YEATS AND THE IDEA OF REVOLUTION

consciousness of death, the culture would become truly alive. To quote Adorno again:

We might be tempted to speculate . . . whether the turn in evolutionary history that gave the human species its open consciousness and thus its awareness of death - whether this turn does not contradict a continuing animal constitution which prohibits men to bear that consciousness. The price to be paid for the possibility to go on living would be a restriction of consciousness, then, a means to shield it from what consciousness is, after all, the consciousness of death.7

As against that we remember Yeats's words:

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

('Sailing to Byzantium')

He was a revolutionary whose wars took place primarily within himself; and he knew that in the end, struggle as he might, it was a losing battle. Not even art could quite compensate for that. We can close on the poem 'The Four Ages of Man' from the 1934 sequence Supernatural Songs:

He with body waged a fight,
But body won; it walks upright.
Then he struggled with the heart;
Innocence and peace depart.

Then he struggled with the mind;
His proud heart he left behind.

Now his wars on God begin;
At stroke of midnight God shall win.

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It is generally accepted that Synge's most important works are distinguished by a linguistic richness and vitality which derive from the combination of Gaelic and English speech habits and literary conventions.1 Synge was uniquely equipped to exploit the fading potential of the Irish language as a regenerator of an English which seemed to him asphyxiated by the formal apparatus and the narrow preoccupations of realism and naturalism. His work, like that of Yeats, declares the need for a new horizon, a new language, by a reincorporation of the past into the present through art. But before he could discover the new language or the new art he had to discover the new Ireland. To do that, he had to forsake his Protestant, evangelical beliefs and attitudes. In his Autobiography he says: 'Soon after I relinquished the Kingdom of God I began to take a real interest in the kingdom of Ireland. My politics went round from a vigorous and unreasoning loyalty to a temperate Nationalism. Everything Irish became sacred.'2

The salvational vocabulary of the Autobiography, and especially of this section, is remarkable. In a short space we have the following sequence of words: radiance, beauty, intangible glory, transfigured, pilgrim, divine ecstasy, puberty, primitive people, adoration, divinity, kingdom, God, Ireland, sacred, human, divine, goddess. Synge was saved again, re-baptized in the faith of a utopian conviction: his new, Irish community was to be a liberation from the repressive inherited workaday world of his class, religion and political attitudes. A persistent feature of his new faith was his enhancement of the 'primitive' feelings. He believed they

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were released in the young by the death of the old. At the age of 10 he wandered in the woods at Rathfarnham with his first girlfriend. An aunt had just died:

The sense of death seems to have been only strong enough to evoke the full luxury of the woods. I have never been so happy. It is a feeling like this makes all primitive people inclined to merriness making at a funeral.

We were always primitive. We both understood all the facts of life and spoke of them without much hesitation but with a certain propriety that was decidedly wholesome. We talked of sexual matters with an indifferent and amused frankness that was identical with the attitudes of folk tales. We were both superstitious, and if we had been allowed... we would have evolved a pantheistic scheme like that of all barbarism... The monotheistic doctrines seemed foreign to the real genius of childhood in spite of the rather maudlin appeal Christianity makes to little children...

Thus Synge’s career seems at first to have been dominated by a series of actual escapes and symbolic reorderings. He moved from unionism to nationalism, from respectability to the theatre, from English to Irish, from decadence (in literature) to an original primitivism, from class to folk community, from the bourgeoisie to the peasantry, from his own ill-health to the glorification of physical well-being and of youth. The list of transpositions could be extended but the general direction remains the same. A joyless, repressive regime, linguistically anaemic, gives way to a joyful, liberating order, linguistically rich, even luxurious. The claustrophobic fears discernible in a work like *Etude Morbide* are alleviated time and again by the thought of open spaces, open and candid speech, and, above all, by the openness of a small-scale civilization like that of the West of Ireland to the European past. When Pat Dirane finished a story, Synge, who was well versed in the contemporary researches into the oral traditions of Europe, wrote: ‘It gave me a strange feeling of wonder to hear this illiterate native of a wet rock in the Atlantic telling a story that is so full of European associations.’

Even so, Synge never loses sight of the constrictions of peasant life. All his work recognizes the link between constriction and intensity and shows a desire to escape from the intensities of the personal life, which can become merely neurotic or worse, into the ‘naturalness’ of the folk life, which can retain intensity and remain communal. The psychological finesse of his autobiographical writings and of the literature of decadence (Baudelaire, Huysmans, even Zola) is, in his own view, symptomatic of an illness, a closure within the self characteristic of the late-bourgeois era. Ireland’s nationalism offered an escape into health, sanity and community, but for Synge nationalism was a moment of resistance to the inevitable transformation of traditional life, not a programme of redemption for it. In this his nationalism deviates in a radical manner from that of Pearse who sought, in a new educational system and in a new ideology of cumulative rebellion, the instruments for the re-establishment of a lost cause.

