8 Anglo-Irish as a Literary Dialect—The Contribution of Synge

TOWARDS A BILINGUAL STYLE

The idea of an Irish National Theatre in the English language is something of a contradiction in terms. Synge was well aware of this, but by the end of the nineteenth century the pressures on Irish writers to produce their work in English were overwhelming.

Earlier in that century, the great populist leader of the peasantry, Daniel O’Connell, had grown up a fluent speaker of the Irish language. However, he used English in all his speeches to mass meetings, recognising that he needed to make his cause comprehensible to British liberals as well as to the Irish peasant. The few writers who sprang from the people, such as Carleton and Griffin, chose to write in English for the same reason that O’Connell spoke in it. They wrote mainly for a British audience, since the native Irish were mostly illiterate and the literate Irish were never enthusiastic buyers of books. O’Connell’s radical young adversary, Thomas Davis, warmly advocated the preservation of Irish as a spoken language and literary medium, but he was caught in a cruel paradox. As a son of the Protestant Ascendancy, he knew no Irish; but he lived to see his patriotic songs, written as a ‘second-best’ in English, spread like wild-fire among a peasantry which was rapidly abandoning the native language.

With the foundation of the Gaelic League in 1893 under the leadership of Douglas Hyde, a major attempt was made to save the dying language. Hyde actually produced songs in Irish and heard them sung with delight by the folk in Galway. But he, too, was a prisoner of the same paradox. In his most successful collection, Love Songs of Connacht, he printed the Irish text on one side of the page and his own translation into Anglo-Irish dialect on the other. The translation was included simply to help the student who found difficulty with the Irish, for the object of the work was to popularise the spread of Irish literature. It soon became clear, however, that the main appeal of the book to Yeats and his contemporaries lay in Hyde’s own translations, and especially in those translations written in Anglo-Irish prose rather than in verse. The very success of the book caused the defeat of its primary purpose. Instead of popularising Irish literature, it made the creation of a national literature in English seem all the more plausible. Furthermore, it provided Irish writers of English with one of their finest literary mediums, the Anglo-Irish dialect. Hyde’s position was ambiguous. In one sense, he was seen as the leader of the movement to save Irish; in another, he was the first exponent of the Anglo-Irish literary revival. Subsequent literary history was to emphasise the cruelty of the paradox. It was unfortunate for Hyde that his twenty-year campaign to save Irish should have coincided with the emergence of a group of Irishmen destined to write masterpieces in English.

All this is obvious only in retrospect. In its time, Hyde’s doctrine was highly influential. It was supported by Frank J. Fay, the drama critic of the United Irishman, who called for a National Theatre and boldly declared: ‘I must say that I cannot conceive it possible to achieve this except through the medium of the Irish language’. Fay was taken seriously. Hyde wrote successful plays in Irish, as did Tomás Mac Domhnaill, P. T. MacGinley and other minor dramatists. But Synge was the only playwright who possessed an undeniable creative genius and a knowledge of Irish; and he never answered Fay’s call. However, he took that summons sufficiently seriously to feel the need to justify his work in English. In his opinion, the Irishman was now master enough of English to write well in it, whereas ‘Leinster and Ulster would take several centuries to assimilate Irish perfectly enough to make it a fit mode of expression for the finer emotions which now occupy literature’ (Prose, pp. 385–6). This, however, was to gloss over some of the difficulties which confronted those who wished to produce a national drama in English rather than Irish. Yeats pointed to a major problem, remarking in Samhain (1903): ‘We who write in English have a more difficult task, for English is the language in which the Irish cause has been debated and we have to struggle...
against traditional points of view ... Over five decades later in a similar colonial situation in Algeria, Frantz Fanon, the revolutionary and psychiatrist, had to struggle against the 'traditional points of view' embedded in French, 'a language of occupation'. He did this by broadcasting in French, the programmes of Radio Fighting Algeria, as he explained, 'liberating the enemy language from its historic meanings'.

Synge faced a similar problem and solved it in a similar fashion. Irish was the historic language of the nation, but it was not his mother tongue, spoken from the cradle. He knew that he could write better in English, in which he would command a world-wide audience, whereas Irish offered only a dwindling rural community with no theatrical tradition. As late as 1902, he judged that he must write with an eye as much on an English as on an Irish audience: 'The Irish reading public is still too limited to keep up an independent school of Irish men of letters' (Prose, p. 386).

