

CHAPTER - V

The external World and Sygne

"My wish was that nature should be untouched
by man". Sygne, Collected Works, Vol. II ed.
Price, p. 12.

The two significant prose works of Sygne are his Autobiography and the Aras Islands. These two prose works along with his poems enable us to catch a glimpse of Sygne's vision of life which later on found a full expression in his plays. In his prose and poetry, Sygne has explored the external world (the world of nature)"to express subjective mood"¹.

Sygne's Autobiography is a sick man's diary, recording his passion and emotion, love and suffering, ambition and depression. The boy who was born sick, and had continual sufferings, developed a kind of morbidity. He wanted to liberate his mind from the despair of death and oppression of ill-health. In nature, he found a real "recipe". The woods, mountains, the stream and the birds had their very positive and powerful impact on his mind. With Florence Ross, his cousin, Sygne used to hide in bushes, collect the birds' eggs and felt a kind of magical spell in every

1. Lanto M. Sygne, "The autobiography of Sygne", Sunshine and the Moon's Delight, ed. Gushkui, pp. 167-68.

hook and corner of nature, "In my childhood the presence of fumes
bushes and rocks and flooded streams and strange mountain fogs²
and sunshine gave me a strange sense of enchantment and delight".

When Synge came to the Aran Islands, he noticed how the
minds of the Islanders had been coloured by "endless suggestions
from the sea and sky, and seem to form a unity in which all kinds³
of emotion match one another like the leaves or petals of flowers".

Synge, while walking round the island nearly everyday,
"occasionally passed a lonely chapel", could "see the sea on
nearly every side, stretching away to distant ranges of mountains
on the north and south"⁴. He had seen nothing so "desolate" as
the islands before, but felt "a natural link between the people
and the world that is about them"⁵. He saw them "in the face of
a universe that wars on them with winds and seas"⁶. They all
"are wearied of the sea" and "the horror of the mist". They "live
in continual danger on the sea"⁷. And "in wild jest and laughter

2. Synge, Collected Works, ed., Price, II, p. 12.

3. Ibid., p. 86.

4. Ibid., p. 70.

5. Ibid., p. 59.

6. Ibid., p. 75.

7. Ibid., p. 108.

that they can express their loneliness and desolation"⁸. Synge had never "heard talk so simple and so attractive as the talk of these people"⁹ who were always "under a judgement of death"¹⁰. The "solitude of rocks and sea", "the utter loneliness and desolation of the place" have "given these people their finest qualities"¹¹. When summer and spring approach, "every leaf sparkles with peculiar lustre" and "air, foliage and water are filled with life". With the seasonal changes with "odour and colour" on the one hand and "splendour and decay" on the other, these people "unite in a rude way the old passions of the earth"¹². While they are plagued by the horror of death, they are at the same time governed by the passions of the earth. These two realities which are both physical and poetic go hand in hand in Synge's works. From the external nature, Synge got this lesson and found the same truths in human life as well.

Both Wordsworth and Synge introduced nature, and man living close to nature in their creative works and had shown how

8. Ibid., p. 140.

9. Ibid., p. 144.

10. Ibid., p. 161.

11. Ibid., p. 256.

12. Ibid., p. 199.

nature had influenced their lives and governed their beings. Wordsworth's association with nature began in his early childhood when he was living in Cumberland. Similarly Synge's love for nature grew from his familiarity with the mountainous region of Wicklow. Wordsworth's characters had drawn their vitality from nature which had given them their vision of life. Wordsworth's Michael, The Old Cumberland Beggar, Leigh Rathfriland and the Lilly poems testify to that. To study Synge and Wordsworth in relation to their vision of life is quite interesting. The difference between them lies in the fact that while Wordsworth idealised nature, Synge gave us a vision of the stark reality of the external nature. Both the positive and the negative aspects of nature found their expression in Synge's works.

In sunshine, in the songs of the birds, in the beauty of the woods, streams and mountains, we get "that blessed mood". In the roaring of the waves, in the storm and tempest, in mists, we get just a contrary image, where the part played by nature is almost like a Nemesis, that plays a wanton game with the innocent lives, and casts on the mind a dark, gloomy and quite a tragic spell of mortality and waste. Synge who was "a worshipper of nature"¹³, wrote his early poems (1892-1895), Keeping his eye on "a mountain flower", "sun, moon, sea", "Cloud-vesture drains",

13. Synge, "Prelude", Plays and Poems to Synge, ed. Henn, p. 217.

"all the seasons", "winds and rain", "furse", "golden mist"
"thrushes" and "solitude". He had his own Prelude like Wordsworth,
and travelled "South" and "West and South again" "through Wicklow
from the morning till the night/and far from cities, and the sites
of man" and "lived with the sunshine and the moon's delight".¹⁴
Synge was responsive to nature, and "knew the stars, the flowers
and the birds/The grey and wintry sides of many Glens" [~~Lisheen~~]
Wordsworth's realization that "Nature never did betray the heart
that loved her" [~~Lisheen~~ ~~Abbey~~] dawned upon him during the
period he composed his early poems. And he wished that "nature
should be untouched by man"¹⁵.

