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John Synge

By *MARY C. MAGUIRE*

THE great artist has more in common with the vigorous maker of melodrama and serial shockers than he has with the second-rate artist who is mainly concerned with form and style, and whose audience must necessarily be somewhat narrow-spirited and select—must be in fact a clique.

Very often the great artist and the weaver of the shockers have the same following. In Shakespeare's day the great dramatists filled both functions in themselves, and it was just such an audience as rocked the old Globe Theatre with applause for *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* that Synge ought to have got, and that we know from his prefaces he desired.

“Many of the older poets,” he tells us, “such as Villon and Herrick and Burns, used the whole of their personal life as their material, and the verse written in this way was read by strong men and thieves and deacons, not by little cliques only.” An audience similar to these full-blooded folk was what Synge looked to. Every great artist desires such an audience; every great artist in the end gets it. During his lifetime Synge got little but hostile criticism from his countrymen, for he carried his love of strong life and vigour and fierceness to a degree of exaggeration unpleasing in a country where these things are held at poor enough value. It was tragic that it was the few intellectuals and the elegant bourgeoisie who frequent the stalls of the theatre as an after dinner amusement who applauded his immortal *Playboy*. That a howling multitude of the fine buoyant folk of the pit, hissed and outraged it, is one of the things for which their children's children will be ashamed of their forebears. For Synge was a supreme genius who saw life stripped of the false subtleties that passing fashions in literature and metaphysics endow it with, and who created men and women free from the accidental traits and influences that the time-spirit gives them—though, perhaps, his aim to bring on the stage only the most elemental emotions, and the most ancient energies was a little too self-conscious, as was his cult of vigour and pursuit of fine imagery in his dialogue.

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The appearance of the four volumes of his collected work is an exciting event in the literary annals of this country. Not many Irishmen have produced great literature in English. Synge is one of the number who represent Ireland in European literature—we might justly claim indeed that he is the first who fairly represents us as a nation at all. For the best-beloved names, Davis, Mangan, Ferguson, are outside of this country almost unknown; and the great names, Swift, Goldsmith, Sheridan, might almost as well be those of Englishmen, so little connection has their work with the land of their birth. But Synge cannot be separated from Ireland. Every page in the volumes before us deals with Ireland, and, as far as we know, he never got a line of inspiration outside of Ireland. Almost the only literary influence on his work is that of Gaelic literature or Gaelic tradition.

The bulk of the work in these volumes is small—half a dozen of plays, some twenty original poems, some translations, and two volumes of his adventures and impressions among the peasants of the west and east. They represent the output of the last eight or nine years of his life. We have no young work of his twenties to tell us what apprenticeship he served, and by what steps he arrived at his development. The two volumes of his impressions in Aran, Kerry and Wicklow are best regarded as simply a kind of commentary on his dramatic work—the best commentary we can ever hope to have. They are the notebooks of his plays. We can trace in them the process by which he came to write almost all of them. Here and there we encounter a plot or a reflection or a piece of dialogue which he afterwards worked up—everywhere we meet the understudies of his characters. We see in embryo *The Shadow of the Glen*, *Riders to the Sea*, and *The Tinker's Wedding*. In his *Aran Islands* he remarks, now and again, on the strength of the maternal passion among the women, which, he says, gives them a life of continual torment because of the danger of the sea. There we see the first step in his mind towards the creation of the nobly tragic figure of the old mother in *Riders to the Sea*.

In this play with a plot so slight that it would be but an incident in a French or English drama—in a piece that plays but twenty minutes—he puts a strength and intensity that critics would find hard to match

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in any play of similar length in the literature of the world. The characters have the Greek quietness and stateliness, and the play ends in the high grave note which the ancient dramatists thought the true ending of a tragedy.