The question still remained as to what kind of English Synge should employ. His writings in Paris in the mid-1890s had been morbid, introspective and totally unpublishable. Except for a poem in a college magazine, he had not managed to write a publishable line in five years of exhausting effort. The decision to quit Paris and live on the Aran Islands may be taken as a measure of his frustration in 1898. But the years in Paris had not been wasted. The example of Guy de Maupassant, George Sand and Anatole France had convinced him of the artistic potential of dialect. In one of his many unpublished articles of this period, Synge praised Anatole France for his 'mastery of the Paris dialect' and his 'fine sense for the shades of spoken language'. France's achievement was all the more remarkable because 'the half-recognised words and changes of grammar, that are usually to be found in the idiom of the cities, make it particularly difficult to form from a dialect of this kind a pliant and beautiful style'. The dialect of cities fascinated Synge in this period and his admiration for the achievement of Anatole France in Histoire Comique may arise from his own sense of failure with 'Ballad of a Pauper', probably written in 1895. This conversation poem, composed partly in Dublin dialect, failed to achieve publication, much less a pliant and beautiful style. That disappointment did not threaten Synge's belief in the potential of dialect. M. Paul Passy, his Parisian lecturer in phonetics, had shown him that patois could have a literary, as well as a purely philological, value.

This conviction was strengthened by the leading theorists of the Gaelic League back home in Ireland. Eoin MacNeill, writing in the Gaelic Journal of 1897, spoke of 'the absolute necessity of basing all literature on the living usage' and held that writing in Irish 'must strike its roots into the living vernacular'. This was the start of a crusade for the introduction of Caint na ndaoine, the 'deaf and sinewy and versatile Irish' of the common folk, into the written literature. Over a period of three years from 1894 to 1897, MacNeill published An tAthar Peadar Ua Laoghaire's Stadbna in the Gaelic Journal in order to demonstrate the validity of common speech as a basis for the literary language. What was true of the Irish spoken by simple peasants might just as easily be true of their English. The lesson was not lost on Synge.

While doodling in one of the notebooks which he brought to Aran in 1899, he hit upon a solution to the problems which had worried the founders of the National Theatre. It was also the solution to his own, more personal, artistic difficulties in the search for a valid medium. Although he did not write in Irish, Synge felt that the native Gaelic literary tradition could be a powerful source of strength and inspiration for the contemporary Irish writer. In the Aran notebook, he wrote: 'American lack of literary sense due to the absence in America of any mother tongue with a tradition for the whole population'. Lower down on the same page, he scrawled with a spurting nib a question to which his later dramatic masterpieces provided fitting answer: 'Has any bilingual person ever been in great style? crois pas?'

It was, unwittingly perhaps, a succinct statement of a problem which he was to solve by developing an idiom which would make him famous throughout the world and notorious for a time in his native land. If he must write in English, Synge was resolved to write in an English as Irish as it is possible for English to be, an English into which toms of the Gaelic mode of speech and syntax had been injected. In this way he could defeat the 'traditional points of view' embodied in English, which so worried Yeats and which threatened to smother the national literary revival. That Synge was acutely conscious of the dangers for a writer in these 'traditional points of view' is clear from the concluding sentence of an article written in 1902:

... it may be hoped that we have seen the last of careless writing addressed to an English public that was eager to be amused, and did not always take the trouble to distinguish in Irish books between what was futile and what had originality and merit' (Prose, p. 386).
Synge's dialect was not simply the solution to a national literary problem. It was also the source of his international fame. He was convinced that if Irish writers were to make a lasting contribution to world literature, they must seek to express the native mode:

It is difficult to say how far the Gaelic atmosphere which is now so powerful all through Ireland will bring a new note into the English language. Every new movement of literature has a new note in language and every language that is spoken widely has these notes potentially without stint... 14

Not long after Synge wrote those lines, George Moore confidently predicted that, from universal use and journalese, English would soon be so coarsened as to lose all power as a literary medium. 15 With deeper insight, Synge had foreseen that English would receive a renewal of life from her regional dialects. For him the use of dialect was intimately bound up with the artist's sense of place. This feeling for a known locality has been designated by Robin Flower as a crucial part of the Gaelic literary tradition. 16 Synge held that a profound work of art was 'always inimitable' (Prose, p. 349) in its depiction of a particular period and location. In a notebook he wrote:

No personal originality is enough to make a rich work unique, unless it has also the characteristic of a particular time and locality and the life that is in it. For this reason, all historical plays and novels and poems... are relatively worthless. Every healthy mind is more interested in Tit-Bits than in Idylls of the King. 17

