Virgins, something that he does not find in the great modern masters, and that he cares for deeply. Is it merely that these men share certain moods with great lyric poetry, with, let us say, the 'Leech Gatherer' of Wordsworth; or that their moods, unlike those of men with more objective curiosity, are a part of the traditional expression of the soul? One always understood by something in his selection of line and of colour that he had read his Homer and his Virgil and his Dante; that they, while giving something of themselves, had freed him from easy tragedy and trivial comedy.

Though he often seemed led away from his work by some other gift, his attitude to life and art never lost intensity—he was never the amateur. I have noticed that men whose lives are to be an ever-growing absorption in subjective beauty—and I am not mainly remembering Calvert's philosophy of myth and his musical theory, or Verlaine's sensuality, or Shelley's politics—seek through some lesser gift, or through mere excitement, to strengthen that self which unites them to ordinary men. It is as though they hesitated before they plunged into the abyss. Major Gregory told me Bernard Shaw, who visited him in France, that the months since he joined the Army had been the happiest of his life. I think they brought him peace of mind, an escape from that shrinking, which I sometimes saw upon his face, before the growing absorption of his dream, the loneliness of his dream, as from his constant struggle to resist those other gifts that brought him ease and friendship. Leading his squadron in France or in Italy, mind and hand were at one, will and desire.

Colton Johnson (ed)

W.B. Yeats: later

Articles or Reviews

(1923)
II. THE LETTER

Some twenty-four years ago, Lady Gregory, who was near her fiftieth year, and I, who was in my early thirties, planned the foundation of an Irish Theatre, and we were soon joined by John Synge, who was in his late twenties. Lady Gregory had spent most of her life between two great houses in South Galway, while Synge had wandered over half Europe with his fiddle, and I had gone to and fro between Dublin and London. Yet Synge and I—like Lady Gregory—were people of the country; I because of my childhood and youth in Sligo, and he because of his in Wicklow. We had gone, all three, from cottage to cottage, collecting stories and hearing songs, and we thought that in these we had discovered that portion of the living mind of Ireland that was most beautiful and distinguished, and we wished to bring what we had discovered to Dublin, where, it seemed to us, the popular mind had grown harsh and ugly. We did not think that the Irish country lacked vice; we were even to be denounced because we insisted that they had the brutalities of country people elsewhere; but we were certain of the beauty of the songs and stories.

Lady Gregory had taken down a song in Irish—'The Grief of a Girl's Heart' it is called—and one day she showed it to a Gaelic-speaking man at her door, and asked what were the best verses. He picked just those verses that I would have picked—those that are most wild and strange, most unlike anything that is called 'popular poetry':

My heart is black as the blackness of the sloe, or as the coal that is left on the smith's forge; or as the sole of a shoe left in white halls; it was you put that darkness over my life.

You have taken the East from me; you have taken the West from me; you have taken what is before me and what is behind me. You have taken the moon, you have taken the sun from me; and my fear is great that you have taken God from me.

Amid your semi-tropical scenery, you think of Ireland as a far-off country of romance, and you will find it hard to understand our very prosaic reality. If a man is creating some new thing he has to question the taste of others, and that makes those others angry, and all the more if that new thing is a part of something they have long looked down upon as ignorant or foolish or old-fashioned. Then, too, even if he does not openly question the taste of others, it will be a long time before they can see the beauty that he has seen. I think it was George Henry Lewes who said that at first he could see no merit in the Elgin Marbles; and I remember an essay by Andrew Lang, in which he apologised for some attack on the poetry of my generation saying that when he first met with the poetry of that very great poet, Paul Verlaine, he thought it no better than the rhymes in some country newspaper. George Henry Lewes and Andrew Lang had much taste and great erudition. We had to convince average men and women, and to do this by an art that must blunder and experiment that it might find some new form.

If any of you become artists or poets, do not ask a welcome from great crowds, but write at first for a few friends, and always for a comparatively few people—not because you scorn the crowd, but because you think so well of it that you will offer it nothing but your best. In a few generations—but a short time in the history of a masterpiece—that crowd will speak of you with respect, if you are a great artist or poet, and a sufficient number will study what you have made with pleasure and profit.

We thought that Irish drama would be historical or legendary, and in verse or romantic prose; neither Synge nor Lady Gregory had written plays nor had indeed thought of doing so; so it was I—my head full of poetical drama—that gave the theatre its first impulse. After an experiment with English actors, we began our real work in 1902 in a little temperance hall in a back street, and chose our players from boys and girls, whose interests were, with a couple of exceptions, more political than literary. For the next two or three years we moved from hall to hall making some reputation among students of literature, and among young patriots who thought a theatre with Irish plays might strengthen national feeling, but much derided by the newspapers. One night I came in front of the curtain and asked the audience to support us against our enemies. I quoted from a leading article in one of the morning newspapers, which had said: 'Mr Yeats proposes to perform foreign masterpieces'—that was part of our project at the time—'Foreign masterpieces are very dangerous things.' I was angry; I should, perhaps, have remem-
bered that the Elgin Marbles are ‘foreign masterpieces’, and that some of the figures are very unclad. Among my audience was an English friend, Miss Horniman. I had been hoping—that she had made one or two hints—that she would give us a subscription, and as she was rich, I had fixed upon twenty pounds as the amount. She came up to me the moment I had finished, and said: ‘I will buy or build you a theatre’. In the next few months she bought and rebuilt a little old theatre that had been part of a Mechanics’ Institute, and we opened there in the winter of 1903-04.

