

CHAPTER - I

A Survey of Synge Criticism

In 1971 that marked the birth centenary year of Synge, it was noticed that Synge had commanded wide attention and studies on Synge continued "assuming greater proportions with each passing year" leaving behind "an unusually large output of material"¹. In view of this immense popularity it is worthwhile delineating the heritage of Synge criticism.

After the posthumous publication of Synge's poems and translations of Petrarch and Villon by the Cuala Press in 1909, his poetry evoked such enthusiasm among the public. In 1911 another edition of Synge's poems and translations was brought out by John W. Luce & Co. Maunsel and Co. Ltd., published in Dublin Synge's poems and translations in 1920. W.B. Yeats chose nine of Synge's poems and four of the translations in his anthology, The World Book of Modern Verse. The trend in Synge criticism on poetry has been more or less the same, emphasising the subjective elements in his poetry. Synge's contemporaries (W.B. Yeats, Massfield, Maurice Bourgeois^{etc.}) and later critics (Robin Skelton, T.R. Henn, Francis Werner, John Stallworthy)

1. E.H. Mikhail, "Preface", J.M. Synge : A Bibliography of Criticism. (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), p. XIII.

have viewed his poetry as the "self-revelation of Synge"². They believe, "The poems are like the man speaking. They are so like him that to read them is to hear him"³. Of course Ellis Farnor has discussed Synge as "nature-poet" and "nature-mystic" and compared his poems with "those of the ancient poetry of his own race"⁴.

Critics (like Ronald Peacock, T.R.Heun, Elisabeth Coxhead, F.L.Lucas, Robin Skelton, W.R.Rodgers, Edward Stephens and Nicholas Grene) have shown the special significance of both of Synge's prose-works, The Aran Islands (1907) and Selected Poetry in the making of Synge the artist and in the evolution of his vision of life. Ronald Peacock has felt that the Aran Islands "awoke the artist in him"⁵. W.R.Rodgers believes that "It was on Aran that Synge found a frame for his living imagination"⁶.

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2. Maurice Bourgeois, John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre (New York, 1965), p. 232.
 3. John Massfield, J.M.Synge, A few personal recollections with biographical notes (Cula Press, 1920), p. 20.
 4. Una Ellis Farnor, The Irish Dramatic Movement (London, 1939), p. 172.
 5. Ronald Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre (London, 1946), p. 105.
 6. W.R.Rodgers, Irish Literary Portraits (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), p. 100.

And Robin Skelton holds the view that "in the Aren Islands he found his vision of human nature and human predicament".⁷

Synge's Autobiography at the same time has been considered "as a document of social history and as a biographical essay of first-rate importance to readers of Synge's works and of the works of his contemporaries".⁸

Apart from these studies on the Aren Islands and Synge's Autobiography we have a study by T. Kellum on Synge's prose which has provided "the phraseology of many of the plays".⁹

And finally we review the criticisms of Synge's dramas. Though many of the Synge editors have excluded his maiden work When the Moon Has Set we cannot ignore the importance of the play. Ann Sadlemyer has retained it in her edition of Synge's plays (Vol. III, 1968) and explained that this maiden work "provides perhaps the most important clue to his transition from apprentice to playwright".¹⁰

Besides When the Moon Has Set Synge wrote six plays. Excepting his last one, Deirdre of the Sorrows (Synge could

7. Robin Skelton, J. M. Synge & his World (London : Thomas and Hudson, 1971), p. 37.

8. Panto N. Synge, "The Autobiography of J. M. Synge", Shining and the Moon's Delight : Synge 1871-1909, ed. S.H. Bushra (Scirat, 1972), p. 40.

9. Thomas Rice Kern (ed.), T. K. Kern's Last Essays (Colin Smythe Ltd., 1976), p. 193.

10. Ann Sadlemyer, "Introduction", III, ed., J. M. Synge: Collected Works (Oxford University Press, 1968), p. xxi.

finish it for his premature death) all the five plays were produced at the Abbey Theatre and published in his lifetime. He received both fame and ignominy for these plays. The stark realism of some of them, the shadow of the Glen, the Pinter's Wedding and the Playboy of the Western World in particular - provoked a sharp response from the audience as well as from the critics. Some of the hostility was quite undeserved.