The search for a language which might convey this sense of place was not merely the preoccupation of Synge the adult writer. It had become an obsession at a very early age, as he recalled in his *Autobiography*: 'I had a very strong feeling for the colour of locality which I expressed in syllables of no meaning, but my elders checked me for talking gibberish when I was heard practising them' (Prose, p. 5). Years later, when he attempted to express his feeling for the colour of peasant locality in dialect, a number of Dublin critics also hailed that language as gibberish. Throughout the plays, Synge does, in fact, use quite a number of words which have no objective existence in any Irish dialect and which are clearly his own invention. These include such nouns as 'dreeness' and 'pitchpike', verbs such as 'swiggle' (a portmanteau word combining 'swing' and 'wiggle'), and adjectives such as 'louty'. He also uses unprecedented phrases such as 'string gabble', 'curiosity man' and 'puzzle-the-world'; and constructions such as 'turn of the day' which have definite roots in Irish. Many of his notebooks contain numerous inventions of his own—on the very first page of one book he wrote 'quibblers and query-heads—JMS' 18, adding his initials to indicate that he had created the phrase himself.

These words and phrases offer further evidence of the dramatist's close affinity with the Gaelic folk-song and story-telling tradition, which delights in the composition of nonsense-words, difficult phrases and even outright gibberish. 19 But Synge's elders at home repressed this tendency in him at an early age and it was only much later in his art that he found a use for this childish genius for invention. Indeed, it may not be altogether fanciful to ascribe the earthy dialect of his plays to his rejection of the linguistic standards of his mother, who taught him that all strong language and exaggerations were sinful. She had 'sought divine aid in confining the already restricted speech of the period and class she represented, in which expression of feeling was almost paralysed'. 20 In The Playboy of the Western World Synge extended his war against the linguistic Victoriamism of his mother, when he battled against the equally restricted language of the contemporary stage.

If Synge had a strong sense of the power of locality, then a corollary of this was his conviction that the artist must submit to the circumstances in which he found himself. 'Each work of art must have been possible to only one man at one period and in one place' (Prose, p. 349). The problem faced by nineteenth-century Irish writers was the linguistic disorder resulting from the rapid loss of Irish and the yet imperfect assimilation of English. That problem, in Synge's opinion, was solved by 1902, when he wrote that 'the linguistic atmosphere of Ireland has become definitely English enough, for the first time, to allow work to be done in English that is perfectly Irish in essence' (Prose, p. 384). The value for him of the Irish peasant's English lay in its vitality, a living antithesis to the threadbare journalese of English writers, so roundly condemned by Yeats and Moore. He chose to write in the language of the peasantry, whose discovery of English still had the freshness and excitement of surprise. Into this dialect, the country folk had absorbed phrases, images and cadences from spoken Irish. In the years of the revival, however, Irish in its written form suffered acutely from over-use by poor journalists who relied on spent images and clichés. Synge warned that the
'rareness and beauty' of peasant Irish might be 'sophisticated by journalists and translators', with the result that the language could 'lose all its freshness' (Prose, p. 386). So, the objections which Yeats and Moore raised against the pollution of Standard English by journalese could with equal justice be raised against much written Irish.

It was no wonder, therefore, that Synge's inspired compromise in fashioning his unique Anglo-Irish dialect seemed so attractive. Strategically poised between two literary languages, this dialect could exploit the poetry of both traditions, without submitting to the clichés of either. Thomas Davis had argued that a truly national tradition could exist in two languages, Irish and English. But Synge went one better and exploited the very clash between the two cultures. He forged an art of surpassing beauty out of the very fusion of these languages and thereby achieved his aim of a bilingual style. The more perceptive writers in the Gaelic League conceded the truth of Synge's analysis. Thomas MacDonagh admitted that he was losing faith in the League. By 1904 he had confided in Yeats his belief that its writers were 'infesting Irish not only with English idiom but with the habits of thought of Irish journalism, a most un-Celtic thing'. MacDonagh soon came to share Synge's opinion of the Anglo-Irish dialect as an ideal literary medium. In his epoch-making study, *Literature in Ireland*, he asserted that 'the dialect at its best is more vigorous, fresh and simple than either of the two languages between which it stands'.

