

CHAPTER - II

Synges the man : a biographical study

"And here's John Synge himself, that rooked  
man, 'forgetting human words', a grave deep  
face".

W.B. Yeats, "The Municipal Gallery  
Revisited", *Stanza*, vii.

"In exploring the character of Synge we are indeed  
exploring a crucial aspect central to the nature  
of the creative process and also observing, not  
for the first time, that the man of genius always  
remains both to his contemporaries and the successors  
something of an enigma".

Robin Skelton, "Foreword",  
J.M. Synge : Interviews and Recollections,  
ed. L.H. Mikhal (The Macmillan Press  
Ltd., 1977).

The creative being in Synge owes much to Synge the man  
who "wrote using his whole life as his material",<sup>1</sup> John Millington

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1. Andrew Carpenter (ed.), My Uncle John : Edward Stephens's  
life of J.M. Synge (London, 1974), p. 213.

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Synge was born in a family which enjoyed an illustrious heritage<sup>2</sup>. Synge came from an Anglo-Irish Protestant family. His mother was the daughter of a Northern clergyman, and herself a strongly evangelical member of the Church of Ireland. Synge's father was a barrister and land owner, and a member of the Protestant Anglo-Irish class. He lost his father at an early age. His mother afterwards became the guardian of the boy and Synge's "formative years were powerfully influenced by his mother"<sup>3</sup> who strictly adhered to the traditional values and religious beliefs. "While still very young", the idea of "Hell" entered his mind through his mother and "took a fearful hold on"<sup>4</sup> him. In the wake of hell, came also the thoughts of death. When one of Synge's aunts died, his mother spoke to him about death. A little boy of six, did not realize "what death meant". But "in reality death impressed him with "a sort of awe and wonder"<sup>5</sup>. The concept of "hell" and the idea of "death" had their impact upon his "quiet" "pensive" "sensitive" and "meditative" nature. As a result, a kind of estrangement began to overpower him from his very childhood days.

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2. "The Synge family were a well-known Wicklow family ... and anywhere in Wicklow he mentioned his name, Synge would have been placed". Nicholas Grene, Synge: a critical study of the plays (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), p. 7.

3. Eugene Benson, J.M. Synge, (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), p. 2.

4. J.M. Synge, "Autobiography" J.M. Synge: Collected works, II, ed., Alan Price (Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 4.

5. Ibid., p. 7.

His ill-health was also responsible for his isolation. For he was always sick, and his "childhood was a long series of coughs and colds"<sup>6</sup>. His "ill-health", prevented him from going to school for six months at a stretch. During this time he suffered from "head-aches". Naturally morbidity began to tell heavily upon his body and mind. In the family environment, Synge found nothing which could give him real joy and deliver him from the agony of ill-health. It further "stifled" his mind. He could not be sympathetic to his mother's evangelical teachings and was sinking more and more into a lonely temperament. For "ever and always" he was "a sad and lonely man"<sup>7</sup> and, "even in company he was essentially alone"<sup>8</sup>. Yeats celebrates him as the "solitary man". Synge's early life indicates, how "he passed a crisis in his development as man and artist"<sup>9</sup>. Now Synge "sought for a belief or a cause in which there might be some form of self-fulfilment"<sup>10</sup>. And "became more interested in definite life"<sup>11</sup>. For him that "definite life"

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6. Ibid., p. 4.

7. "Preface", E. H. Mikhail, Synge : Interviews and Recollections.

