SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

the end is amiss. It is the nearest approach in Synge to a
direct lesson: his plays, truly literary, teach only through the
sympathies and antipathies, when, as we say, his hand is in.

The abundance in Martin's character, the mellowness of
the medium through which we are given that character;
these are the two main features in the play which account
for its flavour.

CHAPTER IX.

"THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD"

I.

We have now come to The Playboy of the Western World.
It is Synge's most famous piece of work, so famous
indeed that one can hardly deal with it without
becoming entangled in legend. To grow is of the nature of
legend. "There were riots in Dublin when this play was
first produced," and the foreigner, not knowing these for
words out of a legend, sees, in his mind's eye, a tumult-
dering city, with chargings and counter-chargings in its
streets and squares. Both inside and outside the Abbey
Theatre during the first few performances of the play there
certainly were squabbles and protestings, but to speak of
them as riots is to use the very accents of the Playboy himself.
Mr. Padraic Colum writes of the first performance: "I
remember well how the play nearly got past the dubiousness
of that first-night audience. The third act was near its close
when the line that drew the first hiss was spoken,—'A drift
of the finest women in the County Mayo standing in their
alls around me.' That hiss was a signal for a riot in the
theatre. They had been disconcerted and impatient before
this, but the audience, I think, would not have made any
interruption if this line had not been spoken. Still, they had
been growing hostile to the play from the point where
Christy's father enters. That scene was too representational.
There stood a man with horribly-bloodied bandage upon his
head, making a figure that took the whole thing out of the
atmosphere of high comedy." Mr. Yeats takes up the

1 The Road Round Ireland, by Padraic Colum.
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

tale: "On the second performance of The Playboy of the Western World, about forty men who sat in the middle of the pit, succeeded in making the play entirely inaudible. Some of them brought tin trumpets, and the noise began immediately on the rise of the curtain. For days articles in the Press called for the withdrawal of the play, but we played for seven nights we had announced; and before the week’s end opinion had turned in our favour. There were, however, nightly disturbances and a good deal of rioting in the surrounding streets. On the last night of the play there were, I believe, five hundred police keeping order in the theatre and in its neighbourhood." 1

The protest made with such heat was two-fold. It was religious. It was nationalistic. And only such outsiders as have lived in countries where an alien Ascendancy, for two centuries or more, have been casting ridicule on everything native, can really understand it. Do not psychologists tell us that if an occurrence, which causes us mental pain, is repeated, every repetition brings not only its own particular amount of pain but brings, as well, recollection of our former sufferings from the same cause, that is, brings more than the amount of pain intrinsic in the event. The Playboy incident, then, was not unrelated: it awakened within the national consciousness ancestral disturbances. The new protest was portion of the old. Wherever there is an alien Ascendancy there is such an attendant protest, perennial, and on occasions quickening into noise and violence.

As to its cause and its nature, we may find instruction in these words:

"If an Irishman of any distinction be found a blackleg, a knave, a traitor or a coward, there arises a certain mirth in the discovery among strangers of all kinds, especially the English, as if they were glad to light upon an example in that nation of what is a pretty general rule in most countries at this time of day. But when they dare joke upon it, the single blot is imputed with great gaiety to that whole people. Thus all Ireland is made answerable for the faults of every

1 Plays and Controversies, by W. B. Yeats.

188

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

one of her children, and every one of these bears the whole weight of the country upon his shoulders. Therefore, the Irishman must, in his own defence, and that of his whole country, be braver and more nice in regard to his reputation than is necessary for any other man to be. If there is any mistake or crime in his conduct, not only he but his whole country is sure to pay for it. All this is owing to the calamity dispersed, time out of mind, by the tongues and pens of two neighbouring nations, in order to justify their own barbarous proceedings in regard to that unhappy people."

Will it be believed that these words were written two hundred years ago? They are to be found in a letter from Chevalier Wogan, an Irish soldier of fortune abroad on the continent, to his friend Dean Swift. 1 They contain the simple truth. To sit among the audience in the Abbey Theatre when one of, say, Sean O’Casey’s plays is on the stage, is to learn how true it is that the single blot is, with great gaiety, attributed to the whole people. To remain silent in the midst of that noisy gaiety, even to flingbrickbats about, protesting against it, is, one thinks, to avoid the deeper vulgarity.

The protest attending on an alien Ascendancy’s callous caperings is, of course, always most active in a period of national revival. In 1907, when The Playboy was first produced, the Irish revival was rapidly gathering momentum—we who were then fairly young murmur when we recall the period, ‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,’—and therefore Ireland’s young men were become, perhaps, oversensitive where the representation of the native Ireland was concerned. Religion and nationality are not separable in Ireland. If in any piece of work there occur not only incidents which reflect, or seem to reflect, on the native Ireland, but also words and phrases which hurt the religious consciousness of that Ireland, then the offence of that piece of work is reckoned, in such periods, doubly gross, and not deserving of any fine consideration or afterthought. So was it with The Playboy.

1 The Life of Chevalier Charles Wogan, by J. M. Flood.
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

It is too easily taken for granted by those who have since written on the whole matter that the protest was without foundation: that they who made it simply wrote themselves down barbarians. These superior people forget that the play is not now given the same representation as then; nor are all the offensive phrases spoken; the fact is they are usually all omitted. When the play was broadcast from London not only were such phrases as offended in Dublin omitted, but many others as well, for instance, "I wouldn't be fearing the loosed khaki cut-throats, or the walking dead," a sentence which the English censor also cut out when the Abbey company took the play for the first time to London. If, therefore, there are moles in the eyes of the Irish people, there are whole beams in the eyes of the English people.