In Synge, the cause is always lost. The order of things is not regenerated. Traditional Irish life, in Wicklow or in the West, is changed only to the extent that it becomes conscious of its bereavement from authentic value. In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Pegeen Mike’s desolate cry of loss brings to an end the prospect of a glorious future with Christy Mahon, one which Christy had invoked by articulating a vision of pastoral romance which properly belongs to the old Gaelic past. The failure of the community to bring the past Eden into a utopian future marks the boundary line of nationalist and romantic desire. The vagrant hero or heroine fades into legend or fantasy. The community remains: more deeply stricken, more visibly decayed. The traditional conflict between youth and age, so evident in *The Playboy*, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* and *In the Shadow of the Glen*, gives the social victory to age, the existential victory to youth. Society is not redeemed, and the traditional function of comedy remains incomplete. Synge is not writing out the failure of heroism. He is registering its failure in regard to society or, conversely, society’s failure in regard to it.

This is one of the themes of Yeats and Joyce too. The hero betrayed or expelled by a community (which has itself conspired to create the idea of heroism as a means to its own salvation) is a literary trope. In it we see the suppression of its own utopian vision of itself by a community which did not have ‘courage equal to desire’. Synge himself became one of the lost heroes in Yeats’s pantheon, especially after the *Playboy* riots in 1907 and the performance of *Deirdre* in 1910. In fact Yeats’s search for the ideal audience is part of his interpretation of the meaning and

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3 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 7.
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reception of Synge's drama. The meaning was heroic, the reception base. Thus, a new audience was needed, one to which heroism would come naturally. This is not a distortion of Synge. Rather it is a true perception of the plight of the hero in his plays. Yeats's own repeated attempts to conceive of Cuchulain as a hero who could participate in the mind of the present generation, Pearse's assertion of Cuchulain's presence, and their mutual castigations on the community which could not receive these demanding exemplars, are repeated, with variations, by Joyce, O'Casey, George Moore and others. There was no audience for heroism when it became flesh.

The complexity of Synge's plays is in part focused for us by their ostensible adherence on the one hand to an oral tradition which prizes story, an institutionalized narrative, and on the other to a written tradition which prizes textuality, a linguistic production which calls attention to its own nature rather than to any narrative end for which it is merely an instrument. Synge was aware of the blend of opposites in his work. He read it sometimes as a blend of the Irish and English elements: 'With the present generation 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, yet has sureness and purity of form.' Sometimes it was a blend of the lyric and epic impulses:

Lyrics can be written by people who are immature, drama cannot. There is little great lyrical poetry. Dramatic literature is relatively more mature. Hence the intellectual maturity of most races is marked by a definite moment of dramatic creation. This is now felt in Ireland. Lyrical art is the art of national adolescence. Dramatic art is first of all a childish art without form or philosophy; then after a lyrical interval we have it as mature drama dealing with the deeper truth of general life in a perfect form and with mature philosophy.7

These remarks return us to the traditional linguistic and literary origins out of which his drama grew.

But the programme, which envisages the fusion of diverse elements, is not identical with the plays, which enact the contra-

dictions between them. Story is one thing and Synge's modifications of the folk stories that supply his plays help us to understand the inevitable difficulties of his position. Once the oral tradition is written, it is transformed. Synge is involved in an act of translation as much as the nineteenth-century rewriters of Irish poetry into English. Thus the oral tradition, the story, is there as a moulding presence, as a guarantor of universal validity, giving sanction to the fiction but not having sanction within itself. (Joyce used The Odyssey in a comparable way in Ulysses). The oral hinterland lends prominence to the mode of telling the story which Synge turns into a virtuoso performance. The balance between the 'epic' story and the 'lyric' performance, between the 'maturity' of the old tale and the 'adolescence' of the actors within it, is an expression of Synge's desire to incorporate the present (as something that had never happened before) into the past (as something in which the present had happened before) in such a way that the audience would be left to contemplate 'purity of form' or, in Yeats's words, 'an eddy of life purified from everything but itself.' In consequence, there would be in such works something more than the disengagement from the petty concerns of everyday life which both Synge and Yeats desired. There would be, finally, a disengagement from history, achieved by the constant relocation of the specific sequence of incidents in the frame of the universal, human condition. So the oral or mythic readings of the plays emerge: In the Shadow of the Glen is a rewriting of the old story of the marriage between January and May; The Playboy is a rewriting of the Oedipus myth; Riders to the Sea is a version of man's tragic struggle against the inevitability of death. Such readings would be encouraged by the almost total absence of historical references in Synge's plays and by the luxurious presence of a self-consciously 'poetic' language.

