CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

John Millington Synge was born in an old, middle class Protestant Wicklow family at Rathfarnham, near Dublin on 16 April 1871. Sir or Synge was a title earned by one of his ancestors, John Millington from Henry VIII for having sung very melodiously when he was a Canon of the Royal Chapel. The dramatist Synge himself was a great lover of music who could play on the fiddle fairly well. He was educated privately first and then at Trinity College, Dublin, where he took his B.A. He travelled widely in Europe, spending much time in Paris between 1893 and 1898. He was then a Parnellite and Socialist intermittently. He kept his room in Paris till 1902, going now and then to the Aran Islands. While in Paris, he had studied Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research regularly and explored mysticism and theosophy. He was also then interested in occultism which he studied with W.B. Yeats and Maud Gonne. In 1903 he gave up his room, returned to Ireland and started writing his plays. He was a director of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, between 1904 and 1909.

During the last year of his life, Synge was engaged to be married to an actress, Marie O'Neill, or Molly Allgood,
who had been playing the heroine in his plays. But disease was slowly but steadily killing him. On 4 May 1908 he wrote to Molly from Elpis Nursing Home:

My dearest love, this is a mere line for my poor child, in case anything goes wrong with me tomorrow, to bid you good-bye and ask you to be brave and good, and not forget the good times we've had and the beautiful things we've seen together. Your old friend.  

Luckily he recovered this time: but very often later he had fits of depression and then a relapse. Two days before his death, he convinced himself after questioning the doctor that he was dying. He was quite cheerful and was even making jokes. When asked whether he knew he was dying, the matron in the hospital said:

He may have known it for weeks, but he would not have said to anyone. He would have no fuss. He was like that.  

Early in the morning on 24 March 1909, he said to the nurse: "It is no use fighting death any longer."  

He turned over and died. Such was the man who was unobtrusive while alive and would make no ado while dying, though he knew that he was dying.

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3 Ibid.
Synge has been described as "a thin, dark-haired, gloomy-eyed man with ashen-coloured cheekbones, and not very much to say for himself." Yeats found him to be the strongest soul he had ever known. He isolated himself instinctively from all infection of inferior intelligences. Perhaps, his none-too-good health had contributed to this deliberate self-isolation. He was always physically ill and weak but there burned in him always the flame of an indomitable will. Though silent and taciturn, he had charming manners. But essentially he was a man deeply absorbed in his own dreams. He would seldom praise any writer, living or dead. "For him nothing existed but his own thought." Not that he disliked other writers; but, for him, they did not exist at all or had little relevance to the shaping vision within himself. He bore a simple and sympathetic relationship towards the ordinary affairs of life. The economy of his outer life facilitated the inner direction of his creative powers. Yet he was no egotist with a sensibility folding itself upon an introverted self. On the other hand, the private voice of the self in the process of artistic creation could hardly brook the distracting echoes of the mere market place. "In the arts he knew no

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5 W.B. Yeats, op. cit., p. 512.
language but his own." Yeats asks in wonder:

Can a man of genius make that complete renunciation of the world necessary to the full expression of himself without some vice or some deficiency?

Synge merged his self into his art by his creative resolve. The apparent exclusion of the world was neither a denial nor rejection of it; it was only a concentration of means to extend his awareness and deepen his response as an artist.

In the 1890's, W.B. Yeats found that the Irish people were at that precise stage of their history when imagination shaped by stirring events demanded a dramatic expression. His primary idea was to put old stories into dramatic verse:

I hope to get our Heroic Age into verse, and solve some problems of the speaking verse to musical notes.

He was interested more in the heroic legend than in the folk legends and stories. But he realized the importance of the "peasant plays" because he believed in the maxim, chosen by the Norwegian National Movement — to understand the saga by the peasant and the peasant by the saga. So all seemed set for an

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
uninterrupted voyage of poetry and poetical plays, of calm minstrelsy upon the shadowy waters, of endless 'dreamy kind of delights' with an occasional pleasant comedy (to be supplied at intervals by Heba) filled with gentle laughter.  

