limited.

This directorship prompted a continuing association between these individuals. A reflection of the closeness of this relationship is captured by O'Connor. "The death of Synge came very close to being the end of the others as writers: Yeats' work between 1909 and his marriage is the least important part of his output, and all Lady Gregory's best work was written during Synge's lifetime."²³ When public outcries met the first performances of The Playboy of the Western World, In The Shadow of the Glen and The Well of the Saints, Yeats and Lady Gregory responded in an adamant defense of Synge's work. In a review of the Playboy, the Freeman's Journal "referred to the production as 'squalid' and to the language as 'barbarous jargon' and to the characters as 'repulsive creatures.'"²⁴ Responding to public objections, Lady Gregory observed that "they, not used to works of imagination and wild fantasy, thought the play a libel on the Irish peasant. . . ."²⁵

²³O'Connor, p. 30.

²⁴Skelton, J. M. Synge and His World, p. 110.

²⁵Lady Augusta Gregory, "The Coming of the Irish Players," Collier's, 21 Oct. 1911, p. 24.

Synge did not actively participate in this debate, but he later responded to it in National Drama: A Farce. In this book "he mocked the foolishness of 'wilful nationalism' that demanded a drama that should display 'the virtue of its country'" only, suggesting "'that Ireland will gain if writers deal manfully, directly and decently with the entire reality of life. . . .'"²⁶

Members of the police force were required more than once to control the hostility of the riotous audiences of the Playboy. Yeats frequently debated the merits of the play with the dissident mobs. By the end of the first week of its performance, the Playboy spectators were quite subdued, apparently "because the patrons had no wish to appear in court the next day."²⁷

Michael Monahan believes the "motive" behind the Playboy criticism "is religious, or rather ecclesiastical in its nature, and it has been pronounced from the very beginning against the whole literary movement of which Synge was a part."²⁸ Monahan compares the Playboy to other works which have suffered in Ireland from "priestly censure."²⁹ In his examination of the Playboy disturbances, however, W. B. Yeats

²⁶Skelton, J. M. Synge and His World, p. 85.

²⁷Ibid., p. 114.

²⁸Michael Monahan, Nova Hibernia: Irish Poets and Dramatists of Today and Yesterday, 2nd ed. (1914; rpt. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), pp. 30-1.

²⁹Ibid., p. 31.

succeeds in proposing a most eloquent defense of the play. "Many are beginning to recognize the right of the individual mind to see the world in its own way, to cherish the thoughts which separate men from one another, and that are the creators of distinguished life. . . ."30

It was in this spirit that Yeats preferred verbal debate to physical violence in his confrontations with the hostile crowds at the Abbey. The intention of the Irish National Theatre Society Limited was to exercise "the right of the individual mind," and this expression found its ideal embodiment in the drama of J. M. Synge. John Eglinton remembered that Synge "was a listener, and it was he who heard the promptings of the ironic muse who at that time was endeavouring to be heard in Ireland."³¹

³⁰W. B. Yeats, Explorations (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 229-30.

³¹John Eglinton, "Yeats and His Story," Dial, May 1926, p. 361.

CHAPTER II

ACCEPTANCE AS CHOICE: SYNGE'S HEROIC MOMENT

In his autobiography Synge suggests that music may be the purest art form. Synge discovered that music, in its universality as an "ideal form," provided a "definite unity."¹ In his plays Synge assumes the task of creating a unity with language and symbol for a world that would otherwise prove to be inadequate. W. B. Yeats observes that Synge "took from life the violent and incomplete that through its symbolism he might reveal a heroic dream."² The resolution of Synge's art can be apprehended in the creation of this heroic moment. Implying that the heroic moment is an alternative to death, Synge emphasizes that "every joy and pain" must be "resolved in one passion of relief, the only rest" coming "in the dissolution of the person."³ This transcendent resolution is exemplified in Yeats' On Baile's Strand by Cuchulain's assault on the sea at the play's end. The Fool describes Cuchulain's heroic act: "Ah! now he is running down to the sea, but he is holding up his sword as if he were going into a fight. Well struck! well struck!" Later, the Fool

¹J. M. Synge, The Autobiography of J. M. Synge, ed. Alan Price (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1965), p. 38.

²Yeats, "The Abbey Players, What Ireland Now Offers Us," p. 633.

³Synge, The Autobiography of J. M. Synge, p. 28.

intercedes again on behalf of the Blind Man: "There, he is down! He is up again. He is going out in the deep water. There is a big wave. It has gone over him. I cannot see him now. He has killed kings and giants, but the waves have mastered him, the waves have mastered him!"

A heroic moment has been created by Cuchulain's willed "dissolution" of his "person." Cuchulain's behavior represents an active choice, a decision that substitutes a "definite unity" for the chaos of the temporal world. His action is an ultimate manifestation of faith in the absolute beauty of art. Arthur Ganz reminds the reader of Synge that "more than anything else, he desired to create an image of beauty that would stand against the sense of the absoluteness of death. . . ."4

Hugh MacLean uses a similar rationale as he accounts for Synge's quest for permanence in both The Playboy of the Western World and Deirdre of the Sorrows: "man's salvation, he seems to have felt, lies within himself--if indeed it is within reach."⁵ David H. Greene, while noting that "the Deirdre of the original legend is too lacking in self-assertion to be the central character of a tragedy," emphasizes that Synge's Deirdre "no longer tamely submits to her fate but meets it because no other course is preferable."⁶ In the heroic tradition of

⁴Arthur Ganz, "J. M. Synge and the Drama of Art," Modern Drama, May 1967, p. 58.

⁵Hugh H. MacLean, "The Hero as Playboy," University of Kansas City Review, Autumn 1954, p. 11.

⁶David H. Greene, "Synge's Unfinished Deirdre," PMLA, Dec. 1948, p. 1316.

Cuchulain Deirdre and her companion, Naisi, "thus become truly tragic characters who play an active part in their own destiny."⁷

When art assumes its necessary dimensions for Synge, "for Deirdre, as for Naisi, death is a triumph over limitation."⁸ "In Deirdre Synge's work is summed up. Acceptance becomes choice, and the agony of life is transmuted into the perfect beauty of art."⁹

Just as human sensations are objectified by the apprehension of "ideal form," so is myth a reflection of the human psyche or imagination. The process of symbol formulation may be regarded as representative of man's attempt to create myth. Yeats' Cuchulain is a symbol that has evolved from this process. Joseph Campbell intimates the heroic alternative when he remarks that "not only Freud and Jung, but all serious students of psychology and of comparative religions today, have recognized and hold that the forms of myth and the figures of myth are of the nature essentially of dream."¹⁰

This view implies that "since such images stem from the psyche, they refer to the psyche. They tell us of its structure, its order

⁷Ibid., p. 1317.

⁸Brenda Murphy, "Stoicism, Asceticism, and Ecstasy: Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows," Modern Drama, June 1974; p. 161.

⁹Ganz, p. 68.

¹⁰Joseph Campbell, Myths To Live By, 3rd ed. (1972; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1973), p. 261.

and its forces, in symbolic terms."¹¹ Campbell therefore maintains that "mythologies, having sprung from the psyche point back to the psyche ('the center'): and anyone seriously turning within will, in fact, rediscover their references in himself."¹²

Ernst Cassirer grapples with this problem of definition in Language and Myth. He maintains that the symbol must necessarily transcend itself when posing an intimation of ideal form. He argues that the symbol by its agency of revealing reality becomes in itself the actual reality:

From this point of view, myth, art, language and science appear as symbols; not in the sense of mere figures which refer to some given reality by means of suggestion and allegorical renderings, but in the sense of forces each of which produces and posits a world of its own. Thus the special symbolic forms are not imitations, but organs of reality, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension, and as such is made visible to us. The question as to what reality is apart from these forms, and what are its independent attributes, becomes irrelevant here.¹³

Since the question of "reality" becomes "irrelevant" at this point, the value of the symbol is in the real orientation which it provides the human quest. At any rate, the suggestion of "symbolic forms" is an integral factor in the process of myth formulation.

