*JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE (1871 - 1909)**

Ann Saddlemyer

A stroll down past the River Liffey to Lower Abbey Street in Dublin some eighty years ago led one to a small square-faced red brick building, the old Mechanics Institute, next door to the former city morgue. Here, during the first decade of the twentieth century, history was once again made in world drama, when another experimental literary theatre took its place beside those of Paris, Berlin, Moscow, and London. Dublin's was not a large theatre – it seated at most 560 and the stage was only sixteen feet in depth – but its honor roll includes actors Barry Fitzgerald, Arthur Sinclair, F.J. McCormick, Willie and Frank Fay, Sara Allgood and Maire O'Neill, Siobhan MacKenna, Cyril Cusack, and playwrights Sean O'Casey, Lennox Robinson, T.C. Murray, Brendan Behan, Padraic Colum, Lady Gregory and the poet-playwright William Butler Yeats. But the name which stands apart and yet at the same time owes its whole literary existence, cause and effect, to the Abbey Theatre and the forces which created that theatre, is the name of John Millington Synge.

Synge died in 1909 at the age of thirty-eight, leaving behind seven plays (one of them unpublished), a travel book, some uncollected essays, and a slim volume of poems and translations. For a brief time he acted as theatre director with Lady Gregory and Yeats, became engaged to the actress Molly Allgood (who was eighteen years his junior), wrote the occasional essay and reviewed the odd book. But he was first of the Abbey Theatre playwrights to achieve European recognition, and his plays, which have been translated and performed through the world, are constantly cited as outstanding examples of modern tragedy and comedy. And although – perhaps because – his time was short, his impact on the Abbey Theatre itself, both in type of play and characteristics of performance, is felt to this day.

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* This was originally prepared for and developed from the lecture she gave at Shinwa Women's College and Shujitsu Women's University in October, 1984. — Editorial note.

A "quiet, solitary man who lived apart," as Yeats was later to remember him, Synge was, like his fellow directors, of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy. However his roots were in County Wicklow while theirs were in the west of Ireland; he was descended not from landowners but from Unionist professional stock that had supplied Ireland with bishops and educators for many generations. His father, a barrister, had died when he was only one year old; one of his brothers became a medical missionary in China, one emigrated to Argentina, the other served efficiently if sometimes ruthlessly as a land agent in Ireland, while his only sister married a solicitor. Synge grew up in a narrow world which, although kind and generous within its own strict religious and political code, considered theatre and the related arts highly suspect if not dangerously immoral. His mother, to whose home he regularly returned until her death four months before his own and who served as model for old Maurya in *Riders to the Sea,* prayed devoutly that young Johnnie would turn back from his interests in music and literature to the church he had early renounced. Yet it was Synge who even more than his colleagues turned Ireland's eyes westward and inward to rediscover the roots of a race and the soul of a people and, in the lyrical eloquence of his language, to hear its true voice once again.

Never strong as a child in spite of his roaming through the hills and valleys of Wicklow, Synge received most of his education privately before entering Trinity College Dublin in 1888. He did not distinguish himself academically, and when he was granted a gentleman's or pass B.A. four years later, his lowest mark was in English literature. But he received prizes in Irish and Hebrew and had acquired some knowledge of German. More significantly, that same year he won the scholarship in counterpoint from the Royal Irish Academy of Music; and it was this award that determined the next period of his life. He had been studying the violin since he was sixteen years old; now, to the dismay of his family, he decided to pursue a career in music.

For the next ten years he lived in the intense, self-conscious world of the semi-exile, returning to Ireland each summer, but aware always of his country as the furthermost corner of "the western world". He discovered after a year studying music in Germany that he preferred a literary life, being too nervous to perform in public and too conscious of his own weaknesses as a composer. He travelled briefly in Italy, then settled in Paris to study at the Sorbonne and grub

out a living as a journalist. His path briefly crossed that of another determined young exile, James Joyce; they argued fiercely about Aristotle and tragedy through the streets of Paris and parted, still arguing. (Later in Trieste Joyce was to translate *Riders to the Sea* into Italian; later still he admitted Synge's genius was "more original" than his own.) Other meetings proved more eventful, for in December 1896 he met William Butler Yeats and unwittingly became part of the Irish Literary Revival.