Man and Nature, it would seem, are the protagonists in this new, post-Christian art:

The religious art is a thing of the past only - a vain and foolish regret - and its place has been taken by our quite modern feeling for the beauty and mystery of nature, an emotion that has gradually risen up as religion in the dogmatic sense has gradually died. Our pilgrimages are not to Canterbury or Jerusalem, but to Killarney and Cumberland and the Alps . . .

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In my plays and topographical books I have tried to give humanity and this mysterious external world.\(^6\)

It is appropriate that Synge should provide this connection between art and tourism. For, though he was a serious scholar of the Irish language and of Irish literature and the oral tradition, he was also a visitor to a culture which had already degenerated into the quaintness of the preserved species, quarantined in its own beautiful and economically unproductive landscape. The refreshment which the landscape of famous beauty-spots gave to the exhausted sensibilities of the urban weekend visitor is transposed by Synge into a linguistic key, with the exhausted English language gaining a new vitality from its recourse to famous beauty-spots in the Irish language - its folk-tales, its poems, its brilliant but almost occluded literary achievement. As in Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde, Yeats and others in the literary world, as in the world of Franco-Germanic philology, the concentration of interest was on the language of this dying community and, in the case of the writers, on what could be rescued from it for the contemporary moment. It was an elixir vitae for a decadent civilization. But Synge consistently emphasized that its natural home was in art. He wanted a revival of the English, not of the Irish, language. The Gaelic League, seeking the re-establishment of the Irish language, could perhaps keep the cruder powers of the Irish mind occupied in a healthy and national way till the influence of Irish literature, written in English, is more definite in Irish life, and then the half-cultured classes may come over to the side of the others, and give an intellectual unity to the country of the highest value.\(^7\)

It is not clear from this passage who the 'half-cultured classes' and 'the others' were, but it is a safe bet that neither of them were Irish speakers. The goal of art was culture; its means was the creation, through a language in which Irish and English were reconciled into a new balance and beauty, of a cultivated audience.

The idea of the new Ireland was predicated on the replacement of politics and history by art. This is a version of Sir Samuel Ferguson's cultural conservatism duplicated by a much greater writer. A peasantry blessed by refinement, an aristocracy free from decadence, both distinct from the crude citizens of the towns - these are the recognizable ideals of the Anglo-Irish writers from Ferguson to the present day. It is a weary theme, employed with un fretted persistence, the burden of the Victorian traveller's tale of distant, exotic places. In The Aran Islands we read:

The absence of the heavy boot of Europe has preserved to these people the agile wild animal, while the general simplicity of their lives has given them many other points of physical perfection. Their way of life has never been acted on by anything much more artificial than the nests and burrows of the creatures that live round them, and they seem in a certain sense to approach more nearly to the finer types of our aristocracies than to the labourer or citizen, as the wild horse resembles the thoroughbred rather than the hack or cart-horse. Tribes of the same natural development are, perhaps, frequent in half-civilized countries, but here a touch of the refinement of old societies is blended, with singular effect, among the qualities of the wild animal.\(^10\)

The distinctive fact about Synge and about the writers of the period in which he lived was that the country in which they conducted this species of spiritual tourism was not a far-off region. It was their own.

So in the plays we find ourselves confronted by discontinuities. Their narrative form is oral, that of the folk-tale; their narrative mode is literary, of the specialized language. Their background is Nature, open, wild and romantic; their foreground is Society, closed, decayed and utilitarian. The rituals of a community are invoked but the loneliness of individual heroism prevails. Mythical figures are remembered, historical detail is blurred. Love is an enchantment, marriage a travesty; lies become truths, dreams become realities; vagrancy is a virtue, settlement a vice; the heart's a wonder but there are no psychological problems; authority is pervasive but anarchy also prevails. Each play presents its own peculiar form of discontinuity, but they all have in common the story of a fantasy - Christy Mahon's fantasy about the killing of his da, Maurya's fantasy in Riders to the Sea about having one son preserved, Martin and Mary Doul's fantasy in The Well of the


\(^7\) ibid., vol. 2, p. 386.