The early plays of Yeats like The Countess Cathleen and The Pot of Broth were miracle plays and Yeats's conception of the theatre was semi-religious, mythic and ritualistic. It was Synge's The Shadow of the Glen that turned the movement away from such half-religious ideas of Yeats. Yeats himself then realized the potentiality of the peasant plays although the weightiness of his speculative mind could hardly accommodate so primary a kind of reality without distorting its natural simplicity and innocent charm.

The Irish Dramatic Movement started as a reaction against the intellectualization of the European theatre as a result of the growth of the realistic and naturalistic drama of Ibsen and Strindberg. It was also a revolt against the gross commercialization of the British theatre. Synge was then in France, and remained there till 1903. Yeats met him in Paris on 26 December 1896 and advised him to return to Ireland and study the life of the people in the Aran Islands because that life "had never been expressed in literature."  

10 Michael MacLiammor, op.cit., p. v.  
11 W.B.Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 568.
He was advised to make use of this material for drama. So Synge moved from the artificial urban civilization to the natural unsophistication of an insignificant group of islands, which was not touched by the industrial revolution. These islands, full of mountains, extend over about fifteen miles. All the common people with whom he lived intimately in his European tours did not inspire him to make drama. But the Aran folk fired his imagination because, in his own words, their lives had "the strange quality that is found in the oldest poetry and legend." When he saw them marching in a procession to the chapel it wrung him

with the pang of emotion one meets everywhere in Ireland -- an emotion that is partly local and patriotic and partly a share of the desolation that is mixed everywhere with the supreme beauty of the world.

The "intense insular clearness one sees only in Ireland" brought clarity to his brooding but fertile mind. The Aran folk whom he was to immortalize in his plays represented to him a primitive community which lived in accordance with habits of thought which had once characterized the whole of human race. He found himself

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13 J.M. Synge, In Wicklow, West Kerry And Connemara (Dublin: Maunsel, 1911), pp. 11-12.
sitting among men and women listening to their rude and beautiful poetry that is filled with the oldest passions of the world. 15

Again in their prelapsarian innocence he experienced a sense of wonder and discovery:

Well as I seem to know these people of the islands, there is hardly a day that I do not come upon some new primitive feature of their life. 16

He felt that the habits of thought of such people were animistic and allegorical and that his language should give expression to those primal modes of human mind. When he came to a wild island off the Galway coast he was happy for the first time, escaping, as he said "from the nullity of the rich and the squalor of the poor." 17 He found himself confronting the miracle of pure undifferentiated being.

Synge learnt the Gaelic language at college. When he came to the Aran Islands and observed the simple folk there speaking a synthetic language, Gaelicized English, he was as much impressed with the beauty of their language as with the drama of their life. They spoke an almost Elizabethan dialect, which retained its vigour, saltiness and imaginative potential. They possessed an imagination which was at once

16 Ibid., p. 243.
17 Cit. Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 368.
"fiery, magnificent and tender." Their rhythmical discourse admitted of both precision and complexity. He found in their life the raw material for drama, an almost embarrassing richness waiting to be exploited in art. Their very gestures and movements had something of drama:

The complete absence of shyness or self-consciousness in most of these people gives them a beautiful charm.

He made a careful and painstaking observation of their life and recorded the beautiful poetic phrases they used in their ordinary conversations.

So with the material and language ready, Synge set out to give them a creative transformation in drama. The Irish National Theatre, of which he was an active member, called for a return to the people, as did the Russian theatre of the early seventies. Their purpose was "to write about the roads, or about the people of romance, or about great historical people", to bring acid into the molasses of ordinary life. Synge felt that if that was the objective, they should not write plays which analysed moral, sociological and psychological problems. That might result in a delusion effect falsifying the real life of the people.