The first significant criticisms on Synge's plays is J. H. S. and the Irish Theatre (1913) by Maurice Bourgeois. Both Bourgeois and Synge's contemporaries like W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, John Galsworthy and William Fay have looked at the subjective elements in Synge's plays.

A more critical insight into Synge's plays was noticed in the 1930s when he was being viewed more and more against the background of the Irish Dramatic Movement and Anglo-Irish literature. Three very important works of this decade are D. Corkery's Synge and Anglo-Irish literature (1931), Ellis Jernor's The Irish Dramatic Movement (1939) and The sources of Synge (1939) by A. M. Lattin.

In the forties, Synge critics were more or less concerned with the plays themselves. L. A. G. Strong, in John Millington Synge (1941) studied Synge's The Playboy of the Western World from quite a new angle and described the playboy as a poet and a man of imagination. Now Synge was being viewed as a poet in

the theatre. Ronald Peacock stressed the "imaginative vitality" of the artist in The Poet in the Theatre (1945). His study of The Riders to the Sea is of inestimable value.

The sixties and the seventies have been remarkable in respect of Synge criticism. During this period he was widely explored and a valuable critical literature produced about him. In 1963 T.R. Henn edited The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge with a very illuminating introduction. Allan Price in Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama (1963), studied Synge in relation not only to Irish life and drama but also to the backdrop of English, rather European literature. E.V. Lucas's book, The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello (1963) should be mentioned in this connection. Here we get an insight into Synge's plays, the Aran Islands and Synge the man. ^{9m} The Elements of Drama (1960), J.L. Styan highlighted the qualities of Synge and discussed him along with Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekhov. Styan believes that Synge's dramatic practice can enable a critic to formulate a serious theory of drama. In his The Dark Comedy : the development of Modern Comic Tragedy (1963), Styan especially considers the works of Synge and Sean O'Casey and shows how these two dramatists "were quick to strike the fantastic note and through our willing imagination try to undermine our self-satisfaction"¹¹. Elizabeth Coxhead studied both Synge

11. J.L. Styan, The Dark Comedy : the development of modern comic tragedy (Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 107.

and Lady Gregory in J.M.Synge and Lady Gregory (1962), which is indeed the first full-length study of Synge and one of his contemporaries. Dona Gerstenberger had shown in John Millington Synge (1964), the universal patterns in Synge's works. These criticisms show us more fully than before, the various aspects of Synge studies. T.R. Henn in The Harvest of Tragedy has assessed the best of Synge's works as tragedy "reduced to its simplest elements"¹² and further examined "certain facts, theories and assumptions regarding the nature of the form which we term, loosely Tragedy"¹³. In J.M. Synge and Modern Comedy (1968), Ann Saddlemyer has brought out the conflicts between dream and actuality in Synge's works while believing that for Synge's characters, "imagination becomes a refuge"¹⁴.

1970 being the centenary year of Synge, has been prolific so far as Synge criticism is concerned. Besides the publications of two centenary volumes : J.M.Synge centenary papers 1971 (Dublin 1971) and Sunshine and the Moonlight : J.M.Synge 1871-1901 (Beirut, 1971) edited by Hermon Maurice and S.B.

12. T.R.Henn, The Harvest of Tragedy (London, 1966), p. 201.

13. Henn, "Introduction", The Harvest of Tragedy, p. xi.

14. Ann Saddlemyer, J.M.Synge & Modern Comedy (Dublin, 1968), pp. 17-18.

Bushrui respectively, there are some significant works on Synge. Robin Skelton in The Criticism of J.M. Synge (1971) and J.M. Synge and his world (1971) has traced the background of Synge's life and life's experiences which Skelton believes, Synge has translated into his works. Robert O'Driscoll's book Theatre and Nationalism in 20th century Ireland (1971), is a new approach to the study of 20th century Irish drama. He holds that "great moments of theatrical achievement have often coincided with moments of national excitement and tension" and "theatre is the form of literature which makes the most direct impact on the people" and "becomes ultimately the means by which the deeper life of the people"¹⁵ is expressed. Ann Saddleayer edited (1971) Synge's letters written to Maire O'Neill while enabling us for the first time "to observe the wholeman"¹⁶. An important biographical study on Synge entitled, My Uncle John: Edward Stephens's life of J.M. Synge was published in 1974 edited by Andrew Carpenter. Since Synge was an enigma to his contemporaries, few could know what Synge was during his lifetime. Bush