\(^10\) ibid., vol. 2, p. 66.
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Saints about their own splendid appearances— which is, first, rebuked by fact and then, in the next instant, legitimized as belonging or contributing to a higher truth than mere fact could ever reach. This double fold in the stories allows us to think of them as something more complex than exercises in a kind of cultural bovaresme, since they both share in and castigate illusions. Finally, the illusion must be ratified by something larger than realism. Mesmerized by an eloquence which begins in illusion but which continues after the destruction of illusion, we are forced to concede to the imagination a radical autonomy. It insists on its own truth not by ignoring fact but by including it and going beyond it. The imaginary, overtaken by the real, becomes the imaginative.

The dynamic force which makes this possible is language. People talk themselves into freedom. No longer imprisoned by sea or cottage, by age or politics, the Synge heroes and heroines chat themselves off stage, out of history, into legend. Yet they leave behind them a community more hopelessly imprisoned than ever. In one sense, we can read this as a criticism of the community's hopelessness as a receptive audience for heroism. But it is also an acknowledgement that heroism of this sort is a hopeless means of reviving the community. The central discontinuity is there. Synge's drama affirms and denies the value of the heroicizing impulse of the Revival. It produces the hero out of the 'organic' community but leaves the community empty and exhausted. The glorious language is not a signal that all is well. Self-realization involves social alienation. Those who walk away from society and those who remain within it represent two kinds of value which are not reconcilable.

An examination of the text of The Playboy reveals these tensions operating at the deepest level. Key-words—lonesome, afraid, decent, sainted—and their associated epithets, such as queer and dark, so dominate the rhythms of speech that they give it the regularity of chant. The adoption of the present habitual tense, so common in the Irish language, into the present participle in English also helps to give regularity and continuity to the speeches, allowing for a smoothness in the transitions not native to either language. If I am a queer daughter, it's a queer father'd be leaving me lonesome these twelve hours of dark, and I piling turf with the dogs barking and the calves mooning, and my own teeth rattling with fear. The wonderfully lubricated syntax and the grammatical nonchalance of Synge's writing certainly abet the impression of naturalness which is so important in these plays. But the ever unfolding repetitions, the picking up of one phrase by a number of speakers, the alliterative patterning ('dews of dawn', 'wonders of the western world', 'a high wave to wash him from the world'), enforce the contrary impression—of artificiality, of design. The more brilliant the artifice, the more natural it appears to be. Yet the conciliation between these things is not only a matter of cadences; it also involves meaning. The key words which generate the play's meanings provide us with no sense of final conciliation. At the simplest level we can, by their light, pick out the main movement in the play. Beginning in anonymity and squalor, Christy moves via eloquent fiction to fame and glory. For a moment he is offered the sidetrack temptation of the Widow Quin, notorious not famous, shrewd not glamorous. Resisting that, he is finally brought down by the reappearance of his father, only to rise again above father, above the villagers, and leave 'master of all fights from now'. Lonesomeness, tempted by decency, becomes individuality. Decency, with its saints and cardinals, popes and peelers, wakes and marriages, is left behind.

Yet it is a strange kind of decency which, for instance, demands a dispensation be sought from Rome for the marriage of Peggeen and Shawn (because they are related) and at the same time approves of a son who boasts how he killed his father. It is an odd fact that a play which seems at one level to promote the comic idea of the subversion of adult authority and the liberation which is its consequence, should be so sparing in its references to the oppressions and dangers of authority itself. We hear of priests and of peelers and of a thousand militia '— bad cess to them!—walking idle through the land';12 we hear of hierarchies of potentates, religious and secular, of God in his golden throne, of St Peter in his seat, and we smile at the fearful anxieties of a Shawn Keogh who is terrified at the very name of Father Reilly, the parish priest. The poverty and the limited incestuous nature of the society is hinted at on several occasions. Yet famine, eviction, military oppression and landlordism, the characteristic facts of late-nineteenth-century Irish rural existence for the peasantry are almost entirely repressed features of the text. The peasant society that Synge knew was dying because it had been atrociously oppressed—not because it had lost contact with the

11 Ibid., vol. 4, p. 63.
12 Ibid.
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heroic energies which its early literature had once exhibited.