Then we fortunately have an outsider's account of the impression a performance of the play in Paris made on those present—a literary audience we may assume:

Les acteurs qui ont joué à Paris il y a quelques années une traduction du Baladin n'ont pas semblé comprendre tout ce qu'il y a de délicatessen de poésie profonde dans l'âme fruste de ces simples et leur langage savoureux. Ils ont poussé à la caricature et ont fait du Baladin une farce brutale et dégoulinante, sous prétexte que les personnages étaient des paysans. C'est que, lorsque nous représentons les paysans au théâtre, en France, nous en faisons de fadas soupirants de bergères, vêtus de velours et de soie, et la houlette enrubannée—on bien des lourdauds ridicules. Notre théâtre est un théâtre de salon, la France ne connaît pas le paysan. En Irlande au contraire, le théâtre est presque tout entier paysan et, en vérité, c'est un art solide et profond que celui dont les rôles sont fixés dans la terre et dont l'âme est celle du peuple.

The actors seem to have given the play in somewhat the same way as it was first given in the Abbey Theatre itself. Now, it will be admitted that the Irish people had many urgings, ancestral voices among them, towards protests that neither the French nor the English could scarcely realize, yet

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

these peoples also, as we have seen, even if silently and through other channels, made their protest. They have not, however, been called barbarians for doing so. Of the protest in America it is better to take no account. Mr. Shaw felt called upon to write a pamphlet on it for the comforting of his own and England's soul: it was the pseudo-Irish who protested! They would, one must think, have proved themselves real Irish if they had done quite otherwise from what their brothers in Dublin had done!

The protest, at any rate in Dublin, was inevitable. The natural, the inevitable, needs no apology. The fault lies not in the native Ireland but in Ascendancy Ireland, which has played the game of literature not for its own eyes, such as they have been and are, but for English eyes, not expressing Ireland to itself but exploiting it for others. Had Ascendancy Ireland treated Ireland fairly, serving up, without any ulterior motives, in literary form, the life of the country, had Ireland been long accustomed to see its own life so served up, so looked at and commented on, honestly from many standpoints, always, however, from indigenous, that is, natural standpoints, The Playboy, instead of being greeted with outcry and passion, would have been taken for what it was worth.

In it Synge probably did give way to a desire to shock his audience; yet of this one cannot be quite certain. It may be that he expected a Dublin audience to look at the spectacle of the play as a purely folk audience in the West, self-contained and not conscious that their neighbour in the next street, the theatre was English-eyed, might conceivably have done, for Synge was simple about many things, and was amorous of the honest insensibility of the folk consciousness. For that sensitiveness, that touchiness, if one likes, our history has induced in us, he had but little feeling: the "harrow of sorrow" is a common phrase in Irish poetry, and a harrow reduces to fineness. As for our religious consciousness, he was not quite unaware of it, it is true; was sometimes even touched by it—if also, at other times,
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

estranged—but certainly he never became initiate of it. Knowing of this dullness of his to what is ever almost too alert, too quick, in our people’s consciousness, we are able to conceive that he could honestly think the audience would enjoy the play even as he himself would enjoy it if another pen had written it. And his bearing in the theatre during the first performance falls in with this view of him. He is said to have remarked that it would be necessary to establish a society for the preservation of Irish humour. For humour he had an Anglo-Irish stomach, which, remembering Swift, and Lever, and Lover, and Maginn, and Prout, and George Birmingham, and Sean O’Casey, and Somerville and Ross, and St. John Ervine, and Dr. Gogarty, one thinks must be as strong, if not as naive, as the folk stomach in all lands. On that night some of the pressmen questioned him on the play, and he answered them that certain incidents in it were improbable, that the whole thing was extravaganza. This admission his admirers at the time regarded as calamitous; and Synge himself in a short and very curious letter to the Press immediately withdrew it.

"The Playboy of the Western World is not a play with a purpose in the modern sense of the word, but, although parts of it are, or are meant to be, extravagant comedy, still a great deal that is in it and a great deal more that is behind it is perfectly serious when looked at in a certain light. This is often the case, I think, with comedy, and no one is quite sure to-day whether Shylock or Aeneas should be played seriously or not. There are, it may be hinted, several sides to The Playboy." 1

This is an honest letter. An artist makes a play and afterwards analyses his own impulses in doing so; when Synge wrote this letter he was only beginning the analysing process. Far more illuminating, however, is this passage in a personal letter of his to a friend, written about the same time:

"It isn’t quite accurate to say, I think, that the thing is a generalization from a single case. If the idea had occurred to me I could and would just as readily have written the