8. Herbert Howarth, The Irish writers 1880-1940 (Lalibury Square, London, 1958), p. 218.

9. Carpenter (ed.), Stephens's life of J. M. Synge, p. 34.

10. Robin Skelton, J. M. Synge and his world (London : Thames & Hudson, 1971), p. 19.

11. Synge, "Autobiography", Collected Works, II, ed., Rice, p. 7.

was awaiting "amidst strange mountain fogs and sunshine"<sup>12</sup>. The external world "where there was always variety - the alteration of day and night, the passing of the seasons" became for him "a symbol of inspired life and the house as a symbol of dull method"<sup>13</sup>. Synge used to explore the woods surrounding Rathfarnham Castle and collect birds' eggs with Florence Ross, his cousin. In his leisure hours, he studied books of natural history and ornithology. Sometimes Synge was seen sitting alone on the cliffs and watching the birds and "listening to the sound of the waves, to the cry of the gulls and to the chatter of the choughs"<sup>14</sup>. He would often "hide in bushes to watch with anxious fellowship the rare movements of the birds"<sup>15</sup> and would take "very long walks along the Dublin mountains"<sup>16</sup>. He "felt a strange sense of enchantment and delight"<sup>17</sup>. Synge had the Wordsworthian temperament at core of his heart and believed that "the beauty of nature

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12. Ibid., p. 12.

13. Carpenter (ed.), Stephen's life of J. Synge, p. 38.

14. Ibid., p. 118.

15. Synge, "Autobiography", Collected Works ed. Price, p. 7.

16. Ibid., p. 9.

17. Ibid., p. 12.

influenced him more than ever<sup>18</sup>. He became a "pilgrim to the Sun" and arranged his "excursions to reach a certain corner where there was a fine outlook of hill and sky"<sup>19</sup>.

While nature inspired him so much, Synge was, on the other hand, inspired emotionally by Cherrie Matheson, the daughter of a leader of the "Plymouth Brethren". Cherrie Matheson was a girl of his own age and Synge met her at Castle Kelvin. Later on she became Synge's neighbour. His cousin, Florence Ross moved him emotionally in his adolescence. Now when he was ten, in the company of Cherrie Matheson, Synge's "real appreciations and imagination acted together"<sup>20</sup>. In fact, this friendship with her was a significant experience at a formative period of his life. Unfortunately this love did not mature. It lasted till 1896. However, the orthodox training of Synge's mother was not in keeping with his temperament. He was not responsive to the religious instincts. This was the reason why Cherrie Matheson had forsaken him. For she "could not bring herself to think of marrying an atheist"<sup>21</sup>. In this way, Synge's early love received a serious

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18. Ibid., p. 9.

19. Ibid., p. 13.

20. Ibid., p. 6.

21. Skelton, Synge and his world, p. 29.

setback. On their separation, Synge passed through a period of terrible mental crisis leading to an isolation which became more and more intense.

The poetic temperament in Synge absorbed "this unhappy love affair, together with other less certainly known, relationships". Afterwards Synge turned them into print in his Viteveggja, which was his first attempt "at a poetic opus of any size"<sup>22</sup>. In his fourteenth year, soon after this unhappy love affair, Synge read Darwin's book on Evolution. This book "reinforced his growing agnosticism"<sup>23</sup> and by it he "laid a chasm between his present and" his "past and between" himself, "and" his "kindred and friends"<sup>24</sup>. During this period, he took the vow of celibacy, "I am unhealthy, and if I marry I will have unhealthy children. But I will never create beings to suffer as I am suffering"<sup>25</sup>. So he decided not to marry. And this decision caused him "horrible misery"<sup>26</sup>.

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22. Robin Skelton, "Introduction", J. M. Synge's Collected Works, I, ed., Robin Skelton (Oxford University Press, 1962), p. xii.

23. Benson, Synge, p. 3.

24. Synge, "Autobiography", p. 11.

25. Ibid., p. 9.

26. Ibid., p. 9.

When Synge was sixteen everything changed. He finally rejected Christianity and took to the violin. He began to study "literature with wild excitement" and "lost almost completely his interest in natural science although the beauty of nature influenced him more than ever"<sup>27</sup>. He went off on his "bicycle among the loneliest hollows of the hills in vain hopes of an adventure"<sup>28</sup>.

Gradually he was turning to music. Synge had an extraordinary passion for music. He devoted eight of his best years [probably between 1886 and 1874] to music and it played a major part in the development of his artistic talents.

