




2011

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### Author Manuscript

This is a pre-publication author manuscript of the final, published article.

### Recommended Citation

Merchant, John. "Universal Identities and Local Realities: Young Poland's (Mis)readings of Synge," *Polish-Irish Encounters in the Old and New Europe*, edited by Egger, Sabine, and John McDonagh. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang UK, 2011. < <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0353-0191-5>>. Web. 6 May. 2020.

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## Universal Identities and Local Realities: Young Poland's (Mis)readings of Synge

John A. Merchant

Much has been made of the brilliance of Irish-Ireland in articulating and reinvigorating Irish identity at the turn of the twentieth-century, but relatively little attention has been paid to how its genius played to foreign audiences. The case of Synge's impact on Young Poland, a parallel cultural movement, is especially intriguing in this regard, because it not only represents a contemporaneous, transnational reaction to the Irish Cultural Revival, and the Abbey Theatre in particular, but it also exposes the essential limitations of an extra-national, non-Irish reading of Irish literature.

The question of the accessibility of Irish literature to foreign audiences is a stimulating one. In *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, the Irish writer and critic Daniel Corkery suggested

that Irishness was not readily understandable to the outsider, but rather it was something that had to be intuited. ‘As for Irish nationalism,’ Corkery wondered, ‘how can normal countries understand it? [...] The only way to get to know it is to learn the Irish language and read the poetry in it.’<sup>1</sup> While Corkery's assertion is understandable given the charged cultural context of the nascent Irish Free State of the 1930s, for the contemporary admirer of Irish literature the implications of such a position are difficult to accept. After all, Irish writers such as William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, Sean O'Casey, and Samuel Beckett have all been solidly enshrined in the canon of modern world literature, with few complaints as regards the impenetrability of their work.

Corkery was ultimately asserting that it was impossible to appreciate the genius of Irish literature fully without first entering into the consciousness of the Irish people. It was not

1 Daniel Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature (Dublin and Cork: Cork University Press, 1931) 21.

entirely surprising, therefore, that of all the writers of Irish-Ireland Corkery concentrated his attention most on Synge. Synge's dramas balanced original literary artistry with a close appreciation of Irish country life to a degree that set him apart from other Irish writers of the day, Yeats included. Corkery identified this equilibrium within Synge's work as its inherent strength. Synge's work, however, is not without its complexities, and the determination as to how to interpret it is especially treacherous for foreign audiences. Nicholas Grene has pointed out that for many scholars Synge's association with rural Ireland has to some degree limited his reputation and set him apart from the main of English literature.<sup>2</sup> If taken together with Synge's Anglo-Irish status, which ultimately forced Corkery to exclude him from consideration as an 'Irish' writer, it is possible to perceive how Synge presents the non-Irish observer with the difficult challenge of making sense of an English language

2 Nicholas Grene, Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975) 185.

writer who was somehow simultaneously neither English nor Irish.

It was in part because of Synge's ambivalent position in Irish nationalist circles that his colleagues came to appreciate the importance of his broader, international reputation. Early on Yeats recognized his value in cultivating interest in Irish literature, the drama of the Abbey Theatre first and foremost, outside of Ireland. 'Synge's foreign success,' Yeats explained in a letter to John Quinn in September 1905, 'is worth more to us than would be the like success of any other of our people, for he has been the occasion of all the attacks upon us. I said in a speech some time ago that he would have a European reputation in five years, but his enemies have mocked the prophecy.'<sup>3</sup> Yeats, who at the time was already preparing for the Abbey Theatre's first foreign tour in Britain, was undoubtedly aware of the plans of the Deutsches Theatre in Berlin to stage Synge's

3 William Butler Yeats, The Letters of W. B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955) 461.

continental debut with a production of *The Well of the Saints* in three months' time.

It is less likely, however, that Yeats or any of his contemporaries were aware of the steady Polish interest in the cultural activity of Irish-Ireland since its emergence in the 1890s. In an article in the influential literary journal *Życie* (Life) in 1898, Jerzy Płoński, one of the journal's foreign correspondents in London, was already pointing to Yeats and drawing parallels between Young Poland and Irish-Ireland. 'Barely do we pull back the edge of the veil from the temple of the Irish nation,' Płoński observed, 'than we stand amazed by the poetic wonders produced in the collective soul of that nation spiritually akin to Poles.'<sup>4</sup> As the most visible representative of the Irish cultural resurgence, Yeats naturally attracted the initial interest of Polish writers and critics, but it was Synge to whom the honor fell of having the earliest and ultimately the most

4 Jerzy Płoński, 'Znad Tamizy,' *Życie*. 7-8 (1898): 92.

visible presence on the Polish stage.<sup>5</sup> Guided by some of the most innovative directors of the day, leading Polish theatre companies put on productions of *The Well of the Saints* and *The Playboy of the Western World* in Lwów (1908), Warsaw (1913), Kraków (1914), and even war-torn Kiev (1915). Tadeusz Pawlikowski's stage production of *The Well of the Saints*, which paired Synge's play together with Stanisław Wyspiański's *Sędziowie* (The Judges) at the Municipal Theatre in Lwów in 1908, would have most certainly been a surprise to the directors of the Abbey Theatre. The joint production not only represented Synge's Polish theatrical debut, but it also numbered as just the second performance of the play on the European continent.<sup>6</sup>

5 Although translations of Yeats's poetry and dramatic work by Stanisław Lack and Jan Kasprowicz appeared in Polish literary journals as early as 1902 and the Irish poet was the subject of a number of critical discussions of Irish-Ireland at about this same time, the first stage production of a play by Yeats did not take place until 1914, when *The Countess Cathleen* was performed at the *Teatr Rozmaitości* (The Variety Theatre) in Warsaw.