The story of the first encounter between Yeats and Synge reads like a fairy tale and has often been turned into one. For as Yeats later reported it, he immediately advised Synge to "go to the Aran Islands and find a life that had never been expressed in literature, instead of a life where all had been expressed." But Yeats had recently returned from Aran, and he admitted that his imagination was full of "those gray islands, where men must reap with knives because of the stones." Meanwhile, however, Synge continued to divide his time between Wicklow and Paris, and Yeats had still not recognized the peculiar genius of his friend several years later when he wrote to Lady Gregory from France: "I have seen Synge. He is really a most excellent man. He lives in a little room, which he has furnished himself. He is his own servant. He works very hard and is learning Breton. He will be a very useful scholar." Finally seventeen months after Yeats's suggestion, Synge visited the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland for the first time (where, incidentally, an uncle had been the local curate some years before). Although he was to keep his rooms in Paris for another four years, the circle of his life moved westward until France became the outer rim, and Ireland once again the centre.

Synge brought with him on this westward journey an ear heightened by the study of music and language, an eye sharpened by summers in County Wicklow (where his mother regularly rented a house) and winters of estrangement abroad, and an objectivity and clarity of vision intensified by frequent bouts with illness. On Aran and later in Kerry he discovered a fresh, vigorous and primitive world of simple strong outline, with a richness and variety created by the harsh bitter struggle with sea and wind. Out of his five visits to the islands he wrote his travel book *The Aran Islands,* a sensitive evocation of his own reactions to the stark grandeur of a life in which the human, natural and supernatural are an unfragmented whole. He wrote of the islanders in his notebook, "Their minds

have been coloured by endless suggestions from the sea and sky, and seem to form a unity in which all kinds of emotion match one another like the leaves or petals of a flower." Recalling his musical training, he determined in his writing to seek the same purity and balance of emotion, and to attempt the same broad spectrum of colour, joy and hardness. In the preface to his *Poems and Translations* ten years later he re-affirmed this attitude towards life and art: "It is the timber of poetry that wears most surely, and there is no timber that has not strong roots among the clay and worms... the strong things of life are needed in poetry also, to show that what is exalted, or tender, is not made by feeble blood. It may almost be said that before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal."

Meanwhile, encouraged by Lady Gregory and Yeats, he became involved in the work of establishing a national theatre in Dublin. Incidents on Aran provided him with the framework of *Riders to the Sea,* the painful one-act tragedy of a widowed mother's fate-ordained struggle with the sea. The sea broods over this play from the opening speech of the two young girls; there is no synonym, no adjective, no personification for "the sea" – the words appear on every page, the rhythm takes on the relentless beating of the waves – it becomes some unnamed power that lures away a woman's strong sons and leaves the old desolate. Throughout the play, the past is imposed upon the present, the supernatural blends with the natural, the Christian is submerged in the pagan, as the inevitable ritual renews itself; against this eternal rhythm of nature the characters move in dream-like measures towards their destiny. At the end, there is resignation, not to old age or to the coming of death, but a relief that at last the sea holds no terror.

Riders to the Sea was Synge's first published play, a startlingly clear evocation of the life impressed upon him during his stay on Aran. Life is not much different today – there is still the thin-shelled curragh meeting the big boat, the loading supplies on to it or taking passengers off to the smaller islands; still the rocks and barren fields, rock fences enclosing rock surfaces. The Islanders now have natural gas and electricity, and a very small air strip has been built on the sands of the middle island, but not much else. Kelp may still be used for the fire; cocks for the seaweed fertilizer still look the same.

There is still also the awareness of nature, the realities of life as we see them

so strongly portrayed in *Riders to the Sea.* How simply the two girls talk of the bodies floating in the sea. Nobody rebels against the sea – at the end Maurya's lifelong struggle against the acceptance of the power of nature is over: "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me". But for the young men the sea attracts as well as repels: "It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?" Nature and the sea mean death but at the same time represent life, for there is no life without the acceptance of challenge even if the odds are heavy, the end inevitable.

Nature creates another conflict within man also – between his awareness of nature as a power itself and his Christian faith. The Irish peasant on the whole manages to maintain an easy balance between the depths of his feeling for his religious beliefs and the overwhelming influence of natural forces. "Didn't the young priest say the Almighty God won't leave her destitute with no son living?" asks Nora simply. But Maurya replies with the folk wisdom of age: "It's little the like of him knows of the sea". The *caoine* (pronounced *keen*), the mourning chant of the chorus of women at the end of the play, comes from pagan times and has become mixed with the prayers for the dead of the Roman Catholic church, a sort of truce between religion and fatalism which has its own irony.