In the drama of Synge the projected form of the imagination, the dream, is a symbol that never abandons the recognition of its opposite,

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 266.

¹³Ernst Cassirer, Language and Myth (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), p. 8.

the temporal world of mortal decay. The dream can be an objectification of human emotion, and therefore a symbol. In Synge's plays it is created in response to or in defiance of death. Synge courts this sometimes delicate, but often brutal, relationship as a means to effect both tragedy and comedy. Synge's most terse philosophical comment on the opposition between death and the dream is contained within Deirdre of the Sorrows, but the conflict is present in all of his plays. Figgis perceives that "it is a strange and mystic sense of doom that broods over all his dramas, even though it be a comedy like The Well of the Saints. Like a background of tragical intensity it is never absent from his work: an impersonal pain significant of impending terror."¹⁴ Riders to the Sea would probably be the most frequently cited expression of this mood. The development of intensified emotions in the play suggests a tragic idyll. But does Riders to the Sea assume classic tragic proportion? With his characteristically questionable intentions, Synge reminds the reader of a tragic mode which is apparently not applicable to Riders to the Sea. He regards how tragedy formerly meant "the story of a great reverse of fortune," which this play, he explains, "is certainly not."¹⁵

What, then, does the life portrayed in Riders to the Sea offer the players and the reader? For the critic Denis Johnston the play "is

¹⁴Figgis, p. 58.

¹⁵J. M. Synge, Some Formerly Unpublished Letters and Documents of J. M. Synge (Montreal: Redpath Press, 1959), p. 31.

Orestean, and in the true Greek tradition, where no moral choice at all is offered to the characters. The sea--not the Gods--is the source of the law in this play, and there is no escape from it."¹⁶ As Bartley's body is brought to her at the play's end, Maurya determines that "they're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me" (p. 96). Johnston views Maurya's expression as a defiant conclusion in the face of natural law. "These expressions of human dignity under the buffetings of life are not wails of anguish, nor are they even projections of the stoicism of Job. They are man's answer to Heaven, and should be played as such."¹⁷

The tragic dimensions of Riders to the Sea are envisioned in a similar manner in a review appearing in 1911. The article acknowledges the resounding tones of unsympathetic fate. "Riders to the Sea has in its texture all the old Greek solemnity, and the shadow of a fatality not to be eluded. Fate has now done its worst. Life has no more to give of sorrow."¹⁸

Numerous interpretations of Maurya's observations can be considered. The mourning of the universal mother after elemental events is all too familiar. There is, however, one peculiarity in this situation that must be recognized. Maurya ponders that "in the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and

¹⁶Denis Johnston, John Millington Synge (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 18, 20-1.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸"The Poetry of Ireland," Living Age, 7 Oct. 1911, pp. 17-8.

children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old" (p. 89). The real tragedy posed in this reflection is that on this island the young often die before the old. The essential task of the reader, however, is to determine the exact nature of the mood created by Maurya at the curtain. Is she, as Johnston suggests, possessed by a bitterness that can now only foster a defiant attitude? Perhaps, but is it not instead possible that she has been overcome by a new knowledge of life, provided only through the intimacy of a confrontation with death?

MAURYA (continuing) Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied. (p. 97)

Does the individual consciousness of Maurya now perceive with new clarity the reality of her being, and most important, accept it with simple resignation? Alan Price senses a frequent effort by Synge to release at a certain point the tension and apprehension he has created in his plays. "From the ending of this tension and from the contemplation of the actuality behind all appearances and dreams, comes a new state of calm acquiescence, humility and compassion. . . ."19 It is perhaps more meaningful, therefore, to see Maurya's final observation as a recognition of the peace that will only come in death.

The intensity of mood and the density of atmosphere to be found in Riders to the Sea is reminiscent of Maeterlinck's The Intruder.

¹⁹Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, 2nd ed. (1961; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1972), p. 191.

Synge's richly descriptive passages in the play are a testament to his comprehensive perception of this primitive island life. It is Synge's certain perception of reality and his faithful representation of it that instills the vitality of joy and sorrow in his plays:

Spontaneity is the breath of being. And it was because he was spontaneous that mood flowed into mood in him, and emotion succeeded emotion, till in the very quiescence of vital self he passed into a large unity that seemed only perception.²⁰

It has been argued that the thematic implications of Synge's drama are depressing and profoundly pessimistic. This causes the appearance of a fundamental problem of perspective. The apparent pessimism of Synge is viewed by one critic, H. M. Walbrook, as a suggestion of optimism:

This national drama of Ireland has been called a drama of pessimism; and so it is, but the point is that it is a pessimism not of weakness, but of strength. Is pessimism, asks Nietzsche somewhere, necessarily a sign of decline, of decay, of failure, of exhausted instincts? Is there not a pessimism--an intellectual predilection for what is hard, awful, evil, problematical--which is a pessimism of exuberant health and of strength?²¹

In one of his series of books, The Masks of God: Creative Mythology, Joseph Campbell specifically cites Walbrook's fragmentary mental reference to Nietzsche. Campbell recalls Nietzsche's conception of the "tragic feeling" as revealed in The Twilight of the Idols (1888):

²⁰Figgis, p. 56.

²¹H. M. Walbrook, "Irish Dramatists and Their Countrymen," Living Age, 27 Dec. 1913, p. 792.

Saying yes to life, even in its most inimical, hardest problems, the will to life delighting even in the offer-
ing up of its highest types to its own inexhaustibility--that is what I have called Dionysian, that is what I have divined to be the bridge to the psychology of the tragic poet. Not to be unladen through pity and terror, not to be purged by this vehement discharge of a dangerous emotion (as in Aristotle's view), but beyond terror and pity, to be oneself identified with the everlasting joy of becoming--that joy which includes in itself the joy in destruction as well. . . .²²

Whether Synge's scenes reflect subtle humor or pathetic tragedy, the reader partakes of the joy of catharsis. And the authenticity of this response can only be assured by the absolute reality of character portrayal. In his Preface to The Playboy of the Western World Synge regards that

on the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality. (p. 4)

This implication in Synge's drama is that reality, both life and death, must be affirmed. An objective assessment of the sorrow of life and even death can then be considered as a source of strength to the human spirit.

The desire to affirm or willingly be a part of the wondrous processes of the natural world is continually suggested in The Well of the Saints and Deirdre of the Sorrows. The Douls have been left with, and yet finally choose, a world of limited perception that exults in

²²Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God: Creative Mythology, 4th ed. (1968; rpt. New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 356.

the wonders of the natural environment. Deirdre and Naisi place complete faith in their natural desires and in the natural order and willingly accept the consequences.

It is the antithesis of this view, functioning simultaneously in his drama, that provides Synge's work with its paradoxical dynamism. Campbell considers this concern by discussing an evaluation of "the will to life" by Arthur Schopenhauer:

For in Schopenhauer's view, the will, the will to life, which is the very Being of beings, is a blind, insatiable drive, motivating all and eventuating mainly in the sorrows and deaths of all--as anyone can see--yet willfully continued. The more strongly the will to life is affirmed, the more painful are its effects, not only in the willing subject, whose will for more is only enhanced by success, never quelled; but also, and even more hurtfully, in those round about him, whose equivalent wills he frustrates. Recognizing this, and filled, like the Buddha, with compassion by the spectacle of universal pain (the First Noble Truth: "All life is sorrowful"), the undeluded, really honest individual--in Schopenhauer's view--can only conclude that life is the will's (or God's) mistake, something that never should have been. . . .²³

When reading The Well of the Saints the reader is forced to wince as Martin Doul endures the jeering laughter of the crowd. The evidence of hypocrisy in The Tinker's Wedding and The Playboy of the Western World and the consideration of life's paralyzing sorrow in Riders to the Sea causes the reader to ponder if the human element in nature is "something that never should have been."