Synge aestheticizes the problem of oppression by converting it into the issue of heroism. The oppression is finally understood as self-inflicted by the community, because it insists on the lower-class realism of fact and refuses the aristocratic symbol of imaginative truth. It is strange to see this mutation of politics into literature against the background of the County Mayo which had produced Michael Davitt and the Land League, Captain Boycott, and some of the worst agrarian unrest in late-nineteenth-century Ireland. The heroic figures of the Revival’s imagination are social as well as literary constructs. They are leaders of their people in the sense that Lecky imagined the eighteenth-century landlord to be: The Irish character is naturally intensely aristocratic; and when gross oppression was not perpetrated, the Irish landlords were, I imagine, on the whole very popular, and the rude, good-humoured despotism which they wielded was cordially accepted.¹³

This Trinity College view of Irish history was extended and enriched by Synge and by Yeats into a myth of union between peasant and aristocrat — leading to the emergence of heroism, spiritual leadership, still aristocratic in tone, Anglo-Irish in content, but frustrated by the intractable facts of a situation which Michael Davitt had more accurately described in his book The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland (1904). The dispossession of the landlords, the breaking of the political power of the Ascendancy (urged by Burke over a century before) and the deep material and cultural impoverishment of the peasantry which was a direct result of the exercise of that power, are the central political facts of Synge’s mature life. The attempt to recover a new ideal of heroism from the reintegration of the shattered Gaelic culture with the presiding English polity is no more than the after-image of authority on the Anglo-Irish retina.

It is therefore quite proper to resign ourselves to the mythic interpretations of Synge’s plays. In Riders to the Sea, the extreme poverty of the islanders, the carefully annotated disintegration of their traditional habits, the colour symbolism of black and white, grey and red, the sheer marginality of existence, can be embraced under the aegis of Sea and Death. Maurna is the voice of humanity uttering its resignation to an incurable human plight. In her, quietism is heroic. Within this frame, every object — the clothes of the drowned Michael, the white boards for the coffin, the cake on

the griddle — shines with the pathos of the human artifact in the fact of the hypnotic and obliterating force of the sea.

Similarly, in Deirdre of the Sorrows, the betrayal of Naisi and his companions by Conchubor, already foretold, gives Deirdre the opportunity to satisfy her desire for death and for the escape from old age. The political fact is minor in contrast to the ‘metaphysical’ fact. As she says with her last breath: ‘It’s a pitiful thing, Conchubor, you have done this night in Emain, yet a thing will be a joy and triumph to the ends of life and time.’¹⁴

Deirdre, like Maurna and Christy, is a natural symbolist. The purity of action emerges only when it is drawn from the sheath of history. Then it glitters through all ages. But Deirdre is a costume drama with no image of the ‘natural’ to rescue it from its heavy Celtic brocade hangings. Synge’s fascination with obliteration, with being open and free, closed and imprisoned, dominates the action.

NAISI: There’s nothing surely the like of a new grave of open earth for putting a great space between two friends that love.

DEIRDRE: If there isn’t maybe it’s that grave when it’s closed will make us one forever, and we two lovers have had a great space without weariness or growing old or any sadness of mind.¹⁵

Here again, the space that swallows the heroes up is the space that gives them legendary presence. The disappearance of the central figures into death, resignation, or the horizons beyond the cottage or village, is the precondition of that figure’s abiding presence in the mind of the community. Real heroism is never in the here and now; it is always in the past of the mind.

In October 1902, George Moore and Yeats presented their Warmaid and Grainne along with Douglas Hyde’s Casadh an Íosagán (The Twisting of the Rope) in the Irish Literary Theatre. Hyde’s play was the first to be presented in Irish and it told of a hero repudiated by his community. Synge wrote about the evening for the French newspaper L’Européen:

So at the opening of the first piece, it was hard not to smile on seeing all around the hall the fine-looking women of the Gaelic League chattering in abominable Irish to some of the

¹⁴ Ibid., vol. 4, p. 269.
¹⁵ Ibid., vol. 4, p. 251.
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young clerks and shop assistants who were quite pale with enthusiasm. But it happened that during an interval of Diarmuid and Grainne, as was the custom in this theatre, the people in the gallery began to sing some of the old popular songs. Until that moment, these songs had never been so heard, sung by so many people together to the old, lingering Irish words. The whole auditorium shook. It was as if one could hear in these long-drawn-out notes, with their inexpressible melancholy, the death-rattle of a nation. First one head, then another, was seen to bend over the programme notes. People were crying.

Then the curtain went up. The play restarted in a deeply emotional atmosphere. For an instant we had glimpsed, hovering in that hall, the soul of a nation.\(^{16}\)

It is a famous moment and Synge, with his collector’s melancholy, has preserved it for us as a moment of transition, all the more important because he glimpsed in Hyde’s play that night the possibilities for a new kind of peasant drama. The soul of a nation and its death-rattle — what are these phrases redolent of more than a wake? As the old language dies the soul passes from its body, is glimpsed in the National Theatre, and disappears for ever. Synge was writing, more truly than he knew, the programme for his own plays.

16 ibid., vol. 2, pp. 381–2 (my translation).