Much of the ugliness and sordidness of modern tragedy arises from the fact that the play ends in the complete overthrow of the hero in body and spirit. In Synge, after the tragic crisis is past, the principal character rises as it were above the tragedy and in an noble speech, which is a leave-taking, heightens the intensity and ends the play in a note of exaltation. In *Riders to the Sea*, after the dead body of the last of her sons is brought to her from the sea, the old mother speaks:—

“They’re all gone now, and there is’nt anything more the sea can do to me. I’ll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south. . . . I’ll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won’t care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. . . . It’s a great rest I’ll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain—if it’s only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking. . . . Bartly will have a fine coffin of the white boards, and a deep grave, surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.”

And Deirdre asserts her unconquered spirit when her day is over:—

“I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn and muddy; for it is I have had a life that will be envied by great companies. It was not by a low birth I made kings uneasy and they sitting in the halls of Emain. It was not a low thing to be chosen by Conchubar, who was wise, and Naoise had no match for bravery. It is not a small thing to be rid of grey hairs and the loosening of the teeth. It was the choice of lives we had in the clean woods, and in the grave we’re safe surely.”

It has been objected that Synge’s Deirdre is not a successful dramatization of the old saga—that he did not build his characters in high heroic mould. This I believe to be true, but it in no way detracts from the greatness of the play, for the characters gain in human interest what they lose in the heroic.

Here a striking quality of Synge’s men characters may be

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noticed. Although they are equal in portraiture and presentation to his women, they are as human beings inferior to them. Naoise is not so high-hearted a person as Deirdre—all the men in *The Playboy* are Pegeen Mike's inferiors in spirit and courage. In *The Shadow of the Glen* the tramp's daring and imagination make him but temporarily Nora Bourke's equal. Synge's success with his women characters is amazing. They are the most live women in modern drama. This arises, naturally, from his method as a dramatist. He scorned the psychological minuteness of what are called the intellectual dramatists, who break up into little pieces the souls of their personages for examination, and we cannot grasp the character for the number of its compartments. None of Ibsen's painfully analysed women are as live and natural as Nora Bourke, or Deirdre, or Pegeen Mike. Between these women and their lovers Synge contrives scenes of exquisite beauty. Let us take for example the love scenes between Deirdre and Naoise and Pegeen Mike and the Playboy, where in both cases the man has a dash of the milksop. The initiative in love-making is taken by the woman, and this, as it were, liberates the spirit of the man, who responds to her in a series of lyrical outbursts which elevates, what in most plays is an awkward and commonplace scene, into the plane of high poetry.

English critics, astonished at the beauty of the love scene in *The Playboy*, and forgetting that vision and imagination are as necessary to a dramatist as to a poet, have declared that Synge was primarily a poet. He has really only those poetic qualities which are equally common to the great dramatist and the great poet. He is purely a dramatist. His poems are not the poems of a poet—they are the notes in verse of a dramatist—powerful intense little studies of atmosphere, of personages, and of emotions. Had he lived, I believe, he would have worked them up into dramatic form and invented for them a new kind of verse play. But he died in the height of his activity, before his life's work was half done. Few of his countrymen realised what his death meant. The one insistent criticism he received from them which grew more violent with the production of each new play, was that his work was a libel on his country. His critics wanted him to put on the stage their village, and the characters in their village, as they themselves saw them. They

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wanted Irish life and the Irish peasant presented as they appeared to the mass mind and the mass temperament. Synge presented them as seen through the temperament of a man of genius. They were thrilled and shocked. They believed they were shocked at what they thought to be the uncommon wickedness of his characters—they were in reality shocked at his genius.

Many a dramatist since *The Playboy* was hissed has put on the Abbey stage characters less complimentary to Ireland than any Synge ever conceived, and they have been received with the applause of crowded houses, because their creators in other respects echoed the ideas of the collective mind. They have indeed echoed the collective mind until the collective mind is exhausted, and, Synge being dead, the Irish peasant as the subject for drama is dead until some fresh genius resuscitates him.

A few second-rate writers can exhaust in half a decade what to the masters remains an inspiration for ever.