Synge's players show that the temptation to yield to sorrow never ceases for the human spirit. Indeed, acceptance and even passive

²³Ibid., p. 357.

indifference to the brutality of the natural world may be required. But can Synge's "will to life," like Schopenhauer's, be affirmed if it is stifled by the conclusion that "life is the will's mistake"? The beauty of the natural world and the human ability to exult in the apprehension and creation of art would never allow Synge to make such an admission.

It is Synge's determination that "rich joy" can be "found only in what is superb and wild in reality." Even the reality of sorrow and death is a source of exultation or joy, because it causes the mobilization of the creative sensibilities. A full appreciation of nature's decree of mortality is then obtained, "oneself identified with the everlasting joy of becoming--that joy which includes in itself the joy in destruction as well. . . ."

CHAPTER III

THE BLAZING STRAW: A STUDY OF SYNGE'S PARADOXICAL DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS

The distinctive tone in Deirdre of the Sorrows readily distinguishes it from the remainder of Synge's plays. Its composition and continuing progression are a testament to Synge's fortitude and sensitivity. Yet the play, unfinished at his death, persists to offer definite conclusions in consolation.

Determining the play's tragic disposition, Synge assimilates the Deirdre legend while creating a poetry of dramatic intensity with the metaphor of folk life. Though Yeats admires his naturalistic approach to the bleakness of human life and death, Yeats recognizes Synge's separate task of assessing life's meaning through the interpretation of specific internalized symbols. Yeats does not, however, deny his own belief in the importance of temporal phenomena. In "The Moods" he emphasizes the necessity of the natural to serve as an absolute definition for "the imaginative artist." Yeats maintains that "we hear much of his need for the restraints of reason, but the only restraint he can obey is the mysterious instinct that has made him an artist, and that teaches him to discover immortal moods in moral desires, an undecaying hope in our trivial ambitions, a divine love in sexual passion." As will be revealed in the course of this

¹W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, 2nd ed. (1961; rpt. New York: Collier Books, 1968), p. 195.

discussion, Synge regards the "gods'" work in this world with a fundamentally pagan sensibility. John Synge's greatness depends on his remarkably succinct portrayals of the human desire to challenge the hostility of a transient existence.

From the very beginning of Deirdre of the Sorrows the events of the play and the actions of the characters appear to be directed by a dynamism of fate. Synge allows the Deirdre legend to cause the characters to speak continually of what is "foretold." This certain knowledge of the coming destruction and the players' various death poses contribute to the stormy atmosphere described near the opening of the play. It is significant that Synge interjects nature's storm at this point in the play. The storm-draped landscape inspires the frolicsome Deirdre. Conchubor the High King, who would end Deirdre's freedom, however, is fearful of nature's manifestation. Since Conchubor can also be seen to represent death, his fear of the storm might also show Synge's momentary defiance of the power of death. Even if this explanation of this incident is acceptable, Synge does not pursue the storm's significance in the remainder of the play.

Assuming death's influence in seeking the presence of Deirdre against her will, Lavarcham characterizes Conchubor's symbolic importance. "In the end of all there is none can go against Conchubor, and it's folly that we're talking, for if any went against Conchubor it's sorrow he'd earn and the shortening of his day of life" (p. 223). Deirdre and her lover, Naisi, however, determine that death, or

Conchubor, cannot be feared or regarded if it would destroy life's joy. They intend to demonstrate that joy must assume its own rights even in its inevitable confrontation with sorrow. Deirdre affirms that "it should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest, if it's for a short space only" (p. 230). Naisi returns that "we've a short space only to be triumphant and brave" (p. 230). Another moment's pondering causes Deirdre again to reflect. "I'm a long while in the woods with my own self, and I'm in little dread of death, and it earned with riches would make the sun red with envy, and he going up the heavens; and the moon pale and lonesome, and she wasting away. 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?" (p. 230).

There is a striking similarity between the philosophy of these two characters and the motivation of the figures in Thomas Hardy's novels.

D. H. Lawrence perceives that the people of Hardy's novels

are always bursting suddenly out of bud and taking a wild flight into flower, always shooting suddenly out of a tight convention, a tight hidebound cabbage state into something quite madly personal . . . it is all explosive. . . . This is the tragedy of Hardy, always the same: the tragedy of those who, more or less pioneers, have died in the wilderness, whither they had escaped for free action, after having left the walled security, and the comparative imprisonment, of the established convention. This is the theme of novel after novel: remain quite within the convention, and you are good, safe and happy in the long run, though you never have the vivid pang of sympathy on your side; or, on the other hand, be passionate, individual, wilful, you will find the security of the convention a walled prison, you will escape, and you will die, either of your own lack of strength

to bear the isolation and the exposure, or by direct revenge from the community, or both.²

Deirdre and Naisi are not concerned with "the long run," but "the vivid pang of" human "sympathy" is vital to them. They confront death, recognize "the isolation and the exposure" and yet conclude, "isn't it a small thing is foretold about the ruin of ourselves . . . when all men have age coming and great ruin in the end?"

Deirdre mourns that they cannot be left alone with the choice they have made. "Emain should be no safe place for myself and Naisi. And isn't it a hard thing they'll leave us no peace, Lavarcham, and we so quiet in the woods?" (p. 234). The difficulty, if not the impossibility of the flight to real freedom is certainly implied here. Synge argues, however, that the importance of the dream cannot be regarded merely according to the possibility of its fulfillment. The conception of the dream is at once its challenge and consummation. If the end is of no consequence, Deirdre and Naisi are content to discover vitality in the real dream. In his "Preface to the First Edition of The Well of the Saints," Yeats distinguishes Synge's use of the dream:

Mr. Synge, indeed, sets before us ugly, deformed or sinful people, but his people, moved by no practical ambition, are driven by a dream of that impossible life. He tells us of realities, but he knows that art has never taken more than its symbols from anything that the eye can see or the hand measure. For though the people of the play use no phrase they could not use in daily life, we know that we are seeking to express what no eye has ever seen.³

²Irving Howe, Thomas Hardy (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 63.

³Yeats, Essays and Introductions, pp. 304-5.

Though the title of Yeats' Preface indicates another of Synge's plays, its application to all of his plays cannot be escaped. Yeats aptly describes Synge's drama as a "beautiful" and at times "bitter reverie."

Deirdre and Naisi are joined together "by the sun and moon and the whole earth" (p. 233), as the ceremony bids, but the decision of whether to always reside apart from Emain still remains as Fergus and Owen enter in Act II. It is here that Deirdre wonders if the future can ensure the happiness the past has provided. "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 to-morrow 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" (p. 235). Now risking "direct revenge from the community" and searching for "strength to bear the isolation," as Lawrence reminds the reader, Deirdre still concludes "the end has come." "There's no place to stay always. . . . It's a long time we've had, pressing the lips together, going up and down, resting in our arms, Naisi, waking with the smell of June in the tops of the grasses, and listening to the birds in the branches that are highest. . . . It's a long time we've had, but the end has come, surely" (p. 243). In the course of this dialogue Naisi pleads "come away and we'll be safe always" (p. 243). Deirdre assures him, however, that "there's no safe place, Naisi, on the ridge of the world" (p. 243). Naisi remarks that "you're right, maybe. It should be a poor thing to see great lovers and they sleepy and old" (p. 244). Deirdre responds

in a consoling manner. "We're seven years without roughness or growing weary; seven years so sweet and shining, the gods would be hard set to give us seven days the like of them. It's for that we're going to Emain, where there'll be a rest for ever, or a place for forgetting, in great crowds and they making a stir" (p. 244). Now that the dream has been realized, the two characters accept, but through what seems to them active choice, the events which are to come. They anticipate old age and the hostility of Conchubor, but Synge rewards them with nobility for actively seeking to comprehend their fate and for confronting it without fear.