1 John Millington Synge, by M. Bourgeois.
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

Prosaic themselves they want the endless iteration, whereas what Synge offers them is really the flash in the eyes of a young fisherman singing a passionate Irish love-song in the Irish manner, which is to say, with an intense concentration on the matter sung and no thought at all of the vulgar exploitation either of his own voice or his own personality. Were Synge to deal with any other stratum of life, the life of his own Anglo-Irish circle for instance, or the life of Paris or London, he would equally have sought out the daemonic urge in the heart of it. He would have given us his dramatization of the psychic state of that place, as he had read it; than which no man can do more, we, of course, understanding that no two readings of a psyche can ever be the same. In England he could take no interest, holding that life had been too whitened there to be of use to the dramatist. We may imagine he would not have found himself fully contented with any family or tribe or city or nation in the world unless that community, few or many, had, without any qualification, created the daemon within them sole arbiter of their destinies. He went sorrowing through life because no such community was to be found. He thought the lack of sophistication among the people of the West, their open-air adventurous life, their instruction at the mouth of the winds, at the strong hands of the ocean, at the eyes of the stars, their living close to the earth—that all these circumstances had fattened in their midst the roots of the golden bough of life, and kept it evergreen and flourishing. In such places life was really lived, was natural. In cities and towns it was put upon by laws and regulations as well as a multiplicity of institutions: it was strangled by them, so de-energised as to be incapable of blossoming. His choice of Mayo was therefore so much flattery of Mayo: had it contained a whole population of Playboys he would have hailed it as a bit of heaven itself! His early detractors did not understand this. His wild phrases were held up to obloquy, as if he had intended them for considered pronouncements! In reality they were his equivalent for the flashing eyes of Connacht.

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

Synge would distil the poetry of the place into something rich and rare; his detractors, however, looked for glossy photographs of the people with their Sunday clothes upon their backs.

Remembering that the Dionysiac is the spirited and not the spiritual, it is patent that he whose quest it is will come roughly up against the people's religious susceptibilities, for their religious susceptibilities are the very flower of their labouring to keep the daemonic in check. The quester would have them be what they have always been trying not to be. In his headlong pursuit, Synge became altogether irresponsible; the cheapest thing, the most regrettable thing in The Playboy is the quite unnecessary slinging about of holy names and religious allusions. We are not forgetting that the religious consciousness in the Irish people overflows into curious channels; that it is to be met with in the most unexpected associations; yet Synge not only overdoes his painting of this abundance, but overdoes it clumsily and without either cause or effect. One regrets he did not himself take the advice O'Mahon gave his son, the Playboy: 'Leave troubling the Almighty God.' Of this perhaps somewhat slapdash abundance in the people's religious consciousness he probably became aware when reading their Irish poetry, but in the poetry the challenging phrases usually seem nothing less than forced from the singers. And naturally we come on them in the serious rather than in the humorous lyrics. They have always a striking effect, which is exactly what they have not when Synge makes use of them.

It must be allowed that every artist is partial towards the daemonic. It is the principle that opposes the mechanical, the theoretic; it is the Greek mistrust of professionalism; it is in everyman the root of honest laughter; it is in everyman the mirror of nature, answering its moods; it is the fount of heroism, it is the very colour of life itself—as ineffable as is the spirit of music; wherefore, of course, artists as such, who never will rank themselves on the side of the cut and
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

dried, are taken by it. Yet for all that, the greater artists have never shown anything but the deepest reverence for what Goethe used to call the earnest conduct of life, which, at its best when the daemon suffuses it with warmth, becomes mere chaos when the demon overlords it with no regard to any of the other powers within us. By so much do the greater poets differ somehow from the little terrible fry of the Bohemian cénacles, fanatics for theories, whether they know it or not. Synge obviously fell short of the great artist. Occasionally in his essays we find honest testimony from him to the necessity for this earnest conduct of life, and Mr. Yeats tells us he insisted that an artist, as well as anybody else, should provide for his family. Apart, however, from Riders to the Sea, all his art is so much laudation of one especial attribute of life, the spirited, rather than of the totality of life itself, multiple spirit as it is. Obviously, for all that, it would be quite unjust to rank him with those of the artistic cénacles: he didn’t like them; he would have given a score of them for an Aran fisherman or a Wicklow tramp. His mind was more many-sided, therefore, than his art; he had not learnt how to master and shape forth all that he had received into it from life. But he was always ripening, which, of course, does not mean that each successive play was better than the last. Quite honestly, he expresses in The Playboy his idea of Connacht; yet one could show from his own essays that he knew and deeply felt other forces and other currents in the consciousness of the people. If he wrote The Playboy, he also wrote Riders to the Sea; and Shaw’s flippant description of him as the Playboy himself is about as wrong as it could be. He was never a Playboy, not even while Christy Mahon was tumultuous in his brain. Molière was known as the Contemplative; and the name does not misfit John Synge by much.

Is there any reason, then, why we should take sides as between Synge and his scandalized audience? Both were honest, both consistent. If, playing the small boy, Synge did in places throw out a phrase to make them jump in their

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

seats, they, probably knowingly and unjustly, decided to hiss at everything in the play since they had begun the rumpus at all. The critics who in cold blood, and with forensic attitudinizing, took sides seem to us to be far more erring than either Synge or his protesting audience.

II.