Synge's five years in Paris as a writer of retrospective 'literary' prose had ended in frustration. Yet almost as soon as he turned to writing in dialect, after his visits to Aran, he produced a number of dramatic masterpieces. Why the sudden blossoming? It was not as if the nature of his thematic interests had changed. In the *Autobiography*, which deals with his youth and which was written between 1896 and 1898, certain words recur—'radiance', 'sacred', 'primitive', 'divine', 'glory',—but these words occur with the same frequency in the writings about Aran and the peasantry. However, there is a great difference in the way the words are used. In the early work, they are vehicles of an introverted, formless and utterly subjective prose—even Synge's planned novels petered out into subjectivity and incoherence after twenty pages or so. In the prose written after Aran, such words are no longer used subjectively, but have found an objective social context in the language of the island folk. For the first time in his life, Synge had found a language which mirrored his concerns, but which he could submit to objective analysis, before transmутing it into art. Yeats offered a brilliant explanation of the process:

Whenever he tried to write drama without dialect he wrote badly, and he made several attempts, because only through dialect could he escape self-expression, see all that he did from without, allow his intellect to judge the images of his mind as if they had been created by some other mind. The objectivity he derived from dialect was technical.

Dialect formed an ideal medium for Synge the dramatist; but he was much less successful as an exponent of dialect in verse or prose. In retrospect, the range of options open to him as a writer seems extraordinarily limited. It says much for Synge as self-critical that, having found his medium, he had the good sense to write only dialect plays. He would have achieved little in ordinary English.

As a contribution to international drama, Synge's dialect, based as it was on a living language, was consciously revolutionary. His Prefaces illustrate this attitude. He believed that the writer should convey 'the entire reality of life'. In the contemporary drama of his time, he complained that he found only a distorted one-sided version of reality—either a sordid and unimaginative realism or a strained hyper-aestheticism which:

... is far and away from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on the one side, Mallarmé and Huysmans producing this literature—on the other Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid works. On the stage, one must have reality, and one must have joy, and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed ...

The dialect of the folk offered a solution to that problem, because it reconciled these opposed modes, the cult of the beautiful and the cult of realism. It was based on the spoken language of living people, so it was realistic. The country folk had poetry in their souls, so their language was beautiful: 'in Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent and tender' (Plays 2, P. 54).

The very strength of that language may have intensified the hostility of the first Dublin audiences. They may have thought that they were listening to another version of stage-Irish 'brogue'. But they
were not. Synge was fully aware of the dangers of what he called the ‘rollicking note’. As early as 1902, in a review of Seumas MacManus’s *Donegal Fairy Stories*, he criticised the author for failing to ‘bring out the finer notes of the language spoken by the peasants’ (*Prose*, p. 376). He went on to complain that ‘the language of several of the stories has a familiarity that is not amusing, while it is without the intimate distinction good humorous writing requires’ (*Prose*, p. 376). His own plays spelled the death of stage-Irish ‘brogue’. Even those reviewers of *The Playboy* who attacked its bizarre plot were forced to concede that its ‘peasants’ talk is racy of the soil’, ‘a far cry from the stage Irishman’. Synge had seized the crude stage-Irish idiom of the nineteenth-century music hall and refined it. He blended it with the idioms and cadence of native Irish, creating ‘perhaps the most authentic examples of poetic drama which the modern stage has seen’.27

**‘A FAKER OF PEASANT SPEECH’?**

It was St John Ervine who made the notorious allegation that Synge was ‘a faker of peasant speech’. Synge’s dialect was, he claimed, ‘contrived literary stuff, entirely unrepresentative of peasant speech’. Synge must have anticipated such criticism, for he wrote in his Preface to *The Playboy* on 21 January 1907: ‘I have used one or two words only, that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland’ (*Plays*, 2, p. 53). There is a direct contradiction between these two statements, yet, in a sense, both men were telling the truth. No peasant ever talked consistently in the cadenced prose employed by Synge’s peasants. Synge may have used few words that he had not actually heard, but this does not mean that he wrote down *all* that he heard in a truly representative way. Nor does it mean that the speech of an average Synge peasant is that of an average Irish countryman. Yeats acutely described the difference when he remarked: ‘Perhaps no Irish countryman had ever that exact rhythm in his voice, but certainly if Mr Synge had been born a countryman, he would have spoken like that’. Synge used mostly the striking phrases culled from the folk and this was only natural in a writer on the look-out for the colourful sentence. He had an interest, characteristic of a mind formed in the 1890s, in the creation of ‘an art more beautiful than nature’, as he phrased it in a private notebook late in that decade. His language is a heightened version of natural peasant speech. The heightening is achieved by emphasising those aspects of peasant dialect which have their sources in Gaelic speech and syntax. Because Irish country people had, in the main, learned English from each other—rather than from English people—the influence of the Irish language on their acquired idiom was immense. It has recently been noted that ‘even in those areas where Irish has long ceased to be spoken, its influence on pronunciation, on vocabulary, and above all, on syntax, is paramount’. In the remotest parts of Wicklow, where the young Synge first heard the Anglo-Irish dialect, the Irish language had been spoken within living memory, just forty years earlier. The native Irish *substratum* in the English of the folk was what really excited and inspired the dramatist.