20 W.B. Yeats, Explorations, p. 96.
An Irish peasant would not be interested in 'Ghosts' or 'the Rosmer way'; rather he would be interested in a story around an incident in his everyday life or in the story of Deirdre of the Sorrows, a love legend of the folk. Synge, like Yeats, thought that there was too much didacticism in the plays of Ibsen and other naturalists who had an intellectual or moral axe to grind. Though Ibsen and Zola dealt with the reality of life, they wrote "joyless and pallid words." The poverty of poetry in their plays forced Synge to advocate, in reaction, a language that would be both true and beautiful, like Shakespeare's language. The aesthetes wrote a beautiful language but it was not real speech. The European Naturalists wrote a true language but it was not beautiful. Only the rhythmical peasant speech was both true and beautiful, because it combined in itself both lyrical and rhetorical qualities. Synge wanted every word to be "fully flavoured as a nut or apple." The language used in drama must be capable of several dimensions and he was lucky to have found a language of that kind. In his plays, he made a careful selection of the language and used it in such an organic way that his style became inimitable except in parody. In his plays, Synge exploited to the full all

22 Ibid.
the verbal resources and imaginative possibilities of that language.

Synge's poems and prose reveal the sources not only of his dramatic themes but also of the language employed by him in his plays. In fact, many of the picturesque phrases found in them were the ones that he heard from the Aran folk, of which he made a careful record in his prose which contains his experiences on the islands.

Synge was a great admirer of Moliere and Ben Jonson, both of whom, he believed, wrote a creative comedy that nourished the imagination, and was serious and entertaining at once. Theirs was satiric comedy, criticizing life, but yet vibrant with its own rich sense of life. The Playboy of the Western World is a complex ambivalent comedy which criticizes life and 'beyonds' it too. Its rich humour is interlaced with the quick pulp of life and "what is superb and wild in reality."23 The release of the Mayo people's pent-up and starved imagination takes them to a fantastic world where all of them build a myth around themselves. A sort of mistaken or imposed identity makes the play an enjoyable comedy in which the schema and the sensibility are

thoroughly integrated. The drama is made serious in the sense that the blending of poetry and reality both directs and nourishes the imagination. While believing that "all art is a collaboration", between the folk-mind and the creative imagination of the artist, Synge conceived of his own drama in terms of lyric rather than sociological objectives. Consequently his work is free from overt didacticism:

The infancy and decay of the drama tend to be didactic. . . . Analysts with their problems, and teachers with their systems are as soon old-fashioned as the pharmacopoeia of Galen — look at Ibsen and the Germans — but the best plays of Ben Jonson and Molière can no more go out of fashion than the blackberries on the hedges.  

The didactic impulse is controlled by and subordinated to the artistic motive. In The Shadow of the Glen, for instance, the restlessness of the human soul and its longing for liberty are presented. In The Tinker's Wedding, paganism and Christianity are presented in conflict and contrast. In The Well of the Saints it is demonstrated that illusion is pleasanter than reality. In The Playboy of the Western World, people's love of making a wrong type of hero is a major theme. While the themes appear to verge on "the heresy of the didactic", Synge is actually enacting comedy rather than preaching morality.

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24 Ibid., p. 107.  
25 Ibid., p. 33.
Synge prescribes humour as a remedy to several ills and miscellaneous futilities in national life. A nation which destroys humour will become morbid and monstrous. So it is dangerous to limit laughter or destroy mirth. People should not only laugh at others but at themselves and the purpose of comedy is to renew and reinforce mankind's capacity to laugh at itself. Synge loves the Aran folk and sympathizes with them; but he places them in awkward and comic situations which provoke laughter. A patricide being made a hero, and glory being thrust on him to his own dismay are doubly comic. Here Synge is inviting people to direct the freedom of comic laughter towards themselves. He is not satirizing them because satire implies a certain amount of contempt, whereas comedy is motivated by a loving concern and charity. But, unfortunately, this motive of Synge was misunderstood by the Irish audience, which resulted in riots at the performance of his plays.