Our obscurity made it possible to create a new kind of acting, for it gave us time to prepare and experiment. If our players had been stage-struck young men and women of the usual kind, they would have developed much more quickly; but their art would have been the ordinary stage art of their time. I had once been asked, at the end of a lecture, where we would get our players, for at that time there were neither Irish players nor Irish plays. I answered with the first thing that came into my head: ‘I will go into a room where there are a lot of people, and write all the names on slips of paper and drop them into a hat, shake them up, and take out twelve slips. I will ask those twelve people to act our plays’.24

Certainly William Fay, an electric light fitter, who was also an actor of genius, had some experience, for he had toured Ireland in a company with a negro actor-manager; and his brother, Frank Fay, was learned in the history of the stage, and fond of reciting poetry. But our women players were almost chosen at hazard. They all belonged to a political association, ‘The Daughters of Erin’, that described itself as educating the children of the poor, but was described by its enemies as teaching a catechism that began with the question: ‘What is the origin of evil?’ and the answer was—‘England’! From this Association we got two actresses of genius—Miss Sara Allgood, and Miss Máire O’Neill.24 They grew but slowly to skill and power because, acting at first more from patriotism than ambition, they were never tempted to copy some popular favourite. They copied, under the guidance of William Fay, the life they had seen in their own homes, or saw during some country visit; or they searched, under the guidance of Frank Fay or of myself, for some traditional measured speech to express those emotions that we feel, but cannot observe.

I soon saw that their greatest success would be in comedy, or in observed tragedy; not in poetical drama, which needs considerable poetical and general culture. I had found an old Dublin pamphlet about the blind beggar, ‘Zoizinus’,24 and noticed that whereas the parts written in ordinary English are badly written, certain long passages in dialect are terse and vivid. I pointed this out to Lady Gregory, and said if we could persuade our writers to use dialect, no longer able to copy the newspapers, or some second-rate English author, they would become original and vigorous. Perhaps no one reason ever drives one to anything. Perhaps I do not remember clearly after so many years; but I believe it was that thought that made me write, with Lady Gregory’s help, The Pot of Broth, and Cathleen ni Houlihan. The dialect in those two plays is neither rich nor supple, for I had not the right ear, and Lady Gregory had not as yet taken down among the cottages two hundred thousand words of folklore. But they began the long series of plays that have given our theatre the greater portion of its fame.

I once said to John Synge, ‘Why is it that an early Renaissance building is so much more beautiful than anything that followed?’ And he replied ‘Style is from the shock of new material’. It was the shock of new material that gave our plays and players their admirable style. I insist on the word ‘style’. When I saw Miss O’Neill play the old drunken woman in The Tinker’s Wedding, at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre a few years ago, I thought her performance incredibly distinguished—nothing second-hand, nothing from the stock common of the stage; no cliché, no recognition of all that traditional humour about drunken women.24

Lady Gregory’s little farces are the only farces of modern times that have not only humour but the beauty of style; and her tragedy, The Gaol Gate, is a classic, and not because of its action, for it has no action, but because of its style. One need not commend the style of John Synge’s famous plays—The Well of the Saints, or The Playboy, The Riders to the Sea, Deirdre of the Sorrows.24 Should our Abbey Theatre come to an end, should our plays cease to be acted, shall we not be remembered, I think, because we were the first to give the English-speaking Ireland a mastery of style by turning a dialect that had been used hitherto with a comic purpose to a purpose of beauty. If I were your professor of literature (I must remind myself that you hear me, while others but overhear) and were compelled to choose examples of fine prose for an Irish reading book, I would take some passages from Swift, some from Burke, one per-
haps from Mitchell (unless his mimicry of Carlyle put me off) and from that on find no comparable passages till The Gaol Gate and the last act of Deirdre of the Sorrows. I would then set my pupils to show that this strange English, born in the country cottages, is a true speech with as old a history as the English of Shakespeare, and that it takes its vocabulary from Tudor England and its construction from the Gaelic.