The story of The Playboy of the Western World is so full of twists and turns that it takes some time to tell it, not a good sign of a play. The scene is a country public house, a shebeen. It is nightfall. Pegeen is in possession. Her father, Michael James, and the neighbours are setting off to pass the night at a wake across the sands. There enters a ‘queer fellow’—a slight young man, very tired, frightened, and dirty. This is Christy Mahon whom, later, we are to know as the Playboy. Stranger as he is, they all stare at him. He hints the police may be looking for him: is it a safe house? He tells them in covered phrases that he cannot recall any person, gentle, simple, judge or jury, did the like of him. He leads them on. Him they lead on, until at last in a sudden impulse of bravado he informs them that a week ago last Tuesday he killed his father in a quarrel. The glamour of this romantic story seizes on them all; he is made pot-boy to the house. Michael James, the owner of the house, and the neighbours set off towards the wake, leaving Pegeen, Shawn Keogh, who is soon to marry her, and Christy Mahon behind them. Shawn Keogh, whom the Playboy has eclipsed, Pegeen soon gets rid of: then she has Christy Mahon to herself. Their pleasure in each other’s company is spoiled by the entrance of Widow Quinn, whom Shawn Keogh has sent to spy on the Playboy. But her, too, Pegeen gets rid of. In the end, Pegeen leaves the Playboy for the night, going into another room. As he examines the comfortable bed she has arranged for him he soliloquizes: “Well, it’s a clean bed and soft with it, and it’s great luck and company

188
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

I’ve won me in the end of time—two fine women fighting for the likes of me—till I’m thinking this night wasn’t I a foolish fellow not to kill ‘my father in the years gone by.’

The second act is merely a piece of contrivance: there is nothing inevitable about it. We see Christy next morning receiving visits from the young women of the neighbourhood, whom the romantic story, even at second hand, we are to believe, has bewitched, just as it bewitched the men the night before. Widow Quinn subsequently enters; and, still later, Christy’s ‘murdered’ father himself! Christy, in the nick of time, hides himself, leaving Widow Quinn the task of setting his father on the wrong track as to his whereabouts, for it is in search of his son he has arrived at the shebeen.

In Act III, we have the Playboy entering into competition with the local athletes and defeating them all: we are to understand that the sudden realization of manhood, which Pegeen’s infatuation for him has brought to him, enables him to do so. Victor, laden with prizes, he returns to her from the sports; and there follows the rather famous love scene between them. Unfortunately, just as Christy is, as he himself would have said, mounted on the stars of luck, his father enters once more, spoiling everything. Pegeen turns against Christy—he is obviously a liar, he has not killed his father at all! Maddened, Christy chases his father out, and this time, we are to understand, really kills him. Now, having made his boasting true, he expects Pegeen to receive him with open arms. But she tells him there is a great difference between a romantic story and a dirty deed in your back yard—which statement, of course, is Synge’s apology for the comedy, and indeed an explanation of its idea. But the father survives this second killing also. Once more he enters, this time to drive his son home before him. Christy however is no longer the ‘dirty stuttering lout,’ and it is he who drives his father out before him, like a heathen slave. Pegeen too he treats with disdain. He has attained.

190

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

III.

The sources of The Playboy are interesting. In the Aran Islands we come on this passage:

"He often tells me about a Cannaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in a passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives with whom he was said to be related. They hid him in a hole—which the old man had shown me—and kept him safe for weeks, though the police came and searched for him, and he could hear their boots grinding on the stones over his head. In spite of a reward which was offered, the island was incorruptible, and after much trouble the man was safely shipped to America."

Some years after the storm aroused by Synge’s play, Professor O’Maille searched out the details of the whole incident on which the play is based, and whoever wishes may now find the whole legend set out, names and all, in the Professor’s book, An Ghaeth Aniar. Although Synge’s version of the story is thus partially true, the incident itself was tragic, as one might expect, and not humorous. Reading of it in Professor O’Maille’s book, the curious thought strikes one that the man himself who, having killed his father, found refuge among the people until he escaped, may have looked on Synge’s drama with his own eyes, when the Abbey Company took it to America. He would then have been something more than seventy years of age.

As with Synge’s other plays, not only do we find the fable itself in his note-books, but in them also we come on phrases, speeches, and records of incidents which, tightened up somewhat, are familiar with in the play. In the play we have: "What’s a single man, I ask you, eating a bit in one house and drinking a sup in another, and he with no place of his own, like an old braving jackass strayed upon the rocks?" Here, recorded in Synge’s note-book, is the same speech as it fell from the mouth of old Mounteen: "Bedad, noble person, I’m thinking it’s soon you’ll be getting married.

1 The Aran Islands. (1.) 191
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

Listen to what I'm telling you: a man who is not married is no better than an old jackass. He goes into his sister's house, and into his brother's house; he eats a bit in this place and a bit in another place, but he has no home for himself; like an old jackass straying on the rocks." Such a speech one can imagine Synge as repeating to himself, with great delight, for many days after he had come upon it. In the play we have horse-racing on the sands, and in his book on Wicklow and Kerry, we have such a scene fully described. The extent to which he depended on what he had seen and heard is an indication of his distrust of what was theoretic and merely invented.

IV.