The language of Synge’s plays is often a direct translation from the Irish of Aran, rather than a representation of the English spoken by the peasantry. After all, Synge had heard the dialect of the Wicklow peasants from earliest boyhood, but this had no immediate effect on his writing in the 1890s. It was only when he went to learn Irish on the islands that he developed the idiom of his major plays. That language often owes more to the Irish of Aran than to the English spoken by the folk of Wicklow. A simple example will serve to make this clear.

The crucial lines of *Riders to the Sea* are those with which Maurya closes the play:

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... (*Plays*, 1, p. 27).

This stoic utterance has been repeatedly traced to Sophocles by many critics. In fact, the precise words of this sentence were used in a letter written in Irish by Martin McDonough, Synge’s young friend on Inishmaan. The letter to the dramatist was written on 1 February 1902 and the play was written later in that year. Here is the relevant extract:

... do thu amach go bhfuair bean mo dhearbhhráthair Seaghan bás, agus bhí sí curtha an domhnaigh déinach do mhí na nodlag agus féidir gurab brónach an sgéil é le ráth, acht má said féin caithfheid muid a bheith sásta mar nac féidir le aon nduine a bheith beo go deo.
of ‘satisfied’ as the last word of the play, cuts dramatically against the dominant mood of despair induced by the action. This plausible argument is based on the misconception that Martin’s own use of ‘satisfied’ occurred only in the middle of the sentence quoted above. Had this been the case, then Grene’s argument would be wholly valid. In fact, however, Martin repeated the sentiment at the close of his paragraph about his brother’s bereavement, concluding, on this occasion, with the word ‘satisfied’.

Atá Seaghan go rimhaith acht deirim leat go bhfuil sé brónach go leor act mar dear mí chana caithfidh sé a bheithe sásta.

(Seaghan is very very well, but let me tell you that he is unhappy enough. However, as I said before, he must be satisfied.)

It was more likely this moving repetition of the word by Martin at the end of his paragraph, rather than any desire for a poetic re-ordering of the earlier sentence which led Synges to close his play on the word ‘satisfied’. This is not to deny Grene’s point about its dramatic effect in undercutting the mood of despair which dominates the play. Martin had already used the word on two occasions in the letter in just that manner, as he strove to suppress his despair at his brother’s tragedy.

There are other clear examples of how the letters from Aran helped Synges to forge his dialect. John McDonough, for example, could not write his native language so he dictated a letter in English to Martin, who then turned it into Irish. This John was the elder brother ‘Seaghan’ of whom Martin had written in the previous letter. If Synges could use a sentence of Martin’s to conclude Riders of the Sea, then he had no qualms about using a sentence from John’s letter at a lyrical moment in The Shadow of the Glen. Here is the crucial passage:

... is ógnach a bhí muid an t-am a dímigh tú, ar fead tamaill maith, acht anois atá muid ag fagailh as, anuair atá muid deachta anois a bheithe ógnach...

(it is lonely we were the time you left, for a long while, but now we are getting out of it, when we are used to being lonely.)
This becomes the voice of Nora Burke lamenting the loss of Pat Darcy:

... and it’s very lonesome I was after him a long while ... and then I got happy again—if it’s ever happy we are, stranger—for I got used to being lonesome (Plays, p. 39).

Through the use of such letters Synge forged the bilingual style which exploded upon the theatrical world in October of 1903.

In forging this style, Synge had fulfilled an aim outlined by Yeats as early as 1892 in the United Irishman. Yeats had politely questioned the realism of Hyde’s ideal of a national literature in Irish and had gone on to ask: ‘Can we not keep the continuity of the nation’s life, not by trying to do what Dr Hyde has practically pronounced impossible, (i.e. saving Gaelic), but by translating and retelling in English, which shall have an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm and style, all that is best in the ancient literature? ...’

