

## CHAPTER - III

### The Aran Islands and J.M. Synge

"... John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought  
All that we did, all that we said or sang  
Must come from contact with the soil, from that  
contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong..."

W.B. Yeats, "The Municipal Gallery Revisited",  
Stanza, VI (Italics mine)

"That dying chose the living world for text".

W.B. Yeats, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory",  
Stanza, IV (Italics mine).

The Aran Islands whose geography "is very simple",  
"may need a word to itself. There are three islands, Aranmor,  
the north island, about nine miles long, Inishmaan, the middle  
island, about three miles and a half across, and nearly round  
in form and the South island, Inishkeer. They lie about thirty  
miles from Galway, up the centre of the bay, but they are not  
far from the cliffs of country clare on the south or the corner  
of Connemara on the north"<sup>1</sup>.

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1. J.M.Synge, "Introduction", "The Aran Islands", The Plays,  
Poems and Prose of J.M.Synge (Everyman's Library: London  
J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd., 1961), p. 247.

And Synge's visit to Aran in 1898 was "a true renaissance, a spiritual rebirth"<sup>2</sup>. For the Aran Islands went into the making of Synge "even more than Cumberland was the making of Wordsworth"<sup>3</sup>. On his return from Aran, Synge said to C.H.Houghton, "Oh, I wish you go there, you would like the island people"<sup>4</sup>. Wordsworth chose the "humble and rustic life" because he felt that "in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity"<sup>5</sup>. Synge was drawn to that life because "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 catch one another like the leaves or petals of flower"<sup>6</sup>. Their life and their talk which was "far more poetic than much so-called poetry"<sup>7</sup> fascinated him. Their language expressed both imagination and poetry. Synge believed as Wordsworth did, that this "is a more permanent and far more

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2. Elizabeth Conhead, J. M. Synge and Lady Gregory (London, 1962), p. 10.

3. Lucas, The drama of Shelley, Synge, Keats and Pirandello, p. 151.

4. C. Houghton, "John Synge as I knew him", J. M. Synge : Interviews and Recollections, ed. Michail, p. 5.

5. William Wordsworth, Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, eds. R.L. Brett & A.R. Jones (Methuen & Co. Ltd., University Paperbacks, 1968), p. 245.

6. Quoted in Synge : Collected Works, II, ed., Price, p. 86.

7. Lucas, The drama of Shelley, Synge, Keats and Pirandello, p. 151.

philosophical language" because it arose "out of repeated experience and regular feeling"<sup>8</sup>. In the Aran Islands, Synge got the materials, characters and the language for his plays. Above all, the Aran Islands awakened his "living imagination"<sup>9</sup> and gave him a new perspective to look at the life of the Aran people. As he knew the dialect of the [Aran] people, he could easily live as "one of the people themselves"<sup>10</sup> and thus chose "the living world for text"<sup>11</sup>. And Synge's vision of life springs from the "relation between the natural environment and the people who live in it"<sup>12</sup>. Apparently it may seem that his vision of life is provincial or local. For his characters are the peasants of the East or the West of Ireland. In reality this is not true. Synge knew how to move "from the particular to the universal"<sup>13</sup>. In the Irish peasants, shopkeeper, priest, tinker, fisherman, he found "a heightened sense of drama and a supreme sense of comedy"<sup>14</sup>.

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8. Wordsworth, Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, eds. Brett & Jones, p. 24.

9. W.R. Rodgers, Irish Literary Portraits (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1971), p. 100.

10. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 299.