The character of Owen is not included in the original Deirdre legend. The suffering in the mind of Owen, like the internal strife of Conchubor, denotes the tension created by Synge in the play. The following interchange occurs after Deirdre and Naisi announce their intentions to return to Emain:

FERGUS You've made a choice wise men will be glad of in the five ends of Ireland.

OWEN Wise men is it, and they going back to Conchubor? I could stop them only Naisi put in his sword among my father's ribs, and when a man's done that he'll not credit your oath. Going to Conchubor! I could tell of plots and tricks, and spies were well paid for their play. (He throws up a bag of gold.) Are you paid, Fergus?

[He scatters gold pieces over Fergus.]

FERGUS He is raving. . . . Seize him.

OWEN (flying between them) You won't. Let the lot of you be off to Emain, but I'll be off before you--Dead men, dead men! Men who'll die for Deirdre's beauty; I'll be before you in the grave!

[Runs out with his knife in his hand.] (pp. 245-6)

The madness of Owen is a separate tragedy. As reality often dictates, the memory of injustice or sorrow in the past can cause justice to be neglected in the present. And yet the deliberation of Owen is still evident in his raving speech. It is a fatal compromise for him to forsake the Deirdre he admires. As certainly as this act must follow the death of his father, his madness must now anticipate his own destruction.

After Deirdre and Naisi discover the open grave in Act III, Synge inserts a comment about the cruel solitude of death. Naisi ponders his unjust fate and that of his brothers. "We are shut in, and I have not Ainnle and Ardan to stand near me. Isn't it a hard thing that three who have conquered many may not die together? (pp. 254-5). The fellowship of life that must end in absolute loneliness seems to be Synge's implied criticism here.

The open grave assumes a shadowing power that tends to unify the events of Act III while also creating the immediate presence of the spectre of death. In Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature Daniel Corkery accounts for Synge's use of this staging feature:

It focuses the feeling, it explains the hard bare phrasing, it heightens the exaltation in which the play ends. It sanctions one of the best passages in the play: "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."⁴

⁴Daniel Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1966), p. 226.

Deirdre and Naisi, however, determine that there are "things . . . worse than death" (p. 255). Naisi relates that "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" (p. 256). Synge implies here that the pangs of loneliness are worse than death. Unfortunately, explains Naisi, "there's nothing, surely, the like of a new grave of open earth for putting a great space between two friends that love" (p. 256). Deirdre sincerely assures him that "if there isn't, it's that grave when it's closed will make us one for ever, and we two lovers have had great space without weariness or growing old or any sadness of the mind" (p. 256). With these lines Synge suggests the approaching "exaltation" on which the play ends.

The often tragic influence of circumstance is again evident as Conchubor and Naisi almost succeed in a reconciliation. Only the sudden, yet plotted death cries of his brothers cause him to recoil and appeal "do not hold me from my brothers" (p. 258). The apprehension and yet also the resolve of Conchubor is shown when he announces "I was near won this night, but death's between us now" (p. 258). Synge does, however, allow Conchubor to earn a certain nobility by exhibiting the struggle in the mind of the High King. After witnessing the wild sorrow of Deirdre upon the death of Naisi, Conchubor observes that "it's I'll know the way to pity and care you, and I with a share of troubles has me thinking this night it would be a good bargain if it was I was in the grave, and Deirdre crying over me, and it was Naisi

who was old and desolate" (p. 260). The lonely, grieving passion of the aged king is again related: "It's not long you'll be desolate, and I seven years saying, 'It's a bright day for Deirdre in the woods of Alban;' or saying again, 'What way will Deirdre be sleeping this night, and wet leaves and branches driving from the north?' Let you not break the thing I've set my life on, and you giving yourself up to your sorrow when it's joy and sorrow do burn out like straw blazing in an east wind" (pp. 260-1). This final statement of Conchubor must be of the greatest importance to Synge. Though both joy and sorrow must be merited as necessary human emotions, Synge may be arguing that "giving yourself up" completely to either sense will invite even greater sorrow and depression. Synge may also be pondering in a stoical manner why man must sacrifice himself to joy and sorrow when both will finally only burn like straw. Synge has here introduced this necessary paradox, which can only be fully defined at the play's end.

Synge attempts, therefore, to reveal a conflict within the character of Conchubor. By the end of the play Conchubor can only conclude that "it is I who am out of my wits, with Emain in flames, and Deirdre raving, and my own heart gone within me" (p. 266). Daniel Corkery characterizes the significance of Conchubor's mental anguish:

Indeed in Conchubor, who, knowing himself for king, master of his people's destinies, fears, for all that, he'll miss Deirdre in the end, who also speaks of the wildness and confusion in his own mind--in him, Synge, if he only knew it, had happened on the only type of human being that can move

men to the depths of their being--the character that is divided in his own mind.⁵

The compassionate tempering of Synge's drama transforms it into a poetry of piercing personal intensity. Yeats reminds the reader of the need to distinguish between the dream mode and its consequence. In "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time" Yeats perceives that "in Synge's plays also, fantasy gives the form and not the thought, for the core is always, as in all great art, an overpowering vision of certain virtues, and our capacity for sharing in that vision is the measure of our delight. Great art chills us at first by its coldness or its strangeness, by what seems capricious, and yet it is from these qualities it has authority, as though it had fed on locusts and wild honey."⁶ With characteristic terseness, Yeats has described the unwelcoming doubt which overcomes the witness upon first considering an art work of formidable dimension. The moment of confrontation with a new perspective inspires evaluation and yet also sustains the possibility of rejection. Whatever its appraised significance, however, its intrinsic "qualities" must depend on the projection of its own "authority."

The drama of Synge does project an "authority" that cannot be disregarded. Synge displays the natural world, but only in rare perspective. Yeats believes "the imaginative writer shows us the world as

⁵Ibid., pp. 223-4.

⁶Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 339.

a painter does his picture, reversed in a looking-glass, that we may see it, not as it seems to eyes habit has made dull, but as we were Adam and this the first morning; and when the new image becomes as little strange as the old we shall stay with him, because he has, besides the strangeness, not strange to him, that made us share his vision, sincerity that makes us share his feeling."⁷ The vision allowed the readers of Synge "as we were Adam" is exhibited by the density and yet the freshness of his language. The deliberate solemnity of his characters often disguises his skillful comic effects. The relative absence of humor in Deirdre of the Sorrows denotes some difference in the intention of Synge, but even in a total dedication to seriousness his effectiveness cannot be challenged.

In his characterizations an innocence is portrayed, but it is the innocence to be discovered in the apprehension of sincere wonder, and not in the instance where wisdom is lacking. The wisdom of Synge's characters is the wisdom of proper innocence. In the drama of Synge innocence is natural and it is naturally represented. To the detractors who would take issue with the simplicity of this philosophy Synge would argue, as does Yeats, that "to speak of one's emotions without fear or moral ambition, to come out from under the shadow of other men's minds, to forget their needs, to be utterly oneself, that is all the Muses care for. Villon, pander, thief and man-slayer, is as immortal in their eyes, and illustrates in the cry of his ruin as great

⁷Ibid.

a truth, as Dante in abstract ecstasy, and touches our compassion more."⁸
 The sensitivity and conviction of this belief is a proper dramatic epigram. "Synge's Deirdre is like Helen of Troy; his kings, chieftains, and princes are like immortals wandered from Olympus, struggling helplessly with the fates of mortal men."⁹

Yeats sees Synge's work, and all art as initiating a process of separation which will enhance our human appreciation of "being" while not necessarily adding to our store of human knowledge:

All art is the disengaging of a soul from place and history, its suspension in a beautiful or terrible light to await the Judgment, though it must be, seeing that all its days were a Last Day, judged already. It may show the crimes of Italy as Dante did, or Greek mythology like Keats, or Kerry and Galway villages, and so vividly that ever after I shall look at all with like eyes, and yet I know that Cino da Pistoia thought Dante unjust, that Keats knew no Greek, that those country men and women are neither so lovable nor so lawless as 'mine author sung it me;' that I have added to my being, not my knowledge.¹⁰

Yeats has made a critical judgment about the moment that is outside of time. As T. S. Eliot has also argued, the artist can only triumph when time is escaped. In this "suspension" the poetic image retains its inherent vitality. It is only when this greatest of moments, the essence of memory, is discontinued, that the truth of immortality is destroyed. Each moment, as Yeats emphasizes, must "await the Judgment"

⁸Ibid.