Through his use of dialect, no less than his use of themes from native Irish literature, Synge succeeded in translating the elements of Gaelic life into a language which many regarded as being at odds with the native culture. He is one of those rare writers who forged a distinctive personal style on the translation from one language to another. His cautious, word-for-word translations of the poetry of Geoffrey Keating and other Irish writings had led, almost imperceptibly, to the evolution of his Anglo-Irish dialect. From the very outset Synge associated the development of this dialect with the systematic translation of literature and folklore in the Irish language. In a review of Cuchulain of Muirthemne on 7 June 1902, he wrote:

Some time ago Dr Douglas Hyde used a very similar language in his translations of the ‘Love Songs of Connacht’, and more recently Mr Yeats himself has written some of his articles on folklore with this cadence in his mind, while a few other writers have been moving gradually towards it. The intellectual movement that has been taking place in Ireland for the last twenty years has been chiefly a movement towards a nearer appreciation of the country people, and their language, so that it is not too much to say that the translation of the old MSS. into this idiom is the result of an evolution rather than of a merely personal idea (Prose, p. 367).

In keeping with this perception, many crucial phrases and idioms in Synge’s dialect have been shown to be simply literal renditions in English of poetry and prose in the Irish language. Indeed, the Irish scholar, Tomás Ó Máille has suggested that this dialect owes as much to the written Irish tradition—and even to the usage of Old Irish—as to the spoken idioms of the people:

Tá leaganach cainte de shórt ‘fri deireadh aimsire’, ‘m’áon-bhuille’, go han-chochtcheann sa tsean-Ghaedhilg, ach níl a leithéid i n-úsáid i mBéarla ná i nGaedhilg i gcaint an lae indiu.

(Constructions of speech such as ‘in the end of time’, ‘my one blow’ are very common in Old Irish, but are not in use in English or in Irish in contemporary speech.)

If Synge’s dialect represents a direct English version of phrases from the Irish, then he himself often made the actual translation. The notebooks which he kept on Aran are full of Irish idioms translated, not into standard English, but into a literal version of phrases from the Irish:

go bhfághach sé a gh-dhóin aibh
till he’d get his fill of it.

is dual dó é sin do dhéanamh
it is natural to him to do that.

It is a language that looks suspiciously like the dialect of his plays. Even in letters written in English by Synge from the Gaeltacht, one finds many phrases which seem to be unconscious echoes of Irish. For example, in a letter to Lady Gregory from Kerry in 1904, he wrote of his asthma: ‘It is going away from me now.’ This is clearly an echo of the Irish construction: ‘Tá sé ag imeacht uaim anois.’ In a sense, the author was still writing Irish, but using English words; he was still thinking in Irish cadence, syntax, and idioms, but using an English vocabulary. Nor was he alone in this. Because of the rapid changeover from Irish to English in the nineteenth century, many peasants found themselves speaking English words, while still actually thinking in Irish syntax. Synge’s deep study of Irish grammar and syntax can be attributed, in part, to the fact that they provided him with the basis for his own dramatic language.

Dáithí Ó hUaithne, in his study entitled The Irish Language, has
remarked that Synge's dialect is an accurate reflection of the native language and that much can be learned from it about Irish syntax.47 The ease with which Synge's plays have been translated into Irish affords telling proof of this point.48 Indeed, some of the major speeches seem to gain rather than lose in richness, as they pass through the screen of translation back into the very language in which they may have been conceived. Synge was aware of this, for in a letter to his German translator he explained one of the idiosyncrasies of his dialect:

There is another form which occurs often for instance 'I saw a man and he smoking his pipe' = I saw a man smoking his pipe. The idiom, of course, is a Gaelic one, and it has shades of meaning that cannot be rendered in ordinary English (Plays 1, p. 275).

The playwright was clearly aware of the evanescence of many phrases in the native language. There are a number of phrases and words in the plays which do not seem to exist in the English of the folk, but which may 'have been translated from the Irish by Synge for his own special purposes'.49 These words include 'ill-lucky', 'playboy', 'ridge of the world' and 'share of songs', from the Irish 'mi-ámhar', 'butachaill báire', 'iméall an domhain' and 'cuid amhrán'. Even more interesting is Synge's poetic use of conventional 'mistranslations'. These are words which do have a currency in the English of rural Ireland, but which are based on an original mis-translation of the source-word in Irish. As Alan Bliss explains:

The connotations of an Irish word rarely coincide exactly with those of any individual English word, so that the correct rendering into English will depend on the context. It seems, however, that at some stage in their acquisition of the English language Irish speakers learned a 'standard' equivalent of each Irish word, which they used irrespective of the context; and this type of 'mistranslation' from Irish is a fruitful source of special Anglo-Irish usage.50