The Playboy is too fantastic, comes not easily enough within our common experience of life, to form part of the tradition of great comedy. Admitting that spirit is an unaccountable thing, miracle-working, that it dazzles with swift wings, drugs with un wonted perfumes, yet the falling of a whole countryside at the feet of a self-declared parrotie simply on account of his gamey heart and his fine bit of talk, is an assumption to which we cannot give more than grudging acceptance. The readiness with which the people in the play swallow down what we cannot look at, antagonises us; and this antagonism is kept alive by constant reference to the supposed crime. From our difficulty in accepting the scheme of The Playboy, we may learn that the scarcely possible is not half so comfortable a basis for comedy as the almost probable; and the whole Playboy scheme is hardly even scarcely possible. We are all the time engaged in coercing our minds not to engage in argument against the proposition before us. Skipping this weakness we find much brain-work in the play. The point of it is the continuous upgrowth of Christy Mahon's character from nothingness to full manhood. And this 'upliftment' is due almost entirely to his meeting with Pegeen; she, however, we are to remember, is, like the others in the shebeen, drawn to him

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

by the glamour that the great adventure of killing his father has thrown around him. Later on of course we learn from her own lips that it is not the deed itself that wins either her, or the others, it is Christy's telling of the tale, the fine bit of talk. As on a chart we can follow the Playboy's upgrowth. He was a quiet poor fellow with no man giving him head. He talks us; only the dumb beasts in the fields were his friends (John Synge is remembering his own boyhood). To Pegeen he is only a soft lad; she treats him as bread and milk. To Widow Quinn he appears as one fitted to be saying his catechism than slaying his da. To his father he was only a dirty stuttering lout, one who spent his days fooling over little birds he had, finches and Felts; one who'd be off to hide in the sticks if he saw a red petticoat come swinging over the hill. In one place the Playboy remembers his own past, and Pegeen comforts him:

"What call have you to be that Lonesome when there's poor girls walking Mayo in their thousands now." "It's well you know," Christy answers grimly, "what call I have. It's well you know it's a lonesome thing to be passing small towns with the lights shining sideways when the night is down, or going in strange places with a dog nosing before you and a dog nosing behind, or drawn to the cities where you'd hear a voice kissing and talking deep love in every shadow of the ditch, and you passing on with an empty, hungry stomach falling from your heart."

Next to this passage, one of the most pleasing in the play, let us place his words when he knows he has won Pegeen's love:

"Let you wait, to hear me talking, till we're astray in Erris, when Good Friday's by, drinking a sup from a well, and making mighty kisses with your wetted mouth, or gaming in a gap of sunshine, with yourself stretched back unto your necklace, in the flowers of the earth."

Pegeen (in a low voice, moved by his tone) I'd be nice so, is it? Christy (with rapture) If the mitred bishops seen you that time they'd be the like of the holy prophets, I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad, pacing back and forward, with a neesay in her golden shawl."
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

Always then we are looking at the Playboy striding forward, until, at the close, when his father would assert his authority over him, crying out: "Come on now." Christy answers: "Go with you, is it? I will then like a gallant captain with his heathen slave. Go on now and I'll see you from this day stewing my oatmeal and washing my spuds, for I'm master of all fights from now." His astonished father can but gape, exclaiming: "Glory be to God!" Christy's upgrowth is the strong spine of meaning in the play, if we may use Mr. Galsworthy's phrase. In it, therefore, we have one more working out of the old theme that Dante knew of, that Goethe declared openly:

The indescribable, here it is done,
The woman soul leadeth us upwards and on.
—only, of course, the plane of the spiritual, in which the great ones were at home, has been exchanged for that of the spiritually.

Writing a comedy, as Synge was, some such difference was to be looked for, because comedy is, as Aristotle pointed out so long ago, the imitation of ignoble actions, an opinion that might be dwelt upon by those who write of The Playboy as if it should pass the same tests as a treatise on morals.

Christy Mahon himself is the only character that changes and grows; once it is seen for what it is, the graph of his progress is so direct as not to be interesting. Synge's sense of the psyche of place was always more subtle than his sense of the psyche of any man or woman, and of his men and women Christy Mahon is one of the simplest. One easily exhausts him. It is only when he triumphs, when he drives his stormy parent like a heathen slave before him, that he becomes fit material for great drama. For Christy Mahon lacks an abundant background within himself. He is poverty-stricken where Martin Doul is opulent. And Pegeen Mike, the only other character in the play who has a leading part, is, in background, even still more poverty-stricken. Indeed her background is to be found in theatre-land rather than in the Western World. She is the commonest thing in

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

Synge, pert, bright-eyed, quick-witted, efficient in love-making as in bar-tending. She is the stock figure in amateur play-writing; and amateur actors revel in her type, because they know what to do with any such. Widow Quinn is a thinner Mary Doul, she is a Mary Doul who speaks for effect. This feeling is all over The Playboy. From the Playboy himself downwards, every person is speaking for effect, an unwonted fault with Synge. Even Michael James does it, although his speech where he gives his blessing to the young pair who, one at either side, support him while he makes it, is indeed as rich as it has a right to be. So, too, one relishes old Mahon, with his pride in the atrociousness of the wound his son inflicted on him. His 'Glory be to God!' at the end of all is one of the best things in the play, far truer than Christy's carefully modulated cadences.

The two of these, old Mahon and Michael James, live, each of them, openly and unashamedly the life of the natural man. They care for nobody. They drink their fill and speak their fill, while the spirit we behold assuming sway over Christy makes of him 'a likely gaffer'—"master of all fights from now." In the book Wicklow and West Kerry, Synge describes the simple people from beyond Dingle as reveling in the gaudiness of a travelling circus; a wet night did not prevent them from measuring out long miles of rough mountain road to witness it. The bedizzenment of the Playboy, the scorn of half-tones, the splashes of crude reds and yellows and apple greens, the effloresences of such a daemon as is either callously heroic or outrageously comic—it recalls somehow the travelling circus, posters and all. Poetry, Synge held, must become brutal again to find a way out. So too, he believed, must comedy.