⁹Mary M. Colum, "Shaw and Synge," Forum, Dec. 1935, p. 357.

¹⁰Yeats, Essays and Introductions, pp. 339-40.

or be individually evaluated. But the fact that this suspended moment has been causally formed by the creative imagination allows Yeats to maintain that it is "judged already." The suspended moment, therefore, acts as its own judge. The fact that this peculiar moment has been caused to exist is in itself an act of judgment.

Yeats also recognizes art and the suspended moment as serving to enrich "being" and not to increase "knowledge." "Being" is therefore certainly more than "knowledge," and wisdom is more than the idea of knowing.

In the final scene Deirdre longs to join Naisi, even in death. She mourns the loss of Naisi while announcing her certain intention: "Draw a little back from Naisi, who is young for ever. Draw a little back from the white bodies I am putting under a mound of clay and grasses that are withered--a mound will have a nook for my own self when the end is come" (p. 264). While exhibiting Synge's belief in a certain beauty to be found in death, these words are also reminiscent of one of Synge's translations of Petrarch. Derived from Petrarch's "Laura in Death," the selection is entitled "He is Jealous of the Heavens and the Earth":

What a grudge I am bearing the earth that has its arms about her, and is holding that face away from me, where I was finding peace from great sadness.

What a grudge I am bearing the Heavens that are after taking her, and shutting her in with greediness, the Heavens that do push their bolt against so many.

What a grudge I am bearing the blessed saints that have got her sweet company, that I am always seeking; and what a

grudge I am bearing against Death, that is standing in her two eyes, and will not call me with a word.¹¹

Synge's paradoxical stance in Deirdre of the Sorrows has already been introduced. In the play Synge validates the human sensation of joy by sanctioning the sojourn of Deirdre and Naisi. Their belief that "it should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest, if it's for a short space only" also implies Synge's recognition of the necessity of imagination and the dream. In allowing the two characters to return to certain death, however, Synge is emphasizing the importance of accepting the meaninglessness of life which human reasoning cannot comprehend. These two positions alone represent a paradox. But Synge prods the critic to further contemplation when Conchubor pleads to Deirdre, "let you not break the thing I've set my life on, and you giving yourself up to your sorrow when it's joy and sorrow do burn out like straw blazing in an east wind." Synge has demonstrated that the individual should not attempt to completely sustain either joy or sorrow. The straw blazes because it is absurd to allow the domination of sorrow when the reality of the imagination remains unaffected by it, and yet the dream cannot exist and the imagination cannot create without sorrow's foil.

¹¹Synge, The Complete Works of John M. Synge, p. 304.

CHAPTER IV

TRAGICOMIC ART

In his eulogistic biography P. P. Howe commends Synge's treatment of Pegeen and Christy in The Playboy of The Western World since "the stimulus of fine tragedy is in it, because each has got self-realization in the end of all."¹ It is important to note that this play is recognized by many to be Synge's greatest and most effective comedy. Such a contrast is not really peculiar when examining the drama of J. M. Synge.

It is possible to discern a particular blending of both the comic and tragic element in all but two of Synge's dramatic offerings. Riders to the Sea and Deirdre of the Sorrows can only be received as tragedies. His tragicomic art, therefore, presents

a tragedy and a comedy, and yet not two plays but one. Nor has Synge at any moment made the mistake of the lesser dramatist, and put a divided claim on our emotion--on this side of the stage an occasion for laughter, on that a thing to bring us near to tears; rather, with Shakespeare's great unifying touch, he has made a mingled yarn of both together.²

With In the Shadow of the Glen Synge poses a dramatic situation with explosive comic potential. The Tramp, though armed with a sharp sewing needle, barely tolerates remaining in the presence of the

¹P. P. Howe, J. M. Synge: A Critical Study, 2nd ed. (1912; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1968), p. 70.

²Ibid.

apparently dead Dan Burke. The sight of the Tramp's shock upon being interrupted by the slowly rising "corpse" when nervously immersed in the "De Profundis" is totally disarming. Its comic effect is calculated and completely predictable. The audience is allowed not only to share in the comic response, but allowed to also appreciate and sense the gradual increase in the situation's comic tension released only by the Tramp's terror-filled apprehension. Dan's assurance, "don't be afeard stranger; a man that's dead can do no hurt" (p. 107), while doing little to relieve the Tramp's anguish, does succeed in heightening the comic effect.

It is within the same play, however, that Nora tragically cannot discover happiness with her husband, but in reality fails to reconcile herself with nature:

I do be thinking in the long nights it was a big fool I was that time, Micheal 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 seeing nothing but 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. (p. 112)

Her distaste for mortal decay is predictable:

You'll be getting old and I'll be getting old, and in a little while I'm telling you, you'll be sitting up in your bed--the way himself was sitting--with a shake in your face, and your teeth falling, and the white hair sticking out round you like an old bush where sheep do be leaping a gap. (p. 114)

Nora has chosen to reject her husband and whatever limited security or peace of mind that their traditional life might provide. She

determines her fate before Dan bids her to "walk out now from that door" to the uncertainty beyond. At this point Synge offers Nora the salvation of the Tramp. Little pleading is required by the Tramp to appeal to Nora's instinct:

Come along with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm, and it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a talk of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep, close to your ear. (p. 117)

Almost hesitating, Nora concludes, "I'm thinking it's myself will be wheezing that time when lying down under the Heavens when the night is cold; but you've a fine bit of talk, stranger, and it's with yourself I'll go" (pp. 117-8). While admiring the Tramp's visionary prowess, Nora's action is prompted also as a kind of final alternative. It appears that the plight of the unsettled spirit is to wander, an unavoidable fate frequently not deliberately chosen.

Synge cares not to consider the critic's case of Nora's relative moral goodness. His intention is rather to present the various players in terms of the choices and perspectives which they represent. Synge does not condemn Dan for his suspicion. Synge also characterizes the Tramp and Micheal as above compromise. Neither does Synge isolate Nora from his sympathies. She is unfortunately alienated from her husband, but she is allowed to seek fulfillment once again. Escorting his new charge, the Tramp exits with familiar assuredness. The breath of the

audience pauses as Dan prevents Micheal's determined attempt to escape the cottage. Dan's unanticipated command eases the remaining tension of the play. "Sit down now and take a little taste of the stuff, Micheal Dara. There's a great drouth on me, and the night is young" (p. 118). The cordial fellowship that pervades at the play's curtain is a testament suggesting that each character has indeed discovered "self-realization in the end of all."

Howe's suggestion can be incorporated into a critical appraisal of The Well of the Saints, but Synge prefers to broaden his emphasis in this play. Once again, however, Howe offers that "the motive to his drama is in the resolute individuality of his people, their wish to achieve distinction."³

In Howe's view, the blind Martin and Mary Doul are stricken with frustration and anguish. These blind beggars obviously exemplifying his point, Howe argues that "all the fine people are 'lonesome' people, and the antagonism is between their will to be 'a wonder' and the 'lonesomeness' of life; between the ambition for self-realization and the nullity of circumstance."⁴

At the beginning of the play Synge carefully denotes the peaceful bliss of the poor and lonely Douls. Challenging his tranquil state, however, Martin insists that "in the long nights it'd be a grand thing if we could see ourselves for one hour, or a minute itself, the way

³Howe, J. M. Synge: A Critical Study, p. 194.