Thus the natural tends to blend into the supranatural, just as Maurya's experience gives us the impression of layers of time, her recollections of past losses seeming to call forth the present and future loss. She is like a rock against which the sea pounds, gradually eroding away her family, just as the island itself, entirely rock, is pounded again and again by the waves. Yet, like the island, she also represents the eternal. The height of tragic power and ecstasy is seen in her final speech where she combines the two opposites: death and nature take life, but the human spirit will triumph: "No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied".

This prevailing mood and atmosphere of the play make it almost a lyric or tone-poem (also short works of art), and it is well to remember that Synge was trained as a musician. In *Riders to the Sea* he employs many musical devices by means of choice of language and sentence structure, creating a rhythm which matches the very rhythms of nature. At the beginning of the play, for example, the sentences are short, with the girls almost whispering to each other with

rapidity, implying urgency. Even their silences, which punctuate the rapid give-and-take of question and answer, are eloquent and intense. As Maurya enters, the speed decreases and the sentences grow longer. Bartley's arrival contributes to this dream-like sadness – partly by the finality of his instructions (the pig, the kelp), partly by being the only one to ignore his mother. Action then takes over again for a brief moment at his departure and the tempo quickens as old Maurya is sent hurrying after Bartley to give him the bread and her blessing. Then once more urgency takes over in the speeches of the girls as they examine their drowned brother's clothing and struggle with the salt-dried knot. When Maurya returns the tone of lamentation increases steadily until the lengthy speeches of her final note of release when the wail of the *caoine* brings down the curtain on a tableau of kneeling figures.

Riders to the Sea is a tightly-knit play in other ways also. Synge's device of "doubling up" as he imposes past on to present with Maurya's recollections of the loss of her husband and older sons is reflected in other ways: Bartley's instructions and the girls' conversation point both back and forward; the boards stacked against the cabin wall were intended first for Michael, then for herself, but they will serve now for Bartley (and she has forgotten the nails). Most of all, Maurya's vision of Bartley on the grey mare carries us with a shiver from the known to the great Unknown constantly hanging over those who live in the shadow of death. The selection of such details is very important, for everything woven in must bear its weight. There can be no digression or audience relief in a short play as there can be, for example, in *The Playboy of the Western World,* where Synge has time and space to draw us in, then let us out again, only to draw us in even more tightly. Here we must not be allowed to wander; the tension controls always.

Synge's choice of language also contributes to the musical effect of the play. He was fortunate in his raw material again, for the countryfolk of the west of Ireland still to this day speak English with the slight charm of a foreign language, giving it a lilt which increases even the musical sound of the Irish accent. Here, of course, language must be pared down to reflect the tragic lyricism of the play. In order to help the actors and readers, Synge was careful to instruct us through punctuation in the proper way of speaking his lines.

Through the characters' speeches, our minds are constantly kept on Maurya

even when she is not present; just as the sea is mentioned on every page, so Maurya is referred to: what will she think? where is she? what is she doing now? Thus the others act as a chorus to her grief throughout. Yet all are given enough individuality to be people in their own right: Bartley is representative of the eight strong men Maurya has lost, yet he has a quiet personal strength and presence: Cathleen is older than Nora, wiser than her sister in the ways of grief and the two girls react differently to their own loss; even the comments of the neighbours at the end, while emphasizing Maurya, show individuality.

This is, therefore, effective theatre – giving us the world in miniature, humanity within the individual, great feeling in brief form. It is all the more remarkable when we realize that it is Synge's first finished play.

The same summer he was writing *Riders to the Sea,* Synge drafted his first comedy of nature, *The Shadow of the Glen.* Here all becomes personal, defined, possible, while an unnamed Tramp sings sweetly of the vagrant's life to a lonely sensitive young woman confined and choked by her cold cheerless union with a crusty old husband: "We'll be going now, lady of the house – the rain is falling but the air is kind, and maybe it'll be a grand morning by the grace of God". Other comedies quickly followed, all based on his experiences on the roads of Ireland. First *The Tinker's Wedding,* a rollicking farce considered "too dangerous to perform in Dublin" because it ends with tinkers stuffing a priest in a bag and running off as he calls down a malediction on them; then his first full-length play, *The Well of the Saints,* which brings water from the holy well of Aran to embellish and plague the countryfolk of Wicklow. Aran again provided Synge with one of the themes for *The Playboy of the Western World,* although the richness and loquacity of Christy Mahon and the Mayoites' capacity for myth-making know no county (or country) boundaries.