V.

It's the florid diction of the play that infects our mind somewhat as might the high-colours of the circus-poster. Perhaps only those not gone far in the twenties take that
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

diction to be quite successful. Except for the great difference in their characteristic themes, the associations that cling about them, Francis Thompson would perhaps strike us similarly; he, as well as Synge, depended on not so much the 'little more' as 'the wasteful and ridiculous excess' to, lift us beyond the prosaic. Mr. T. S. Eliot quite correctly points out that 'Elizabethanism was a verbal even more than an emotional debauch'; and Synge in The Playboy outdoes the Elizabethans. Those selfsame Elizabethans seem to have gradually replaced Racine, and indeed French drama in general, in his affections. His rhythms in The Playboy are more obtrusive, more rotund than in the earlier plays, as the incidents are more bustling—the whole aim is at excitement, tension, surprise. The excess of colour in his work we owe to his affection for the Elizabethans as we owe the daring, as also the homeliness, of his imagery to the Gaelic songs of Connacht, many of them truly folk songs. But both Elizabethans and Gaels had an instinct that told them that neither rapture nor intensity nor ecstasy ran to headlong verbalism. They knew when to rein in. They felt, and more especially the Gaelic poets felt, that the measure of intensity produced is in inverse ratio to the volume of the verbiage employed. In so far as you trick out your sentences with prissy adjectives you diminish the effect the sentences produce: it is as if you were to wrap your hammer head about with webbing; let the webbing be as variegated as it may, the heart is taken out of the blow struck. Gaelic equivalents are to be found for many of Synge's most characteristic phrases, more especially for such of them as refer to religion, but the Irish phrases are always far swifter in their effect, far more effective: the hammer head is bared, and strikes home hard and true.

Mallacht Dé do'n té sin
A bhain diom mo ghráidh.
The curse of God on him
Who snatched my love from me.

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

says the Gael, striking the nail on the head. Synge would have decorated both the curse and the beloved one, muffling the blow. There is in The Playboy a straining after terrible things, with not much more than a mush of colour and sweet sound resulting—a curious failure for one who would have the timber rather than the flower of poetry in his work. Adjectives, he should have known, always beat about the bush and give us time to set up defences. The Irish poets on the other hand show us no quarter, for it is not words that come bustling against us, but the things for which the words stand—that is how it feels. With Synge, although taught of them, it is always words, words, words; and sometimes very feeble words. We do not recollect any Gaelic original for: 'Aid me for to win her, and I'll be asking God to stretch a hand to you in the hour of death, and lead you short cuts through the Meadows of Ease, and up the road to Heaven to the Footstool of the Virgin's Son.' Yet, if original there be, one may be quite certain it produces an altogether different effect. Instead of the overwhelming intensity aimed at, the passage quoted has the whine of the beggar in it, whose aim it is not to make an end. One feels the tension of the mind slackening as the words flow on and on. It is like something one would find in Sean O'Casey at his worst, or is it his best? And there is hardly a page in The Playboy that is not stuffed with such long-winded figures, some of them, it is true, exhibiting the excess of his strength; most of them, however, exhibiting nothing more than a disturbing mannerism. Now, mannerisms, as soon as we know them for such, have an uncanny power of instantly chilling the mind; and all Synge's own interest in his puppets, his liking for them, his own innate warmth of feeling, is scarcely powerful enough to sweep us alive through those ever recurring tricks of phrase and cadence. Even while reading these word-spinnings, one suspects their efficacy as an element of dramatic technique: in the theatre itself one cannot help wondering at their ineptitude. They become thus a double distraction. Whetting our appetites, they
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

aim at the ultimate, and achieve nothing more than the moderate, losing half their breath in calling attention to themselves.

This desire of his to go 'beyond the beyonds' accounts for his frequent introduction of phrases with religious allusions in them: if we are to challenge anyone let us challenge God himself! Still less does this obvious phrase-making of his achieve when he draws upon the religious consciousness of the people. That consciousness was, as we have before explained, terra incognita to him: he knew it only dimly, could realize it only superficially. And if we would finally satisfy ourselves as to the truth that intensity in literature is to be achieved only by getting rid of the sense of language, getting back to the thing itself, we have only to compare his refashioning of some Irish phrase or sentence with the original. Thus Synge has: "When you'll feel my two hands stretched around you, and I squeezing kisses on your puckered lips, till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in His golden chair." The original we find in the lines of the well-known Una Bháin:

B'fhéarr liomsa bheith ar leabaidh leis 'ga stór-phogadh 'Na'no shuidhe i bhailteas i g-cathair na Tríonóid.

I'd rather be ever kissing her on a couch Than to be sitting in heaven in the Chair of the Trinity.