15. Robert O'Driscoll, "Introduction", Theatre and Nationalism in 20th century Ireland (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

16. Ann Saddleayer, "Introduction", John Millington Synge to Maire O'Neill 1896-1899 ed. Saddleayer (Cambridge: Massachusetts, 1971), p. xiii.

a study therefore deserves special mention. Of course, Edward Stephens and Grene were pioneers in this field. In 1959, they published, J.M. Synge 1871-1909 which inspired others to undertake similar task so that more information could be gathered about Synge the man. Weldon Thornton has studied the religious milieu of Synge's youth and the religious concerns of his family in J.M. Synge and the Western Mind (1974). Nicholas Grene has made a very significant study both of Synge and his plays in Synge: a critical study of the plays (1975). James Flannery's book, W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre (1976) though aimed at explicating W.B. Yeats's ideas on theatre, had made an important observation on J.M. Synge who had dramatized the theme of individuality triumphing over social constraints in The Well of the Saints, The Tinker's Wedding and his masterpiece, The Playboy of the Western World¹⁷. Now attempts have been made to reveal Synge through the eyes of his contemporaries in the way of interviews and recollections. W.R. Rodgers's Irish Literary Portraits (1972), and L.M. Mikhail's J.M. Synge: Interviews and Recollections (1972), are books of this kind.

Synge criticism did not confine itself to Synge alone. A new perspective emerged. The Irish Drama of Synge and Yeats

17. James W. Flannery, W.B. Yeats and the idea of a theatre (Yale University Press, 1976), p. 135.

to Beckett (1978) by Katherine Worth has shown, how from the thematic point of view, Synge's plays stand very close to those of Maeterlinck's. Moreover "on the visual side too, Synge has strong affinities with Maeterlinck, Yeats and the French Static School"¹⁸.

In the 80s, we have Eugene Benson's book, J.M. SYNGE (1982), and T.O. Brien's Synge: the medieval and the Grotesque (1982). Benson has studied the life and works of Synge. And his discussion on the major plays of the playwright is indeed, stimulating. Since the book is a recent publication, the writer is privileged to be familiar with the hitherto published criticisms on Synge. This familiarity has added much importance to this work. O'Brien has shown, how Synge's peasant or folk dramas have presented, against the background of nature, the themes which are of universal concern. Synge has created men and women and invested them with passion, poetry and brutality while fusing the tragic and comic patterns.

Synge criticism is not restricted to these critical works alone. Many articles have been published from time to time in different periodicals and Journals especially in Modern Drama, P.M.L.A., Times Literary Supplement, The Review of English Studies, Scrutiny, Essays in Criticism, and Southern Humanities

18. Katherine Worth, The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett (The Athlone Press of the University of London, 1978), p. 125.

Review, to explore the domain of Synge literature.

This present survey shows that since Synge's own time, Synge criticism has been making a consistent and continuous evaluation of Synge so that "this uncouth, arrogant figure, with the soul of a poet and the instincts of a truant"¹⁹ could be brought to the public image and be established quite reasonably "as a classic"²⁰. Nevertheless there is room for further studies on this literary artist. This present study on Synge's vision of life is up till now an unexplored area. When we use the word 'vision', we do not use it in a spiritual or metaphysical connotation. By vision, we mean how Synge was looking at life and presenting his observation in terms of his literary works. There is no writer without a vision of life and "every writer's vision is unique and the most successful criticism is that which studies dramatists and even plays individually in order to present their way of looking at the world"²¹. This has been the reason why I have concentrated on Synge's vision of life. It is true, "to every writer's vision of life