However, the audience which had been moved to pity and terror by *Riders to the Sea* felt the stirring of other emotions as they viewed this fantastical comedy for the first time. Horrified by the tale of a young man who is raised to heroic stature in Mayo because he has had the courage, not once but three times, to slay his da, and shocked by the blatant use of the word "shift" (a woman's chemise) on the public stage, the audience broke up in disorder on the first night. They returned again and again during the following week armed with noise-makers, heavy boots, and strong lungs to make certain further offence was impossible. On

the other side of the stage the actors, encouraged from the wings by Lady Gregory and in public pronouncements by Yeats, valiantly ducked flying missiles and continued their performance in dumb show. By the end of the week order – with the help of Dublin Castle's police force – had been restored, the theatre's bank account was unusually healthy, the players were exhausted, and Yeats and Lady Gregory triumphant in their battle for the freedom of the theatre.

But throughout the disturbances in the audience and in the press, Synge insisted that he wrote the play "directly, as a piece of life, without thinking, or caring to think, whether it was a comedy, tragedy, or extravaganza, or whether it would be held to have, or not to have, a purpose". Nor was he as concerned about the first-night violence as he was by certain weaknesses in the actors' performances and their inability to embody the subtleties of characterization. For Synge had devoted over two years and more than a thousand pages of painstaking re-writing to the intricate and richly-textured design of *The Playboy,* making every possible effort to retain clarity and strength of line and plot while elaborating characterization and action through parallels and contrasts, crescendos and climaxes, "currents" of emotion and atmosphere. No wonder many of the actors themselves were bewildered by the carefully controlled fantasy of the text and succumbed to exaggerations of realism.

For the extravagance Synge depicts in his characters is carefully modulated by a deliberate balancing of moods and action until the audience is subtly drawn into a deliberately amoral world which (as in the treatment of Shawn Keogh) banishes both priest and "polis". Once freed of moral and legal judgment, we are able to respond with the myth-making Mayoites to the excitement of a folk-hero in our midst, and to indulge in that "popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender" which Synge describes in his preface to the play. The power of the imagination, the liberation of Christy Mahon's spirit as he expands into the role of poet-hero cast by the Mayoites themselves, runs like a multi-coloured thread through the play. "Given the psychic state of the locality", Synge insisted to a friend, "the story is probable". This small enclosed world entered so timidly and cautiously first by Shawn and then by Christy, is one of deprivation and isolation, where heroes are few and familiar (even the lusty Widow Quin's belated husband has become a standard) and where only reminiscence, horseplay and the occasional sup of poteen (illicitly distilled

whiskey) brighten the darkness and silence of the unknown threatening "big world" outside. The villagers are childlike in their response to "such poet's talking and bravery of heart" – notice their eager, inquisitive circling until Christy yields his story in appropriate heroic form; they do not recognize their part in this creation even when the reality of murder is forced on them by a defiant Christy forced to "prove" his new-found self-respect. Nor, with the exception of Pegeen and the Widow, are they aware of the permanence of that creation or the violence of their own response.

When Synge was criticized for the brutality and violence in the play, he produced an argument he was later to develop more fully in the preface to his *Poems and Translations,* insisting that "the romantic note and a Rabelaisian note are working to a climax through a great part of the play, and that the Rabelaisian note, the 'gross' note, if you will, *must* have its climax no matter who may be shocked". Earthiness and lyricism must exist in equal proportions; the bitter belongs to the reality of life as much as the sweet; poetry must always "have its roots among the clay and the worms". The richer and more tender the imagination, the more fiery and extravagant the accompanying action is likely to be. In the play we see this deliberate paralleling most clearly in the treatment of Pegeen Mike, for the more Pegeen believes in the hero she has helped create, the greater her loss when she dare not follow him "romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgement day". And the greater the need for her to show the pain of that loss by inflicting physical pain in turn as she burns Christy. It is not, in fact, until that moment that Christy is free to become the playboy in earnest; now he is no longer dependent on Pegeen's approval. And so Christy's triumph is Pegeen's heartbreak; in that final scene of rejection the various threads of bitter and sweet, violence and lyricism are drawn irredeemably together.