⁴Ibid., p. 195.

we'd know surely we were the finest man and the finest woman of the seven counties of the east. . . ." (p. 123). Given his sight by the Saint's holy water, the opportunity to elude "circumstance" is provided. Tragically, sorrow anticipates his appreciation of the visible world. Thinking he beholds his wife, Martin approaches the splendid Molly Byrne. "The blessing of God on this day, and them that brought me the Saint, for it's grand hair you have, and soft skin, and eyes would make the saints, if they were dark awhile and seeing again, fall down out of the sky" (p. 137). Reminding the reader of the mob behavior to be found in The Playboy of the Western World, the crowd resounds with jeers and uncontrollable laughter at the continuing feeble attempts of the beggar to find his wife.

When the sight of Mary has also been provided and the two finally confront each other, speech initially escapes them as they are consumed with "blank" stares. Their mutual disillusion causes them to spontaneously degrade each other. Martin imparts that "it's on your two knees you should be thanking the Lord God you're not looking on yourself, for if it was yourself you seen you'd be running round in a short while like the old screeching mad-woman is running round in the glen" (p. 139). Mary retaliates by assuring Martin that "it's many a woman is married with finer than yourself should be praising God if she's no child, and isn't loading the earth with things would make the heavens lonesome above, and they scaring the larks, and the crows, and the angels passing in the sky" (pp. 139-40). It cannot be doubted that the Douls admire and value distinctive human physical forms. It must be

remembered, however, that their fantasies concerning each other's physical appearance have been sustained by the lies of the local community. Their dreams are also secure until the unexpected arrival of the Saint.

The even greater perversion of the surrounding folk is easily demonstrated in Act II as Martin Doull attempts to convince the beautiful Molly Byrne to go away with him. Though a silly and often selfish man in his own right, the beggar humbly offers an appealing and sympathetic proposal. "Let you come on now, I'm saying, to the lands of Iveragh and the Reeks of Cork, where you won't set down the width of your two feet and not be crushing fine flowers, and making sweet smells in the air" (p. 152). Molly is appalled by this sudden breach of rank. "Did ever you hear that them that loses their sight loses their senses along with it, Timmy the smith!" (p. 152). Sensing that her attack is not complete, she determines that "he's a bigger fool than that, Timmy. Look on him now, and tell me if that isn't a grand fellow to think he's only to open his mouth to have a fine woman, the like of me, running along by his heels" (p. 152).

As the second act comes to an end, Martin Doull begins to recognize what the audience suspects at the beginning of the play. He screams defiantly at those who have antagonized him, but he realizes the futility of all but his hopes and dreams. As the world becomes dark once more, Martin makes his final appeal:

Yet if I've no strength in me I've a voice left for my prayers,
and may God blight them this day, and my own soul the same hour

with them, the way I'll see them after, Molly Byrne and Timmy the smith, the two of them on a high bed, and they screeching in hell. . . . It'll be a grand thing that time to look on the two of them; and they twisting and roaring out, and twisting and roaring again, one day and the next day, and each day always and ever. It's not blind I'll be that time, and it won't be hell to me, I'm thinking, but the like of heaven itself; and it's fine care I'll be taking the Lord Almighty doesn't know. (p. 156)

Synge's deliberate symbolic use of the blind couple is underlined as the now blind Martin and Mary Doul reflect upon past events. Alienated now from his wife, Martin ponders that "it's lonesome I'll be from this day, and if living people is a bad lot, yet Mary Doul, herself, and she a dirty, wrinkled-looking hag, was better maybe to be sitting along with than no one at all" (p. 157). Following an enlightening confrontation with each other, the wandering waifs realize that for them life is to be appreciated most fully, and seen most clearly, from their distinctive perch in darkness. Mary delightfully concludes that "we're a great pair, surely, and it's great times we'll have yet, maybe, and great talking before we die" (p. 161).

It is only when the Saint and community encourage them to partake of the holy water again that Martin and the reader realize that the blind couple does indeed have the greatest sensitivity and appreciation of life. Martin implores that they might be left alone:

We're not asking our sight, holy father, and let you walk on your own way, and be fasting, or praying, or doing anything that you will, but leave us here in our peace, at the crossing of the roads, for it's best we are this way, and we're not asking to see. (p. 166)

The Saint and the people respond with incredulous disbelief. In answer to the Saint's wondering if he had any desire to view the great natural

sights of the land and "the places where the holy men of Ireland have built up churches to the Lord" (p. 167), Martin replies with certain import:

Is it talking now you are of Knock and Ballavore? Ah, it's ourselves had finer sights than the like of them, I'm telling you, when we were sitting a while back hearing the birds and bees humming in every weed of the ditch, or when we'd be smelling the sweet, beautiful smell does be rising in the warm nights, when you do hear the swift flying things racing in the air, till we'd be looking up in our own minds into a grand sky, and seeing lakes and big rivers, and fine hills for taking the plough. (pp. 167-8)

Synge is suggesting here the ultimate creative potential of the imagination. Mary and Martin Doul need only to utilize the visionary power of their own imaginations to witness the greatest "wonders."

The sanctity of their peace is preserved only by the quick thinking of Martin. As he jars the can from the Saint's grasp, the holy water returns, almost symbolically, to the earth from which it came. Encouraged by the success of his scheme, Martin addresses the Saint with a new authority. "Go on now, holy father, for if you're a fine Saint itself, it's more sense is in a blind man, and more power maybe than you're thinking at all" (p. 171). The greatest power, found in every man's imagination, is again implied here by Synge. The blind Martin Doul, though at times seeming almost "ridiculous," is actually a "stubbornly independent philosopher."⁵ Symbolizing a common attitude of the sterile mind, Synge inserts Timmy's telling testimony. "There's a power of deep rivers with floods in them where you do have to be

⁵Donald Malcolm, "The Well of the Saints: A Criticism," New Yorker, 18 April 1959, p. 83.

lepping [sic] the stones and you going to the south, so I'm thinking the two of them will be drowned together in a short while, surely" (p. 173).

Upon close inspection it can be seen that comedy actually plays a minor role in the effect of the play. Only the continuous attacks by the Douls upon each other provide the play with authentic comedy. The tale is essentially a characterization of "the passing of life without fulfillment, the ceaseless fading of beauty, the elusive quality of happiness, the agony of disillusion. . . ." ⁶ In this play of greater tragic impact, therefore, at least two characters discover "self-realization" as a consequence of the dramatic action. Except for the Douls, the players at the curtain are no different than they were in the beginning of the play. Mary and Martin Doul have discovered that "the elusive quality of happiness" is to be captured only by the persistence of vision. Synge has revealed that the well of the saints, or of each human individual, is the imagination.

The comic intent of Synge in The Tinker's Wedding is more obvious than in any of his other plays. By the end of the play Synge has made a mockery of the supposed sanctity of the priesthood. Long before this has occurred, however, the sympathetic credibility of the priest has been destroyed. Seeing the pair who desire to be united in marriage, the priest attempts evasive action. Not to be discouraged, Sarah bids

⁶Howe, J. M. Synge: A Critical Study, p. 195.

that "it isn't a halfpenny we're asking, holy father; but we were thinking maybe we'd have a right to be getting married; and we were thinking it's yourself would marry us for not a halfpenny at all; for you're a kind man, your reverence, a kind man with the poor" (pp. 185-6). The astonished priest begins his lengthy refusal by announcing to the tinker and his intended, "is it marry you for nothing at all?" (p. 186).

The wedding plans are unfortunately altered by the habits of Micheal's drunken mother, but Synge does not relent in his attack upon the church. Synge arouses Mary and imparts to her a sudden inspiration of sense:

There now, holy father, let you stay easy, I'm telling you, and learn a little sense and patience, the way you'll not be so airy again going to rob poor sinners of their scraps of gold. 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--I'm told there's swearing with it--a word no man would believe, or with drawing rings on our fingers, would be cutting our skins maybe when we'd be taking the ass from the shafts, and pulling the straps the time they'd be slippery with going around beneath the heavens in rains falling.
(pp. 207-8)

In this passage Synge suggests the logic of his belief in naturalism. The play concludes with a similar implication. An oath sworn by the priest relieves the group's fears of reprisal by the community. With this assurance they release their captive from the sack. To their surprise, however, the priest still believes that a retaliatory act is

possible. Before beginning "a Latin malediction in a loud ecclesiastical voice," the priest proclaims that "I've sworn not to call the hand of man upon your crimes to-day; but I haven't sworn I wouldn't call the fire of heaven from the hand of the Almighty God" (p. 209).