The dialect drama in the hands of Mr Fitzmaurice, Mr T. C. Murray, Mr Lennox Robinson, Mr Boyle, Mr Daniel Corkery, and Mr Sean O’Kelly, and of Mr Padraic Colum in one of his plays, took a new turn. 364 Synge and Lady Gregory were as little interested in social questions as the old men and women whose stories they had heard and copied; but our new dramatists were, in imagination and sympathy, mainly of the city. The countryman is much alone, and if, as happened through all the Middle Ages, when the most beautiful of our stories were invented, he is of a violent and passionate nature, he seeks relief from himself in stories or in songs full of delicate emotion; he delights, perhaps, in Arthur and his Court. In the cities, however, men who are in continual contact with one another have for their first need not the beauty but, as I think, the truth of human life. They suffer much from irritation, anger, jealousy; and in their hearts they desire to be shown that, though capitalist and labourer, Nationalist and Unionist, Republican and Free Stater, even honest men and bribed, differ in one thing, they are alike in a hundred. They wish to see themselves and the enemy of their working hours explained, derided or bantered, with at least occasional good humour, though they are not philosophic enough to know that art is the chief intellectual form of charity. When some play of this kind is acted, they are startled, sometimes angry, sometimes incredulous; but they are not bored. They cannot be shown too many such plays if we are not to murder or be murdered because we have given or received some partisan name. Such plays, in the hands of the writers I have named, have dealt with the life of the shop and workshop, and of the well-off farmer, more often than of those small farms of Connaught where there is so much folklore; and the scene is laid, as a general rule, in or near some considerable town, and their speech comes close to modern English. Except in the plays of Mr Lennox Robinson, however, where some character is introduced whose speech has no admixture of dialect, character-
some simple story of public or private life by the light of a morality
which everyone accepts without hesitation. Great works of art have
been written in that way—the comedies of Oliver Goldsmith, and
nearly all the comedies of Molière, for instance. But there are other
works which are also, as a famous Belgian poet said a masterpiece
must be, a portion of the conscience of mankind, and which judge
all by the light of some modern discovery. Something which has
been there always—more constantly there, indeed, than Tony
Lumpkins or the miser—but which has not been noticed, is
brought out into the light that we may perceive it is beautiful or good,
or most probably evil or ugly. The plays of Strindberg or Tchekov are
of this kind, and it is such works, whether novels or plays, that are
most characteristic of intellectual Europe to-day.

We have already two such plays in Mr Lennox Robinson's
Round Table and his Crabbed Youth; and it looks as if the audience
that welcomed his Whitehead's Boy and the other plays in his old
manner will give them a sufficient welcome. It is wavering; the
shorter play it has delighted in, but the longer, which more openly
calls in question a traditional point of view, leaves it a little cold. Mr
Robinson has taught us to laugh at, and therefore to judge, a cer-
tain exaggeration of domesticity, a helpless clinging to the one res-
olute person that we had all perhaps noticed in some Irish house or
other without knowing that we had noticed it.

He has not made his characters speak in dialect, for he is describ-
ing a characteristic that, though it may exist among peasants, needs
a certain degree of leisure for its full display; one of those tragedies
almost that only begin, as Maeterlinck said, when we have closed
the door and lighted the lamp—almost a malady of contempla-
tion. Should some other of our dramatists use the same form, he
will have spent many years, like Mr Joyce or like Mr Lennox
Robinson, in the education of his judgment, and not only that he
may keep his dialogue pure without the protection of a particular
form of speech, but that he may judge where judgment has hitherto
slept. Then he must be ready to wait—his audience may be slow to
understand—for a long time, it may be, to do without all that pleas-
ant companionship that belongs to those who are content only to
laugh at those things that everybody laughs at.

He will have to help him a company of players who, though they
are still masters of dialect alone, love work and experiment, and so
constantly surprise us by some unforeseen success, and a theatre
that, having no director or shareholder to pay, uses the profits on its
more popular plays to experiment with plays that may never make
a profit at all. The audience, though it has coarsened under the
influence of public events and constant political discussion, is yet
proud of its intelligence and of its old hospitality, and may be won
over in time. Yet it may be a bitter struggle—one can never tell; as
bitter as any Synge had to endure. And you, perhaps, walking among
your palm trees under that Californian sunlight, may well ask your-
self what it is that compels a man to make his own cup bitter.
A correspondent has sent me the following little essay with the comment 'A short time ago I read Synge's life, and it seemed to me rather lacking in the personal touch, so I wrote down these few memories.' Where we have so little with that 'touch', I am grateful as an old friend of Synge's, and I have asked the Irish Statesman to put the essay into print that it may remain for some future biographer. John Synge was a very great man, and in time to come every passing allusion that recalls him, whether in old newspaper articles or in old letters, will be sought out that historians of literature may mould, or try to mould, some simple image of the man. Even before the war, invention had begun, for a tolerably well-known American journalist, who had never been under the same roof with Synge, or even set eyes upon him, published scenes and conversations, that were all, from no malicious intention but because of his gross imagination, slander and travesty. He based all upon what he supposed the inventor of so many violent and vehement peasants must be like, knowing so little of human character that he described, without knowing it, Synge's antithesis. I have left my correspondent's notes as they came from her unpractised hand, trivial and important alike. That praise of Wordsworth, for instance, is nothing in itself. To say that 'Wordsworth is more at one with Nature than some other, is too vague to increase our knowledge, but it recalls some early work of Synge's, certain boyish reveries, that I excluded from his collected edition but not from material that his biographers might use, in which he described minutely brook or coppice—I have forgotten which—a shadowed, limited place, such