Synge was not slow to exploit the rich ambiguity of such words. For example, when the playboy woos Pegeen with promises to take her poaching fish by night, she replies 'That'll be right fun, Christy Mahon' (Plays 2, p. 147). 'Right' is here used in the Gaelic sense of 'great'-but the standard meaning of 'correct'-morally 'correct'-is also mockingly evoked as an ironic comment on their illicit enterprise. Similarly, when Sarah Casey, in The Tinker's Wedding, describes the priest as 'a big boast of a man' (Plays 2, p. 13), something permanent has been said not only about his gigantic girth but also about his personal vanity. In these ways, the ambiguity between the standard meaning of a word and its dialect meaning are often evoked for the purpose of moral exposure. When the ecstatic Christy tells Pegeen to wait 'till we're astray in Erris when Good Friday's by' (Plays 2, p. 149), the word 'astray' works on two very different levels. Christy intends it in the dialect sense of 'roaming freely'; but the illusory nature of his ambition is reinforced for the alert member of the audience by the ordinary English resonance of 'lost' or 'strayed'.

There are also some words in Synge's plays which are not translations, since they have been taken directly from the Irish language. There include 'banbh', 'boreen', 'cleeve', 'curagh', 'Dun', 'frash', 'keen', 'løy', 'ohone', 'poteen', 'Samhain', 'shebeen', 'sluigs', 'sop', 'streelien', 'streeler' and 'thraneen'. The present writer has heard all these words used in the English of the west of Ireland, with the sole exception of 'Samhain'. But even in using this word, Synge was simply developing an innate tendency of the language. P. L. Henry has noted that in areas where Irish was recently spoken, many Irish words are still used, though not always fully understood.51 The meanings of these words are often very delicate in shade. One notes, for instance, the number of words in the list just given which end in the diminutive -'een': 'boreen', 'poteen', 'shebeen', 'streelien', and 'thraneen'. This diminutive is normally applied to anything insignificant, small or of little consequence. As William Burke has written, 'the delicate flavour of contempt conveyed by this suffix cannot be adequately represented in English'.52 However, the tone of contempt is reinforced by the surrounding context in The Playboy, when the suffix is applied by Pegeen to the very name of Shawn Keogh:

Wouldn't it be a better thing for a girl to go marrying the like of Shaneen, and he a middling kind of scarecrow with no savagery or fine words in him at all? (Plays 2, p. 153).

The suffix was used in similar fashion, at an earlier point in the play, when the Widow Quin parodied the priest's terrified reaction to the news that Christy would stay at the shebeen:
‘It isn’t fitting’, says the priesten, ‘to have his likeness lodging with an orphaned girl’ (Plays 2, p. 87).

Not all of the translations from Irish to the English dialect of his works were made by Synge himself. Sometimes, he left it to the Aran islanders themselves to make the ‘translation’. It is undeniable that the author of The Aran Islands refers more frequently to the curious type of English spoken by the islanders than to their brand of Irish. Insofar as it is modelled on any spoken dialect, Synge’s idiom is based on the English which he heard spoken by folk whose natural every-day language was Irish. This was ‘the English idiom of the Irish-thinking people of the west’, as Yeats affectionately called Hyde’s dialect. From the start of his first sojourn on Aran, Synge was fascinated by what he heard: ‘The islanders speaking English with a slight foreign intonation that differs a good deal from the brogue of Galway . . .’ (Prose, p. 50). He noticed that ‘They spoke with a delicate exotic intonation that was full of charm . . . with a sort of chant . . .’ (Prose, p. 52). It must have been this same chant which Synge demanded of the Abbey players at rehearsals of his plays, to judge by the account given by the actress, Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh.

The speeches had a musical lilt, absolutely different to anything I heard before . . . I found I had to break the sentences—which were uncomonomly long—into sections, chanting them, slowly at first, then quickly, as I became familiar with the words . . .