It is significant that Synge does not allow Mary, Sarah and Michael to dominate the scene at the curtain. The priest is left, "master of the situation," and yet muttering an invocation that is implied to be foolish. Synge has inserted a guise of ambiguity here that almost conceals his sympathies.

Though an author's criticism of his own work can often be deliberately misleading, Synge's letter to Mr. M. J. Nolan in February of 1907 concerning The Playboy of the Western World is critically appealing. Synge informed him that he "wrote the P. B. directly, as a piece of life, without thinking, or caring to think, whether it was a comedy, tragedy or extravaganza, or whether it would be held to have, or not to have, a purpose. . . ." ⁷ As diverse elements of the Irish population attempted to do upon its first production, various groups still intensely search for particular insults that Synge may have intended. Although Synge did regard his play as a becoming addition to an ailing national literary consciousness, he is more concerned in the Playboy with portraying the free comic spirit than with delivering a particularly brutal assault to a certain segment of the Irish, or any audience.

⁷Synge, Some Formerly Unpublished Letters and Documents of J. M. Synge, pp. 11-2.

In the classical mode, The Playboy of the Western World is a play of discovery. Northrop Frye emphasizes that Synge must initially discover "a personal mask." "The artist searches for a mask, originally to conceal his natural self, but ultimately to reveal his imaginative self, the body of his art."⁸ The actions of Christy represent the deliberations of Synge's "imaginative self." Realization begins anew for Christy when he is forced to respond to the taunting Pegeen:

What else can a new-found Christy do but attempt the deed again to justify himself, from which gesture follows the two final discoveries of his graduation. First, that he can make his old father run for his life, and second, that the company takes a very different view of a romantic tale from the far south and an attempted murder committed before their eyes.⁹

Johnston cites Pegeen's observation of Christy in support of his claim.

"I'll say, a strange man is a marvel, with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard, and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed" (p. 77).

The sympathetic community has now become a hostile mob. Both Christy and the people have taken advantage of each other. Each is frustrated and a victim of the desolation of the world. Christy, "like the woman who lived in the shadow of the glen, . . . has suffered from the loneliness and emptiness of life. His mood is murderous, but it is also amorous; and when it is amorous the poetry of a starved soul

⁸Northrop Frye, Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 235.

⁹Johnston, p. 37.

sings out unafraid."¹⁰ At least Christy can now reflect with well-wrought humor, "ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day" (p. 80). Only the pathetic, yet potentially comic sorrow of Pegeen remains. "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World" (p. 80).

Stuart P. Sherman attempts to distinguish Synge's comic method from that of the classical mode:

In all the classical comedy of the world one is made aware of the seat whence the laughing spirit sallies forth to scourge the vices or sport with the follies and affectations of men. When the play is over, something has been accomplished towards the clarification of one's feelings and ideas; after the comic catharsis, illusions dissolve and give way to a fresh vision of what is true and permanent and reasonable. Synge's comedies end in a kind of ironical bewilderment. His, indeed, is outlaw comedy with gypsy laughter coming from somewhere in the shrubbery by the roadside, peeling out against church and state, and man and wife, and all the ordinances of civil life.¹¹

Mr. Sherman has a hopelessly fixated view of comic range. Behold the "laughing spirit" of the comic muse introducing "a fresh vision of what is true and permanent and reasonable." One certain purpose and pleasure of comedy is the opportunity to laugh at one's own vice portrayed before one's very eyes. It is also proper that Mr. Sherman should mention the vital "comic catharsis." Various "illusions

¹⁰Warren B. Blake, "John Synge and His Plays," Dial, 16 Jan. 1911, p. 39.

¹¹Stuart P. Sherman, "John Synge," Nation, 26 Dec. 1912, pp. 610-11.

dissolve" after the comic catharsis, but only then are new illusions created. If a "vision of what is true and permanent and reasonable" is anything but transient, the purpose of comedy is lost. Are these visions then not mere illusions themselves? Indeed, in both comedy and tragedy, "when the play is over, something has been accomplished towards the clarification of one's feelings and ideas." Is not the best comedy "outlaw comedy," comedy that causes an unavoidable reappraisal of one's own "feelings and ideas"? And is it desirable and even possible to know "whence the laughing spirit sallies forth"? Dazed with the "ironical bewilderment" that ends Synge's plays, at least Mr. Sherman will not be able to find Mr. Synge "somewhere in the shrubbery."

It is probably the searing depth of J. M. Synge's vision more than anything else that contributes to his tragicomic art. There is a peculiar irony in the humor of Synge, "for the result is so deeply sardonic as nearly to overleap humor into the further deeps of actual tragedy. It is rather that the blade of the dramatist searches too deeply into the very secrets of living."¹²

¹²Darrell Figgis, "The Art of J. M. Synge," Forum, Jan. 1912, p. 64.

CHAPTER V

DEATH AND THE HERO

In the face of tragedy the warlike in our soul celebrates its Saturnalias; whoever is accustomed to suffering, whoever seeks out suffering, the heroic man extols his existence by means of tragedy--for him alone does the tragic poet pour this draught of sweetest cruelty.¹

Even before an attempted application of this Nietzschean perspective to Synge's plays, the appeal of studying it in relation to what is known about the playwright's life is exceptional. The term "suffering" is in itself only the first of many words that must be specifically defined in the course of this discussion. Suffering could have a definite immediacy for Synge in both physical and mental representations. Indeed, much of his work was done during obvious physical discomfort and with the knowledge of his impending death. While arguing that Synge's readings of the French decadents only contributed to "the alleged morbidity of Synge's Anschaung," Maurice Bourgeois instead emphasizes the influence of his physical condition:²

His impaired bodily health had distorted his vision from the beginning. His was such an intense, supersensitive temperament that he naturally clutched at extreme types of existence with all the hectic greediness of a consumptive. To him life was not characteristic unless exaggerated, hypertrophied. No doubt Baudelaire and the decadents were strikingly in accordance with this natural bent of Synge, and possibly reinforced it; but they

¹Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols (1888; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 82.

²Bourgeois, p. 61.

did not create it. What was with them a literary fad was with him a vital need.³

It is only natural, therefore, for the world to present itself for Synge in startling contrasts. It is the very presence of this suffering or sorrow, however, that allows Synge to exult in the reality and beauty of joy. This is "the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality," a highlight in the Preface to The Playboy of the Western World. This paradoxical relationship accounts for the sympathetic reception of the Tramp in In the Shadow of the Glen. A life without shelter in the great glens is apparently hard and barren, but it is this naked intimacy with the physical environment which provides the understanding and sympathy of the Tramp's poetical nature.