This is not a good example to illustrate the difference between love poems in Irish and Synge's idea of them; nobody would think of quoting the lines to illustrate any trait in these songs; what strikes us about them in general is that whenever the nameless singers go beyond the beyonds they find themselves truly driven to it: their songs seem to have been no more made for a public than Beethoven's last quartets. Synge's phrases are literary; from that feeling we cannot escape; but how far from that feeling we are when we find 'Och, Mac Muire na nGráis dom shaocharth' (O, may the Son of Mary of the Graces save me!) in the well-known Soney-breasted Pearl or when we come, in

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

Liam Dall Ó h-Efearnáin's perfect lyric: Pí i nÉirinn i on Cé sheoladh An Mhac Dé im' Ión Ach stór mo chuidh bh?
Whom did the Only Son of God direct into my net But my heart's treasure?

Synge's phrases, then, seem not alone watery to us who know the originals, but very often strike us as being also absurd. Every Catholic knows that no Connacht peasant, drunk or sober or utterly lost in ecstasy, could have used them, no more than drunk or sober or gone in our five wits, we could find ourselves asserting that two and two made five. Knowledge imbibed at our mother's knees is not to be put away from us so easily; yet to utter ourselves as Synge's peasants sometimes do, such knowledge they must have forgotten; as we ourselves must forget it, if we would accept such a phrase as: "Oh, St. Joseph and St. Patrick and St. Brigid and St. James have mercy on me now!" Such passages remind us that Synge's idea of the religious consciousness of the people was that of the outsider; for in that consciousness there is a vast chasm between the attributes of the Almighty and those of the saints.

VI.

There is a world of difference in feeling between The Playboy and The Well of the Saints. In The Well of the Saints we are, as it were, in a strange and distant land, yet our constant surprise is not so much the strangeness of it all as the familiarity of it all. The people, we are sure, have undergone bewitchment: they have all become a little 'natural.' They move to a slow music, processionally. Let us remind ourselves as often as we may that the whole matter is absurd, that these people are quaintly ridiculous, yet they continue to move on gravely, in a sort of stricken quietude, scarcely ever laughing and but rarely smiling, undisturbed by our presence. They sojourn in a removed ground. They

198
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

are at a distance from us: we mistrust the clearness of our sight. But our gazing at them, our overhearing of them, has been an experience: we have had not only holiday but unique holiday. Quite different is our feeling towards The Playboy. For all the rather outlandish lingo and topsy-turvy evauling of life in it, we experience far less sense of distance, of strange voyaging. It is a bustling scene we have happened upon: the people bounce against us: we know them for folk who have dressed up very well indeed; yet we are sure we have met them before, many of them, Pegeen most frequently of all, on the 'boards.' One tires easily of the rough and tumble; contrariwise, again and again we find ourselves drawn back to those pieces of literature where the whole event seems to be kept at a distance from us. In such cases the writer has organized a little world of his own. We wish to go back into it, for something whispers us that due to our own inattention, perhaps, we assuredly did not bring the last time we were there as much with us as we might have done; this time, we deliberate ourselves, we shall get closer to the passionate hearts of the citizens. How curious a thing it is that atmosphere, mood, is the most inexhaustible element in literature! When we have satisfactorily encompassed a thought or a set of thoughts, we find ourselves enticed for ever more; but to the book or play where we found them, unless it have in it more than these thoughts, we had better not return; if we do so we shall find it a little cold. In those strange books, however, where thought is but one of the elements, those strange books that are self-centred, self-lighted, as from within, Musset's plays, for instance, we shall always find some new instruction, some further stimulus: they grow in depth it seems not only with our growth, but a little more than it, so that we once again feel that we are leaving them incontinently, as indeed we shall leave life itself. The Playboy has its own atmosphere; as compared with The Well of the Saints it is, however, a commonplace atmosphere, commonplace even in its surprises. One easily fathoms it,

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

easily exhausts it; only small passages in it entirely grip us when we return to it after voyaging elsewhere.

At first glance the play seems to be more typical of Synge than anything else he wrote. It is of course the piece that made him famous: the word 'playboy,' has gone abroad throughout the English-speaking world; every other day this man is described as the playboy of American politics, this other as the playboy of English letters, and so on; while Synge himself is of course, for many, the Playboy of the Western World—that, and no more. Yet there is less of Synge's self in this play than in any other thing he wrote. He was a broader by nature; his mind was a wandering star, free, through want of purpose perhaps, of many orbits. When, however, that wandering star had had its orbit fixed, its path determined, with a terminus assigned, doubtless it travelled faster than before and, it may be, glowed the brighter for the speed. This brilliancy, however, if such we reckon it, hardly compensates for the more varying tints it exhibited, the chancer atmospheres it drew with it, when it wandered hither and thither, unfolding its own self, revealing its own self half-fellow-well-met, in leisurely contact with sympathetic phenomena round about. The scheme of The Playboy was very definite. That very definiteness of itself, by too-hard focussing of the powers of its creator's mind, may have hindered that mind from revealing itself with such fullness as we have found it doing when it had permission to linger and, shutting its eyes, as it were, to draw riches from its own resources. The fact is, Synge never met in life either the Playboy or Pegeen Mike—neither in Aran nor in Wicklow, in Kerry nor in Mayo. He found the scheme and he created his types to suit it. And paradoxical as it may appear, because he invented them all out of his own brain, they remain apart from his own self—a thing that always happens: it would seem we must find ourselves in others if ourselves we would project on the vision of others. If we create a Playboy, all out of our own brain, it is as if we kneaded a homunculus between our fingers—the figure
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