Though Synge became a pilgrim to the sun and moon,
and enlivened the world of nature, he was never forgetful about
the reality of life around him. His Aran visits gave him the
vision of reality, a reality he found in the contrary aspects of
life where youth and age, life and death go hand in hand. And
"Synge was able to unite the contraries which for Yeats are at
the core of all great art"¹⁶. In the poems written between 1896
Synge was "leaning out" more and more" to reality". The language
of his play, "It's a pitiful thing to be getting old ... it's a

14. Synge, Collected Works, II, ed. Price, p. 12.

15. Ibid., p. 35.

16. Robert O' Driscoll, "Yeats's conception of Synge",
Sunshine and Moon's Delight, ed. Bushrui, p. 165.

queer thing to see an old man sitting up there in his bed with no teeth in his [The shadow of the Glen] resembles the language of many of his poems,

" 'Tis winter in my heart, the air
Is wailing, bitter cold
While I am wailing with despair
As I have wailed of old".

[In the city again]

OR,

"Would she forgive me or fool my fate
I loath the living to death I am wed"

[Quintain]

Moreover his poems are replete with images like "dead year met year ... and it is I am gone away into furrows, the hair of my head is grey and whitish, my eye brows are tumbled from me, and my two eyes have died out within my head", [All old women's lamentations], "I saw a woman dead", "Ah, Death, it is you that have left the world cold and shady, with no sun over it" [Sonnet from Laura in Death] .

In Petrarch's sonnets, Laura in Death Gyngre found his own vision of death, "life is flying from me, not stopping an hour, and Death is making great strides following my track",

"what a grudge I am bearing against Death, that is standing in her two eyes, and will not call me with a word", and in Villon, he discovered his own weariness of age, "it is I am left behind, grey and aged", "I'm getting old in your big house", "I'm growing old with singing on your stairs".

Thus, Synge's translations of Petrarch and Villon were a kind of revelation of the poet's own heart. Therefore, those who want to know what he was himself, should read the poems, "The poems are the man speaking. They are so like him that to read them is to hear him"¹⁷.

Synge, who suffered from the weariness of age and death, wished to create a world for his own soul. That world he found in poetic reality embedded in imagination and love. In Molly, towards the end of his life, Synge found love and expressed his desire to be "in you [Molly] and you [Molly] in me".

[The Meeting]. Synge could not "put from his mind coughing and old age and the sound of the bells"¹⁸. To get his mind rid of the hard facts of life, he sought peace and joy in the blessed mood of nature. And his last wish before death was to see the Wicklow Glens which like Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey

17. John Stallworthy, "The Poetry of Synge and Yeats", WYBIR
quarterly papers 1971, ed., Harrod, p. 148.

18. W.B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions (London, 1961), p. 309.

had become for him as it were, "the anchor of my wildest thoughts, the nurse, my guide, the guardian of my heart and soul of all my moral being". [Timon of Athens, lines 109-117]. All his principal characters who are wearied of age, and death find the poetic reality amidst "the singing birds, and the flowers of the earth", "seas" "woods" "fresh grass" "whole set of the stars, the moon and the sun".

In modern drama, the dramatists seldom portray nature and the natural environment. For "modern drama, like modern life, takes place for the most part in drawing rooms and kitchens"¹⁹. Shakespeare could not forget nature. He never occupied it "as the setting and basis of human life"²⁰. In his works we get the view of "the natural world, the world of wind and shadow, spring and harvest"²¹. Like Shakespeare, Synge in his plays had portrayed this natural world which gave him the vision of poetic reality as well as the vision of the reality of the earth consisting of the fundamental truths of human life. While Shakespeare, "affirms the whole range of our experience, sensual, emotional, moral, intellectual, spiritual"²², Synge could not illumine the whole province of human experience. His was a very

19. Ronald Jaskell, Space and Reality in the European Theatre Since Ibsen (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 3.

20. Ibid., p. 3.

21. Ibid., p. 10.

22. Ibid., p. 4.

small world. Within his short life, he could not absorb the wider range of human knowledge. However, his vision was complete, because it had revealed "the reality of the natural world, in which and by which we live"²³. Simultaneously "Synge was much indebted to nature's beauty as the raw material and inspiration of art"²⁴. Synge's knowledge of the contrary images of nature, gave him knowledge of the contrary aspects of life, where joy is often associated with pain, and life is replaced by decay and death.

These two realities which constitute Synge's vision of life, owe their origin to nature where the inhabitants of the Wicklow glens, riders to the sea, the tinkers, the two blind beggars and their associates, the playboy and the Mayo people and lastly Deirdre, Naisi, his brothers and, conductor, and all other men and women have their "entry" and "exit". It is for this, a close study of nature in Synge's works is so important, especially when we want to know about the writer's vision of life. For Synge in his plays and topographical books had "tried to give humanity and this mysterious external world"²⁵.

23. Ibid., p. 4.

24. Lant M. Synge, "The autobiography of Synge", Bunshine and the Moon's Delight ed. Bushrui, pp. 126-28.

25. Synge, Collected Works, ed. Price, II, p. 35.