The playwright regarded the English of Inishmore, the largest island which he first visited, to be a ‘curiously simple yet dignified language’ (Prose, p. 53). However, since he wished to learn Irish—the substratum of his dialect—he moved on to Inishmaan, ‘where Gaelic is more widely used’ (Prose, p. 53). On Inishmaan, Synge immediately was struck by the relation between the syntax of the Irish and English spoken by the islandmen. This was a relationship which he was subsequently to exploit in forging the language of his plays:

Some of the men express themselves more correctly than the ordinary peasant, others use the Gaelic idioms continually and substitute ‘he’ or ‘she’ for ‘it’, as the neuter pronoun is not found in modern Irish. A few of the men have a curiously full vocabulary—others know only the commonest words in English, and are driven to strange devices to express their meaning . . . (Prose, p. 60)

Syenge’s study of Irish opened his mind to the possibility of new and striking combinations of words in English. In re-ordering the sentences of ordinary English in accord with Irish syntax, he was, in a sense, re-learning his daily language and discovering exciting new possibilities. He once told Yeats that ‘style comes from the shock of new material’ and Aran afforded him that material. Like the islandmen, he came to use ingenious devices to express his meaning in dialect.

By the fourth book of The Aran Islands, which deals with his last visit, Synge was adept at spotting nuances in the speech of the island women. He noted of one:

She plays continual tricks with her Gaelic in the ways girls are fond of, piling up diminutives and repeating adjectives with a humorous scorn of syntax . . . (Prose, p. 143)

Syenge recreated these effects in English in his plays. Christy Mahon in The Playboy resorts to the device of repeated adjectives in order to evoke the lonely observations of his wanderings:

. . . and I walking the world, looking over a low ditch or a high ditch on my north and south, into stony scattered fields, or scribes of bog, where you’d see young, limber girls, and fine prancing women making laughter with men . . . (Plays 2, p. 81)

In that sentence Synge wrote ‘making laughter’ rather than ‘laughing’, a direct translation from Irish which is a noun-centred language. A humorous scorn of syntax is also to be found just where we would expect it—in the lively speeches of the playboy himself: ‘. . . and I after toiling, moiling, digging, dodging from the dawn till dusk . . .’ (Plays 2, p. 83). The same anarchic repetitions are the stock-in-trade of another poetic hero, Martin Douil: ‘and they twisting and roaring out, and twisting and roaring again, one day and the next day, and each day always and ever . . .’ (Plays 1, p. 123). Such tricks, as Synge noted, are often employed in Irish by native speakers. They are rarely if ever used in any Irish dialect of English. Yet here the dramatist resorts to them in his personal version of the dialect, which is an almost literal translation from the Irish of the islands.

It must now be obvious that St John Ervine’s allegation that Synge faked peasant speech is true. It must also be obvious that
the playwright's defence—that he used only one or two words not heard among the peasantry—is equally true. For the fact of the matter is that his dramatic dialect is an artefact. Synge, Yeats and Lady Gregory were fond of quoting to prospective playwrights of the Abbey Theatre the dictum of Goethe: 'Art is art because it is not nature.' Synge's own private description of the attempt by the writer 'to produce an art more beautiful than nature' might be taken as a fair account of the process through which he forged his own dialect. He sought to heighten the natural genius of peasant English, by emphasising its peculiarly native constructions. When Maurice Bourgeois complained that Synge 'seems to exaggerate the coefficient of Hibernicism', he had made the false assumption that the dramatist was trying to reproduce accurately the everyday speech of country folk. But this was not so. If Synge called, in the privacy of a notebook, for an art more beautiful than nature, then a corollary of that call was the demand for a dialect more colourful than everyday speech.

That notebook also contains a draft for an unpublished essay 'On Literary and Popular Poetry'. In discussing the new school of poetry represented by Yeats, Synge writes with clear approval: 'The new poets did not copy the productions of the peasant but seized by instinct his inner mode of work.' This is a perfect description of Synge's own transmutation of folk idiom. In the same notebook in an unpublished essay 'On Mallarmé', Synge quoted with deep interest the French poet's theory of language: 'The language', he says, 'of the streets, the common spoken language, has nothing to do with literature, it exists only as colours or sound exist for the painter or musician and the writer must use it in a free independent way to form the language of literature ...' This theory had a lasting influence on Synge, long after 1896–7 when he wrote it down. It appears in another notebook, kept some years later, where the dramatist writes of two of his other models, Yeats and Maeterlinck: 'Their style is a direct idealisation of their own voices when at their fullest and best. They differ from the ordinary spoken language as the Venus de Milo differs from an average woman ...' The passages just quoted are all taken from articles which the author intended for publication. They never appeared in print and, now that they have failed to achieve inclusion in the Collected Works (1968), perhaps they never will. They represent, however, Synge's attempt to supply the critical theory by which his own use of peasant dialect was to be judged. His language represents not the talk of the folk,