Before Synge went to Germany to become a professional musician and composer, he spent from 1888 to 1892 in Dublin as a student of Trinity College. He studied the Gaelic language in Trinity and took considerable interest "in the Kingdom of Ireland. ... Everything Irish became sacred ... and had a charm that was neither quite human nor divine, rather perhaps as if he had fallen in love with a Goddess"<sup>29</sup>.

Synge read the Gaelic texts of The Children of Lir, and of Diarmuid and Grania. During the years when he was studying

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27. Ibid., p. 9.

28. Ibid., p. 12.

29. Ibid., p. 13.

languages at Trinity, he was also enrolled as a student at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. He also became a member of the Dublin Naturalists' Field Club. After his graduation from Trinity College, Synge went to Germany accompanied by Mary Synge, his mother's cousin and herself a musician. The very disquietude of mind which was always with him, could not give him any definite purpose of life. Synge spent less than a year in Germany before he was convinced that he should give up music for a literary career. His ambition was boundless. He wished "to be at once Shakespeare, Beethoven and Darwin"<sup>30</sup>. During his stay in Germany, Synge began to write verses and compose music. It was in the spring of 1894 that he tried to sketch ideas for plays. During this period, Synge "had felt the agony of belief and the agony of doubt and had seen how religious conviction may lead to emotional deprivation and despair"<sup>31</sup>.

Before he finally left Germany, Synge went to Munich and Berlin. There he studied the works of Heine and the modern German and Austrian dramas. The real turning point of Synge's life was marked by his decision to go to Paris. Synge acquired fairly good knowledge of French during his stay at Trinity. He was acquainted with the French authors and newspapers. When he came

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30. Ibid., p. 12.

31. Robin Skelton, The Writings of J. M. Synge (London, 1971), p. 16.



to Paris, he wished to become an interpreter of French thought and literature for the English speaking world and began to be acquainted with the works of the master writers of European literature. He read Villon, Petrarch, Rabelais, Ronsard, Moliere, Racine, Masson, Cervantes, Herrick, Burns and translated into Anglo-Irish the French poets Villon, Marot, Colin, Musset. The modern French writers whom he either reviewed or mentioned in his notebooks, include Sandelaire, Mallarmé, Gide, Huysman, Pierre Loti, Anatole France and Maeterlinck. He knew a great deal of Balzac. He was a constant reader of Flaubert and Maupassant. He was specially fond of the writings of Petrarch, Villon, Cervantes, Moliere and Racine. Synge had an unusual interest in the Elizabethan and Jacobean literature. He was perhaps the only Irish writer who was endowed with such a refined European culture. This wide reading "equipped Synge with a vastness of perceptions",<sup>32</sup> developed his style, nourished his own view of life and, further enlarged his vision as an artist.

Synge's literary output written between 1895 and 1899 was marked by a strain of morbidity. In Vite morbid and Study Morbid, the first two "fictionalised and morbid autobiographical sketches", we get a record of his "experiences and yearnings"<sup>33</sup>.

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32. Maurice Bourgeois, J. M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, p. 64.

33. Skelton, "Introduction", Synge's Collected Works, I, p. xii.

During these years his interest in Irish culture and the Irish language deepened. He attended Professor H. d'Arbois de Jubainville's lectures on Celtic civilisation. Prof. de Jubainville was the finest holder of the chair of Celtic languages and literature at the College de France, and he taught Synge Old English. Later on Synge reviewed The Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology which his friend, H.L. West had translated. However, Synge's literary works during this period could not usher in any promise of a great artist. W.B. Yeats came upon Synge's life as a Messiah. The rare gifts awaiting their manifestation, were enkindled when in 1896, W.B. Yeats met J.M. Synge in a Paris Hotel. He found Synge wasting his energies, fiddling in an orchestra and writing reviews of French books for English and French publishers. He perceived at the same time how Synge had given himself to the artificialities of French life and poetry. He discouraged Synge to read either Racine or Arthur Symonds and moreover urged Synge, "to go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression"<sup>34</sup>. Synge faithfully adhered to Yeats's advice and made his journey to Aran in 1898. When Synge went there, his "ear, eye, brain and heart were vividly awake"<sup>35</sup>, and,

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34. W.B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions (Macmillan, 1961), p. 299.