Synge believes in presenting life with ironic detachment, showing both the sides. He does not draw a moral by taking sides. Even where a theme might be didactic, its artistic signals are creative, not hieratic. He possesses in good measure the Shakespearean 'negative capability.' As Yeats says:
When a country produces a man of genius he never is what it wants or believes it wants; he is always unlike its idea of itself. . . . Ireland, since the young Ireland, has given itself up to apologetics. Every impression of life or impulse of imagination has been examined to see if it helped or hurt the glory of Ireland or the political claim of Ireland. A sincere impression of life became at last impossible; all was apologetics. There was no longer an impartial imagination, delighting in whatever is naturally exciting. Synge was the rushing up of the buried fire, an explosion of all that had been denied or refused, a furious impartiality, an indifferent turbulent sorrow.

In The Tinker's Wedding, for instance, apparently there is an element of anti-clericalism; but a closer examination will reveal that even the Priest's side and his case are presented with understanding and sympathy. When a young man sought the meaning of The Playboy of the Western World Synge told him that he followed Goethe's advice not to tell any one what the play is intended to be. It is 'what you will.' The meaning of a work of art is what the recipient makes of it, in relating it to himself and permitting it to affect his own sensibility; through it he discovers his own freedom.

Synge thought that it was not his business to build ideals for the people of Ireland but to observe them and express their life. For him, the Irish writers should deal manfully, directly, and decently, with the entire reality of

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²⁶ W.B. Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 520.
life. Beauty and ugliness, nobility and meanness, truth and falsehood, gentleness and violence coexist in life and it is the duty of the artist to bring them all into sharp focus. In his plays, the physical and the spiritual, the rude and the delicate, the immanent and the transcendental, the mundane and the metaphysical blend together to make all richly animated with life. Squeamishness is hypocrisy, and sentimentality, a disease. Both the law-maker and the law-breaker are needed in society. The fundamental realities of life are essentially tragic and involve destruction, waste and apathy. To refuse to face this is hypocrisy, and to face it is to avoid morbidity.

Synge was in close contact with Maeterlinck and Huysman for ten years. Synge imbibed Maeterlinck's much-admired ability to create dramatic atmosphere and mood. Riders to the Sea has the characteristic flavour of a Maeterlinck play. Synge represented the reaction against the intellectualization of the European theatre and endeavoured to achieve a "fusion of realism, romantic idealism, visionary mysticism, and poetic imaginativeness." 27 In his portrayal

of the incidents from the lives of the Aran folk we see his radical realism. Through character he gives expression to reality. When people are born, set in movement, they bring life. What he saw and heard on the islands, he imaginatively transferred to his plays. His text was the living world, which he considered to be the essential spring of the highest kind of realism. As Howe observes:

It is then, the achievement of J.M. Synge that he reconciled life and literature, and brought back both to amicable co-habitation in the theatre.28

The blending of poetry, reality and imagination in his work stems from the integral presence of these elements in the Aran life. His passing from a great world to the lovely but insignificant village produced a vision of life in which reality was in every way commensurate with the poetics of his own imagination. His nature-mysticism makes nature stand out almost as a central character in his plays, symbolizing the joys and sorrows of the Aran people. Synge once told Yeats:

We should unite stoicism, asceticism and ecstasy. Two of them have often come together, but the three never.29

28 P.P. Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
29 *cit. W.B. Yeats, Autobiographies*, p. 509.
He succeeded in achieving his ideal in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. The asceticism of Deirdre is dramatized by her rejection of the material pleasures offered by Conchubor and her existential choice of a life close to nature with her lover, Naisi. She knows her fate, and is stoical enough to face it. Her ecstasy of love, in her seven year marital life with Naisi, and her ecstasy of death over her role in achieving the destruction of Emain are both aspects of a single, unified will powerfully embodied in the dramatic structure of the play.

Whether he was dramatizing a tragic fact or incident of violence in contemporary Irish life, exploring the applications of ancient folk tale or heroic myth, or merely describing in unpretentious language the daily life of the tinker, the farmer or the fisherman, he was interpreting the traditional life of Ireland. It is to him more than to any other Irishman writing in English that we go for an insight into this life.

For Synge realism was no mere attitudinal strategy, but an artistic axis of plunging into the heart of life and encountering its epiphanies.

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