may be very dainty, very charming, but it has length and breadth, height and depth, with a birthday recorded in the annals. If, however, we meet in Wicklow, or elsewhere, a Martin Doul, and try earnestly to realize him in all his amplitude of nature—why, we lose ourselves, we use ourselves up in the effort; there is not enough in ourselves of love, of knowledge, of experience, to encompass him; we are conscious of lacking means fittingly to project that one affectioned figure on the consciousness of others. We may, therefore, understand how much thinner The Playboy is than The Well of the Saints. In the depth of Synge’s being there was a deep-toned music: it found its provenance in the sense of loneliness, in the consciousness that beauty had but little time to stay, love itself not even so long, that old age was upon us almost before we knew, that the grave was the end of all. This undersong that was Synge’s very self, breathes here and there in The Playboy—there is the passage already quoted where Christy tells of his lonely wanderings, with a dog nosing before and a dog nosing behind, beholding others deep in love, himself unaccompanied—but truly not more than a hint of his inner self is to be found in it, whereas he is everywhere in The Well of the Saints. The Well of the Saints is therefore lit from within, and is a strange region, ineffable, unique; to travel in it is to be refreshed. The Playboy is contrived; we encompass the trick of it; we can see all round it. In comparison with his other plays we may speak of it as stagey; if indeed it be almost nature itself when compared with the dramas that were being written in England, and in other English-speaking countries, at the same time.

In only one way does it show progress: it is more obviously the work of a playwright. The acts are not complete, each in itself, as in The Well of the Saints; they flow over, not only inviting conjecture, but half-directing, half-waylaying it. Act I. is a good well-articulated piece of dramatic writing: it opens well, and continues well, the line of interest rising right through. Act II. has far too much padding in

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

it. The only essential point in it is the entrance of the Playboy’s father, and one does not understand why this entry could not have been kept back until Act III. thus reducing the play to two acts. Act III. is a good, bustling act, alive from beginning to end, even if a little repetitious. It is full of matter: the sports on the sands, the return of Michael James from the wake, the real wonder of old Mahon that his son could achieve such heights of manhood, the love scene between Christy and Pegeen, the turning of the tables on the father, the swift ending. However much we may sigh for the gloominess of The Well of the Saints, The Playboy has more of the feel of legitimate drama in it, no slight recompense.

One quality, which is the very seal of creative genius, it shares with The Well of the Saints, as indeed with all his plays, it is homogeneous: all the men and women in it, even if none of them be as rich tempered as he or she might be, draw sustenance from the same impulse of creation: their little vessels of being have all been filled at the same fount, wherever in the Western World that fount may be. They differ from each other, each retaining the whole time harmonious with himself, yet all tread upon the same enchanted ground and are true children of it. Perhaps the Playboy’s speech at the very end of the first act, where he half regrets not having killed his father long ago, is the only blunder in the play. It is the only passage in which the Playboy is truly a playwright, consciously rogue. In the real sense of the term, a playwright lives by roguary, is conscious of it, is conscious too that to the initiated his roguary is an open book; is one moreover who enjoys not only his own roguary, but the sensations, half-looked for by them, that it excites in the initiated. Christy Mahon is no such playwright. If his words at the end of Act I. really give us his very self, if he is truly a rogue, he cannot but behave quite differently from what he does all through Act II. and Act III. A real playwright would not allow himself to be tied up by the simple Mayo men; he would, one thinks, rather have got them to
SYNGE AND ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE
tie up his father. Christy Mahon is an innocent rather than a rogue; and the play in which he is the chief figure is, therefore, not a piece of picaresque drama.

The Playboy of the Western World is a gaudy reckless spectacle; yet it was no small magic that raised it from the rather drab and meagre scheme of life of one of our poorest seaboard. In hidden places, and with the most crazy gear, the peasants there distil that potent spirit poteen which, Synge tells us, sends a shock of joy to the blood. No more, no less than that, did he ever wish this handful of living people to do for us.

CHAPTER X.
"DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS"

DURING the past hundred years from the great story of Deirdre has sprung a vast quantity of closet drama, which, of all sorts of literature, is certainly the least readable. Closet drama is bookishness; and if it be wrong, as surely it is, to transmute immemorial classics, all of which live enduringly not so much through their perfection of form as through their grip on the human heart, into mere bookishness, the wrong is at its worst when it is a Gaelic classic that is so transmuted, for the excellence of such lies entirely in the biting reality of the men and women who move within them. Tradition in literature, a settled style, gives a chance to the weak writer to express himself with some clearness and without meanness; it helps him, although he be unconscious of the help. But it seems to hinder the strong writer; it restricts him, or at least he feels so as he wrestles against it; yet in the end him also it helps. Actually it gets the best they are individually capable of from weak as from strong; from the one, unconsciously; from the other, only after clubbing down the wilfulness that are indeed a sign of his natural powers. So is it also with a classic theme, this story of Deirdre for instance. However inapt the treatment, some of the virtue of the original will be found to survive in it. The weakest writer will not drain it of all its compacted human feeling; while the economy of the original will exert on the strong writer a restraint that is wholesome: willy-nilly, as he works, he is being instructed in how much he may leave out; so that, let him indulge whatever ulterior motives he may in choosing the ancient theme, some at least of its quintessence survives, as indeed also some of the open-eyed sanity which is a note of classic art in whatever medium it