Characteristically, though the plight of Martin and Mary Doul in The Well of the Saints is indeed sorrowful, only these blind beggars really possess a sympathetic knowledge and appreciation of life in the play. The physical appearance of this couple in the play, and that of many of Synge's tramps and tinkers, are but metaphors for Synge's art. The physical manifestation of humanity can be as deceptive to its spirit as sorrow and ugliness can be to joy and beauty. The validity of Synge's judgments is therefore only affirmed by his choice of character. "It will be observed that Synge, who is never abnormal or morbid, has tramps or tinkers prominent in three of his plays; finding

³Ibid., p. 62.

them a little richer in life than the ordinary man, and making them a little richer again than he found them."⁴

The brilliant and elusive comedy of The Playboy of the Western World is a classic example of Synge's imaginative fancy. The plot of the play is in itself only a vehicle for the imaginative wanderings of Synge. The comic reversals of expectation in the Playboy characterize Synge's flirtation with the intimacy of reality and surreality. As Howarth suggests, "Synge doubled reality into surreality, giving Ireland what she lacked as well as what she showed him."⁵ It is Synge's opinion that each reader of the Playboy must determine individually what actual distinctions can be made between the real and the surreal. This critical perspective accounts for the continuing appeal and fascination of The Playboy of the Western World. The incident which suggested the plot of the Playboy to Synge, similar to his use of other incidents, "slight as some of them were when told him, has, at the outset, a wilder, livelier tinge than the normal occurrences of daily life as we know it. Played on by his vivid imagination it developed into a richly coloured work of art."⁶

In all faithfulness to reality, however, distinctions between life and Synge's art become impossible. Though remaining the vital agent in this process of recognition, Synge maintains the necessary formlessness

⁴Bickley, pp. 26-7.

⁵Howarth, p. 221.

⁶Bickley, p. 27.

of the true imagist. "The Dionysiac musician, himself imageless, is nothing but original pain and reverberation of the image."⁷ As the Dionysiac musician Synge does nothing less or more than enhance the focus of "original pain." His glass remains stationary as the concern of his scrutiny becomes larger--the object of his art. Significantly, as the momentous scope of his subject becomes evident under such great magnification, detail becomes obscured by the newly-viewed immensity. There has been a "reverberation of the image" as it appeared to exist in its original state.

The necessary appreciation of art therefore depends upon the objective mind capable of perceiving the inevitable "reverberation of the image." In The Flight of the Dragon Laurence Binyon cites an equivalent formula of Keats. "'The only way to strengthen one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing.' 'Let us open our leaves like a flower, and be passive and receptive.' 'The poetical nature has no self--it is everything and nothing. . . .'"⁸ The infinite number of possible artistic perspectives is suggested by the "reverberation of the image." A similar and related continuum is recognized by Synge in his Autobiography. "The emotions which pass through us have neither end nor beginning--are a part of the sequence

⁷Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy (1872; rpt. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 39.

⁸Laurence Binyon, The Flight of the Dragon, 4th ed. (1911; rpt. London: John Murray, 1927), p. 37.

of existence. . . ."9 As the associations which allow one image to be connected with another have an infinite number of possible configurations, thus the range of emotional responses corresponding to these images is impossible to determine.

The hero, whether he be Naisi in Deirdre of the Sorrows, the Tramp in In the Shadow of the Glen or Christy Mahon in The Playboy of the Western World, must be defined for Synge as "a part of the sequence of existence." The sequential development of Christy in the Playboy does not leave Christy unscathed, but both he and Synge emerge in triumph and in possession of the grail at the curtain. The Tramp asserts and finally establishes the validity of his beliefs by escorting his prize from the cottage at the conclusion of In the Shadow of the Glen. The quest of Naisi in Synge's Deirdre assumes added significance because of the greater universal implications of death to be discovered at the play's end.

In Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama Alan Price maintains that for the characters of Synge "existence, then, is a dream which will be dissolved by the ultimate actuality, death. . . ."10 Commenting on the relationship of Deirdre and Naisi, which is, like the tale of Christy and Pegeen a dramatization of Synge's association with Molly Allgood, Price argues that "they understand that death is the only actuality, and love a dream; and so they go back to Emain to face death rather

⁹Synge, The Autobiography of J. M. Synge, p. 13.

¹⁰Price, p. 85.

than endure the agony of living with a love or dream that they know must fade."¹¹ The critic can be temporarily satisfied with this conclusion. The poetic consistency of this view in literature is firmly established, and without doubt, it is a part of Synge's concern here.

The enchantment of Deirdre for Naisi is echoed in an existing letter fragment written by Synge to Molly Allgood on 9 November 1908. Much of the letter's somberness, however, can be attributed to Synge's grief over the recent loss of his mother:

Dearest Child

I have just been out and posted a letter to you and then walked up and down in the dark. As you are not here I feel as if I ought to keep writing to you all the time though tonight I cannot write all that I am feeling. People like Yeats who sneer at old fashioned goodness and steadiness in women seem to want to rob the world of what is most sacred in it. I cannot tell you how unspeakably sacred her memory seems to me. There is nothing in the world better or nobler than a single-hearted wife and mother. I wish you had known her better, I hope you'll be as good to me as she was--I think you will--I used to be uneasy about you sometimes but now I trust you utterly, and unspeakably. I am afraid to think how terrible my loneliness would be tonight if I had not found you. It makes me rage when I think of the people who go on as if art and literature and writing were the first thing in the world. There is nothing so great and sacred as what is most simple in life.¹²

When Deirdre assures Naisi that "it should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest, if it's for a short space only," it is Synge who is regarding "what is most simple in life."

¹¹Ibid., p. 207.

¹²John M. Synge, Letters to Molly: John Millington Synge to Maire O'Neill, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 299-300.

Upon this observation by Deirdre, Naisi concurs that "we've a short space only to be triumphant and brave." The flower is an ideal metaphor for the heroism of the fated lovers of Deirdre of the Sorrows:

Flowers especially seemed, to those imbued with Taoist conceptions, to partake of an ideal existence. Their sensitiveness and vigour alike, the singleness of purpose in their expansion to the light, their bountiful exhalation of their sweetness, their sacrifice, their beauty, all made a particular appeal. Those blossoms were especially prized which, like the plum, appear on the naked boughs of winter, and even among the snows, and which fall before they wither rather than cling rotting to the stalk. The cherryflower is the classic metaphor for the life of the hero.¹³

It is because Deirdre and Naisi acknowledge and accept the reality of death that they achieve nobility and assume heroic stature. The significance of this action, while the concern of definite pathos, must be received with the greatest exultation. The knowledge thus gained validates the life that has gone before. The grail has been discovered. In A Vision Yeats describes this catharsis in Synge's work as the final fusing of pity and wisdom. "In the works of Synge there is much self-pity, ennobled to a pity for all that lived; and once an actress, [Molly Allgood (Maire O'Neill)] playing his Deirdre, put all into a gesture. Who does not feel the pity in Rembrandt, in Synge, and know that it is inseparable from wisdom?"¹⁴

In the drama of Synge it is exultation and wisdom that paradoxically evolve from pathos and sorrow. It is here that the insufficiency

¹³Binyon, pp. 31-2.

¹⁴W. B. Yeats, A Vision, 5th ed. (1937; rpt. New York: Collier Books, 1966), p. 167.

of Price's criticism must be identified. His conviction that in Synge "existence . . . is a dream which will be dissolved by the ultimate actuality, death" must be reconciled with the thesis of this discussion. It is proper to recognize in Synge's drama no "ultimate reality." As maintained in the third chapter of this work, for Synge it is absurd to allow the dominion of sorrow when the reality of the imagination remains unaffected by it, and yet the dream cannot exist and the imagination cannot create without sorrow's foil. It is necessary for the characters of Synge's plays to exult in life and brood in death. The paradox of this pathos, however, is the cornerstone of Synge's dramatic art. For Alan Price and those who would allow death an "ultimate actuality," let Luasnad respond from Synge's Luasnad, Capa and Laine. "Dead men pass. There lives / One only life, one passion of one love, / One world wind sea, then one deep dream of death."¹⁵

In an appropriate tribute to this stuff of his imaginative vision, Yeats regards the real presence of John Millington Synge:

We pity the living and not such dead as he. He has gone upward out of his ailing body into the heroical fountains. We are parched by time. He had the knowledge of his coming death and was cheerful to the end, even joking a little when that end had all but come. He had no need of our sympathies. It was as though we and the things about us died away from him and not he from us.¹⁶

¹⁵John M. Synge, J. M. Synge: Collected Works, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), III, 204.

¹⁶W. B. Yeats, The Death of Synge, and Other Passages From an Old Diary (Dublin: The Cuala Press, 1928), p. 16.

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