11. Yeats, "In Memory of Major Gregory", stanza, IV.

12. Grene, Synge: A critical study of the plays, p. 14.

13. Robin Skelton, The Writings of J.M. Synge (London, 1971), p. 23.

14. Rodgers, Irish Literary Portraits, p. 101.

In the [Aran people] Synge found "a vision of human awareness of temporality"<sup>15</sup> as well as "a vision of the interplay of death and life"<sup>16</sup>. Though the Aran Islands were a small region, here against the background of the rocky island, Synge got a universal vision of "human nature and of the human predicament"<sup>17</sup>. Synge is not merely a chronicler of a particular race or region, recording "the profound mysteries of life", the "contrary impulses", the "grim negatives", Synge entered "into human nature in all its diversity"<sup>18</sup>. That is why, Synge's "work is, in any serious sense of the word, international, for he tackled fundamental crises of the human spirit"<sup>19</sup>.

Synge noticed how, "in wild jests and laughter" the island people expressed "their loneliness and desolation. They had an unusual apprehension for the sea"<sup>20</sup>. They believed that "a man who is not afraid of the sea will soon be drowned" and "do only be drowned now and again"<sup>21</sup>. Synge could not help

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15. Skelton, The Writings of J.M. Synge, p. 62.

16. Ellis Fernald, The Irish Dramatic Movement (London, 1939), pp. 184-85.

17. Robin Skelton, J.M. Synge and his World (London : Thames and Hudson, 1971), p. 37.

18. Elizabeth Cooney, Lady Gregory : A Literary Portrait (Macmillan, 1961), p. 112.

19. Skelton, The Writings of J.M. Synge, p. 173.

20. Synge, Collected Works, II, ed. Price, p. 245.

21. Ibid., p. 117.

feeling "that he was talking with men who were under a judgement of death". He knew that "everyone of them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks, or would die in his own cottage and be buried with another fearful scene in the grave-yard"<sup>22</sup>.

Further he wrote, "Everyone is used in Ireland to the tragedy that is bound up with the lives of farmers and fishing people"<sup>23</sup>. Throughout the islands, Synge found the human spectacle against the background of the "solitude of rocks and sea"<sup>24</sup>. As Synge's primary "interest was in people, the way they lived and talked and looked at life"<sup>25</sup>, he listened to "the talk in Mayo public house", experienced "the love-making of women" and heard "the cringing of beggars"<sup>26</sup>. In their "melancholy and violence, drunkenness, exaltation, poverty and cruelty"<sup>27</sup>, Synge found "the

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22. Ibid., p. 162.

23. Ibid., p. 230.

24. Ibid., p. 252.

25. David H. Greene, "J.M. Synge: A Centenary Appraisal", Synge, Centenary Papers ed. Harman, p. 196.

26. Lucas, The drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello, p. 77.

27. Ibid., p. 80.

complex moods of frustration and wild fantasy, vicarious exuberance and farcical despair"<sup>28</sup> and "saw the primitive response to the tragedy of human existence"<sup>29</sup>. In Wicklow, West Kerry and the Aran Islands, Synge practically found "a new corner of the world to write of, and worded his writing in a style both new and bewitching"<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, Synge's narrative became powerful because while expressing their emotions and passions, he was actually translating his own feelings and responses into print. Synge's inner being, which was attuned to the grim reality of these people, got its wonderful manifestation in the lives of these people. He could hear in them the voice of his own soul and see in them the spectre of his own death. W.B. Yeats took the Aran Islands for an "objective correlative" for the artist. For "in those images paraded all the desires of his heart"<sup>31</sup>. Being endowed with a rich vision of life that mingled with the universal patterns, Synge now sought earnestly to transmit both "humanity and this mysterious external world"<sup>32</sup> "into the impersonality of art"<sup>33</sup>.

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28. David Krause, "Sean O'Casey and the Higher Nationalism", ed. Robert D. Griscoll, Theatre and Nationalism in 20th century Ireland (Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 121-23.

29. Nicholas Grene, Synge: A critical study, p. 37.

30. F.L. Lucas, The drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello, pp. 136-37.

31. W.B. Yeats, "First meeting with Synge", Synge: Interviews and recollections, ed. Micholl, p. 16.

32. Synge, Collected works, II, ed. Price, p. 331.

33. Keltan, The writings of Synge, p. 46.