35. F.L. Lucas, The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello (London, Cassell, 1960), p. 161.

he brought with him a linguistic equipment and an insight sharpened by his knowledge of continental Celticists<sup>36</sup>. This knowledge of language aided by a subtle sensibility enabled Synge to delve deep into the life of these primitive people. He saw in their life a wonderful intermingling of life and death, birth and decay and a "continued struggle for life and livelihood"<sup>37</sup>. He experienced the joy and the pain, and the profound monotony of the Irish peasant life and the loneliness of the farmstead in the west and Wicklow Glens. And in the Aran Islands Synge "found his vision of human nature and human predicament"<sup>38</sup>. Now began actually Synge's career as a literary artist. The period of apprenticeship was over.

To Aran Synge went five times in all, once in each year from 1898 to 1902. He spent a total of four and half months on the island. In the Aran Islands he found his dialect and the materials for his plays. In fact, in the life story of the Aran Islanders Synge discovered himself and "chose a technique which

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36. David H. Greene & Edward M. Stephens, J. M. Synge 1871-1909 (New York, 1939), p. 63.

37. Greene, Synge: a critical study of the plays, p. 37.

38. Skelton, Synge and his world, p. 57.

would reveal the outer life and simultaneously expose the "inner life" of the artist's inner life"<sup>39</sup>. Before the summer of 1902 which heralded the beginning of Synge's career as a dramatist, Synge wrote The Aran Islands which he considered to be his first serious work. "In writing out the talk of the people and their stories in this book, and in a certain number of articles on the Wicklow peasantry which I have not yet collected, I learned to write the peasant dialogue and dialogue which I use in my plays. The Aran Islands throws a good deal of light on my plays"<sup>40</sup>.

Synge's career as a dramatist lasted only for seven years. It began in the summer of 1902 and came to an end in 1909. Synge's mother hired a small house in Wicklow, known as the Tomriska House. During the summer of 1902 he wrote In the shadow of the Glen, Riders to the Sea and also made the first draft of the Tinker's Wedding. In these plays Synge had discovered his métier and genius. John Galsworthy, Arthur Symonds and G.K. Chesterton all praised his works. Yeats and Lady Gregory drew him closer into their literary schemes. During this time the Irish Dramatic Movement was at the height of its glory resulting in the foundation of the Abbey Theatre in 1904. It was the Abbey which brought the genius of Synge before the public and presented

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39. Ann Saddlemyer, "Art, Nature and the prepared personality" Sunshine and the Moon's Delight: J.M. Synge 1871-1909 ed. S.N. Sushru (Beirut, 1972), p. 115.

40. Quoted in Synge: Collected Works, II, ed. Alan Price, p. 47.

him as a key figure of the movement. Yeats welcomed him as a "national writer". For he had expressed "his own deepest emotions in those curious ironical plays of his, where, for all that, by the illusion of admirable art, everyone seems to be thinking and feeling; as only countrymen could think and feel"<sup>41</sup>. Synge's plays began to be written at a time when the Abbey Theatre needed their cost. In spite of the hostilities which the candid realism of Synge's plays roused, he became a celebrity. When Synge became so intimate with the Abbey Theatre, a strange thing happened in his life in 1906. He fell in love with Molly Allgood, a beautiful actress, popularly known as Maire O'Neill. The vow of celibacy which he had taken in his adolescence, now took a different turn in this intimacy.

It was at Molly's request that Synge desist of publishing some of his poems. Unfortunately this love affair did not get the approval either of Synge's family or of his friends. Apart from their two different backgrounds, there remained between the two, a difference in age. Yeats and Lady Gregory were such in opposition to Synge. And, for Molly, Synge became alienated from his family. However Synge's love was something unique. In a letter to Molly written on 10 December, 1907, Synge addressed her as his "child", "little life", "good angel" and "greatest

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41. W.B. Yeats (ed.), Synge, 1933, p. 161.

friends" "all in one" "I don't believe there has been a woman in Ireland loved the way I love you for a thousand years"<sup>42</sup>.