But the world of fantasy and folk-myth Synge has created is not restricted to Pegeen and Christy. We first hear Old Mahon described in hyperbolic terms by his son (the deed must have a suitably heroic subject); Old Mahon too tastes the joyous moment of recognition and, as with Christy, "Is it me?" becomes "It is me!" In the two Mahons, the drunken antics and earthbound tales of the Mayoites are elevated to Dionysiac and truly grotesque proportions; with the final testing of courage, Christy's mask (and therefore his father's) becomes a

reality, the playboy turns into the genuine player, the dreaming fool of the family becomes the proud poet-jester of Mayo. "Shut your yelling," he admonishes his attackers, "for if you're after making a mighty man of me this day by the power of a lie, you're after setting me now to think if it's a poor thing to be lonesome it's worse, maybe, go mixing with the fools of earth". His elevation isolates him further, and he and his "Da" enter a new world none other dare follow.

Among those left behind, the Widow Quin deserves special notice. For she too is carved of heroic stuff, even though her deed is too close to home to "win small glory with the boys itself". She too is set apart and in her isolation has a breadth of sympathy and realistic appraisal not granted her fellow villagers. Serving as an arch in the balance of tension between the "Rabelaisian" and the "romantic", she acts as foil to both Christy and Old Mahon in her lusty humour and materialism, as counterbalance to Pegeen and the village girls in her experience and longings. It is she who appropriately tags Christy "the walking playboy of the western world", with all the irony that complex title implies.

"In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple," Synge wrote in his preface, acknowledging his debt to the language he heard spoken among the Irish country people. In *The Playboy* particularly he tests that flavour to the utmost, for here the language responds to sense and characterization, vigour and roughness of action leading to the violence and colour of an imagery mingling pagan sentiment with religious overtones, whipping the mood of the play into ever-expanding spirals of excitement, tension, and surprise. This is a selective and artistically created speech pattern, but it is significant that only a handful of phrases are "invented"; for Synge believed that the most valuable drama is that sustained by the speech of the people. But the richness of the language in turn answers to the development of Christy Mahon as poet-hero, fulfilling the dual qualities of reality and joy Synge required in a work of art, and providing even further challenge to the making of the Playboy.

No wonder that first audience was confused, even hurt by the tricks being played on them, and therefore angry. But meanwhile, the man responsible for all the uproar had discreetly retired to nurse a bad cold, and did not appear at the Abbey Theatre again for several months. For John Millington Synge was not by temperament or training a fighter. Besides, by then he had discovered new territory, moving southward to County Kerry and the Blasket Islands in search of

yet greater treasures of western Ireland's wild beauty. His essays, plays and poetry took on new dimensions of passion and intensity as he recognised his departure from the Celtic twilight of the early Yeats and the strict naturalism of the theatrical tradition he had helped develop. He sought deeper into the Irish consciousness itself for a greater reality still; and out of the myths of his country's past he determined to celebrate a different subject matter and to develop a new style. He began to write *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, the tragedy of the Irish Helen, who with her lover Naisi defies the High King to share seven years of life in exile, and then chooses an early death rather than the withering of lingering old age. But Synge did not live to complete the play. Out of the thousand painstakingly worked pages Yeats, Lady Gregory, and his fiancee the actress Molly Allgood (for whom he had created the title role), assembled a text which even in its unpolished state remains one of the most satisfying interpretations of "the story that will be told forever".

In all his work, Synge was an impeccable craftsman, writing and rewriting, unravelling and re-structuring each scene in an effort to reflect the organic beauty he observed in the world about him; to recreate the tension between the Rabelaisian and the romantic; and to capture the rhythmic lyricism of the Anglo-Irish speaker at his most eloquent. His influence on later Irish dramatists such as Sean O'Casey, Brendan Behan, Samuel Beckett is undeniable; but his greatest impact was on William Butler Yeats, who admitted many years later that Synge's shadow remained constantly at his side. Synge became a cornerstone in Yeats's private mythology, a symbol of the pure genius, creator of a noble art "full of passion and heroic beauty" and "a cry for a more abundant and intense life". The Abbey Theatre became for Yeats Synge's theatre, and he confessed in his autobiography, "I did not see, until Synge began to write, that we must renounce the deliberate creation of a kind of Holy City in the imagination, and express the individual". Friendship and aesthetic creed passed through the crucible of poetry and became immortal.

Synge died of Hodgkins' Disease in a Dublin nursing home in 1909, at the age of thirty-eight. But in his writings his spirit still lives, exploring the lush beauty of County Wicklow, or following that same pilgrimage to the counties of the west, where tinkers and story-tellers, fishermen and strong women of the Aran Islands, celebrate the qualities of a life and the natural world that are

universal, uncompromising, and permanent.

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