19. Denis Johnston, John Millington Synge (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 4.

20. Alan Price, "A survey of recent works on J.M. Synge", Sunshine and the Moon's Delight, ed. Muehrli, p. 295.

21. Ronald Gaskell, Drama and Reality: the European theatre since Ibsen, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 12. (italics mine)

of experience come to seem important, those he illustrates, others he leaves in shadow or excludes completely"²². Even Shakespeare who "attains the whole range of our experience - sensual, emotional, moral, intellectual, spiritual"²³ is no exception to this. But with Shakespeare, what he excludes "seems to enlarge rather than limit our experience"²⁴. Synge's text was the living world. He primarily looked at life from the vantage ground of the Aran Islands. Of course, before coming to the Aran Islands, he explored life on his own and then through literature. His Aran visits further enlarged and deepened his vision of life. Here he got 'a vision of sea naked to the natural forces that surround them, who live in a country where the twilights are filled with 'vague and passionate anguish' and the sunlight glows with exuberant vitality"²⁵. Synge was both a poet and a playwright like Yeats. They possessed the impulses of introspection and were endowed with "lyric instinct" as well as "histrionic temperament". While the former was responsible for the growth of Yeats as a poet, the latter gave them the expression of dramatists. Synge had the

22. Ibid., p. 4.

23. Ibid., p. 4.

24. Ibid., p. 4.

25. Keelton, writings of Synge, p. 110.

Poetic impulse and "the right dramatic perception of life's growth and becoming"²⁶. To Yeats drama is not an independent form of art. It is closely allied to poetry and its business is to make use of poetry for expressing the essence, spirit and reality of life. As dramatist W.B. Yeats was always in favour of imagination and poetry against the realism and naturalism of prose drama. In W.B. Yeats's plays, we get two lifevisions. In the first place this lifevision arises out of the Gaelic legends and myths (which he interpreted in his own way). And secondly this vision of life has manifested itself in certain unexplored laws of nature (psychic phenomena) and latent powers in man such as the spiritual body taking control of the physical body. Yeats's knowledge of the spiritual essence of life which frees man from earthly bondage while ensuring 'Nirvana', in which the lower self is dead, is, indeed, a very enlightened realization. Synge's atheism perhaps stood in his way in matters of undertaking this metaphysical search for the human psyche. Synge plunged deep into the life of the peasantry which gave him the real knowledge of the fundamental truths of life while enlarging and deepening his lifevision. Synge saw drama "as emanating from the observable realities of known life, rather

26. Maurice Bourgeois, J.M.S and the Irish Theatre, p. 42.
(Italian mine)

than as Yeats saw it from the life of myth"²⁷. Synge's is a
"vision of universal significance"²⁸. For he "entered into
human nature in all its diversity"²⁹. In the seasonal changes
and the play of light and shade, Synge wove the tragic and
comic patterns of his plays and presented his vision of life
which is poetic and *subject* to earthly reality of "getting and
spending". The poetic vision has embodied the imaginative
aspects of life to be found in love, passionate life and linger-
ing for freedom. And in the vision of the surface reality is
found "the living world", and "the naked realities of material
existence"³⁰, where youth and age, life and mortality, illusion
and reality face each other and go hand in hand. And Synge was
successful to unite the contraries "which for Yeats were at the
core of all great art"³¹.

I have been specially interested in Synge's vision of
life because of the co-existence in it of the poetic and surface

27. Sean O'Tuama, "Synge & the idea of a National Theatre",
J.M.Synge : centenary papers, ed. Harman, p. 2.
(*Italics mine*).

28. Robin Skelton, The Writings of J.M.Synge, p. 40
(*Italics mine*)

29. Elizabeth Coehead, Lady Gregory : A Literary Portrait
(Macmillan, 1961), p. 112.

30. Robert O'Driscoll, "Yeats's conception of Synge", Sunshine and
the Moon's Delight, ed. Sushrui, p. 165.

31. Ibid, p. 165.

aspects of life. All creative artists more or less have enshrined in their works two lifevisions. What is indeed striking in Synge is that all the principal characters are governed by a wonderful zest for life which gives the lie to life's negative aspects like mutability and mortality. While living among the Aran people, Synge got a new vision which moved him. Himself being a dying man, he chose the living world for his text. And his characters set a positive force against "the grim negatives" of life, proclaiming the poetic aspects which can redeem life from the pangs of physical suffering and death. And now Synge is "not merely of one country or one age, but for all mankind".³²

32. Alan Price, "A survey of Recent work on J.M.Synge", Sunshine and the Moon's Delight ed. Bushrui, p. 295.