Synge's love particularly at this hour when he was suffering from Hodgkin's disease and obsessed "with sickness and death" explains that in Polly he found "the excitement of life"<sup>43</sup>. In his letter on 30th August, 1906, Synge wrote, "I am afraid I'm killing you by writing to you everyday"<sup>44</sup>. Synge loved Polly "incomparably", "so utterly", "as the very breath" of his "soul". Polly was for Synge his "dearest treasure" and a "whole world" to him. She was just like "the little shiny new moon, and the flowers of the earth"<sup>45</sup>. Synge wanted to marry Polly, and his mother, who at first objected to the idea, at last yielded to it. This idea of marriage gave Synge the joy of living. In 1907 he was operated on. In order to allay Polly's anxiety, Synge was always cheering her up and in his letters he never expressed that he felt unwell, "I feel wonderfully gay. ... My spirits are going up and up, and up"<sup>46</sup>. But the feat whether

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42. Siddons (ed.), Letters to Polly & Synge to Maire O'Neill 1906-1909, p. 115.

43. Siddons, "Introduction", Synge to Maire O'Neill 1906-1909, p. xiv.

44. Ibid., p. 19.

45. Ibid., p. 87.

46. Ibid., p. 120.

he would be all right was always with him and the letter written on 21st August, 1907 referred to that operation. That the chance of his being "all right" was a remote possibility, had been indicated in the note of exclamation [!!!!!!!!!!!!] of the letter. In Syngé's life there was always an interplay of life and death and this interplay is found in the heart of his works, "... the odour of death permeates Syngé's work even when he is playing with it".<sup>47</sup>

When Syngé learnt from Dr. Person's report that the condition of his health was "much more unsatisfactory"<sup>48</sup>, he wrote to Molly addressing her as his "dearest love", "This is a mere line for you, 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 to forget the good times we had and the beautiful thing we've seen together"<sup>49</sup>. Before he died, Syngé "reserved" his "last strength for Beirdre" and was "determined to finish it" before his death. But "before the last writing was accomplished, Syngé laid aside the pen and resigned himself to death"<sup>50</sup>. At the hour of death, Syngé requested his nurse Miss Kitty Clinch who attended upon him all through his illness in the hospital, to

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47. John R. Moore, "Syngé's Beirdre and the Sorrows of Mortality", Centenary Papers, ed. Harison, p. 99.

48. Saddlemyer (ed.), Letters to Molly, p. 309.

49. Ibid., p. 317.

50. George Moore, Syngé, J.M. Syngé : Interviews and Recollections ed. E.H. Mikhail (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977), p. 103.

kindly take him to a room from where he could see the Wicklow mountains, the hills where he used to go for long solitary walks. But unfortunately he could not see the mountains.<sup>51</sup> "To see them it was necessary to stand up and Synge could not stand or sit up in his bed, so his last wish remained ungratified, and he died with tears in his eyes"<sup>51</sup> at 5.30 in the morning of 24 March, 1909. What Villon, Herrick and Burns had done in using their "life and experience" in their poetry, Synge wished to do on the stage. Thus we see that life, love and death which have characterized Synge's works, have been the dominant "moods" in his own life. As a result of it "all his work was subjective"<sup>52</sup>. Therefore every minor or major information of his life is important for a full study of both the man and his works. For, "literature is always personal, always one man's vision of the world, one man's experience, and it can be popular when men are ready to welcome the visions of others"<sup>53</sup>.

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51. Ibid., p. 104.

52. Padraic Colum, "My memories of John Synge", Synge: Interviews and Recollections, ed., Michail, p. 68.

53. W.B. Yeats, Saithain 1903, p. 116.