6 The other two performances were the Deutsches Theatre's production of *The Well of the Saints* in Berlin and the Bohemian National Theatre's staging of *In the Shadow of the Glen* in Prague, both of which took place in 1906. Synge, who corresponded with his translators in regard to both productions, would have been completely unaware of the Municipal Theatre's performance of his

Young Poland's tendency toward essentialism and self-reflection, however, made it difficult to receive Synge's work on purely artistic terms. Young Poland by nature was a cultural movement fundamentally concerned with the problem of the artistic expression of identity. Its openness to foreign cultural impulses spoke to a fundamental desire among Polish intellectuals to reinvigorate a Polish nation perceived to be mired in a state of cultural stasis after a century of partition under the tripartite forces of Prussia, Russia, and Austria. Desperate to reinvigorate Polish cultural life, Young Poland looked abroad to the latest cultural developments taking place in art and literature. In doing so, however, there existed within Young Poland a fundamental tension between the competing streams of cosmopolitanism and essentialism. 'We demand our art to Polish,' Artur Górski asserted in the 1898 essay that gave

play. Always pressed for money, Pawlikowski was criticized by local theatre critics at the time for not bothering to pay royalties for the rights to produce plays by foreign writers as a cost-cutting measure.



the Young Poland movement its name, 'because if it loses its native character, it loses its strength, value, and reason for being.' Young Poland was, to paraphrase Jan Cavanaugh's study of early modernist Polish painting, a Janus-faced cultural movement that was continually looking out in order to look in.<sup>7</sup>

Young Poland's divided perspective was evident in its reception of Synge. Originally intended to be an evening marking the first anniversary of Wyspiański's death, Pawlikowski's choice to pair *The Well of the Saints* with *The Judges* transformed the 1908 production in Lwów from what was expected to be a solemn evening of Polish national drama into a cosmopolitan artistic event. For Pawlikowski's supporters, the production injected much-needed vitality into the Polish theatre by bringing together on the stage two of the most innovative, new dramatists of the early modern European

7 Jan Cavanaugh, Out Looking In: Early Modern Polish Art, 1890-1918 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

theatre. 'This growth,' Alfred Wysocki observed, referring to the Lwów Municipal Theatre, 'this overcoming of old mistakes, is a pledge, with which yesterday's performances of 'The Judges' and 'The Well of the Saints' marked a great step forward.'<sup>8</sup>

While a number of Polish critics considered *The Well of the Saints* to be an exciting 'scenic experiment,' evoking references to Gordon Craig, Maeterlinck, and Reinhardt, the novelty of Synge's work was not enough for most critics to connect it to Young Poland's most original artist, Wyspiański.

Synge's association with Wyspiański, established by this initial production, proved difficult for Young Poland to overcome. The problem grew more acute in the later

8 Alfred Wysocki, *Cudowne Źródło*, Archive of Teatr Im. Słowackiego, Kraków, 5. Wysocki's comment speaks to an ongoing tension, which was not unfamiliar to the Irish theatre, within the theatre of Young Poland between proponents of national drama and innovative, artistic drama. Wyspiański was unique in that his drama satisfied both artistic camps. In this respect, his plays were to be immensely popular among Polish theatre-going audiences yet proved difficult for Polish directors to realize artistically on the stage. For the proponents of so-called artistic theatre, the staging of plays by Wyspiański and Synge on the same program represented a long-awaited sign of progress for the Polish theatre.

performances of Synge's work, Arnold Szyfman's production of *The Playboy of the Western World*, at the Polish Theatre in Warsaw in 1913 and Pawlikowski's revival of *The Well of the Saints* at the Słowacki Theatre in Kraków in 1914. Józef Kotarbiński, who had staged a number of Wyspiański's works as the director of the Civic Theatre in Kraków a decade earlier, objected to the ease with which Polish critics tended to filter Synge's work through Wyspiański. Kotarbiński felt that Florian Sobienowski, who translated *The Playboy* for the Polish Theatre's 1913 performance, had wrongly 'Wyspiańskized' the original by attempting to replicate the Polish playwright's stylized folk dialect and inserting representative figures from the Polish folk dramas (Carpathian shepherders, Hungarian soldiers, etc.) into his translation.

The blatant appropriation of Wyspiański aside, Kotarbiński's central complaint regarding Synge's play was its recurring motif of patricide. 'The external side of the symbol,'

Kotarbiński maintained, 'is, in my estimation, unpleasant and even repulsive.'<sup>9</sup> Although Poles were not scandalized by Synge's play for the same reasons as the Irish, their reaction to the violence in Synge's play was not altogether different from that of their Irish counterparts. As Grene points out, the 'Playboy' riot may well have had as much to do with Christy's second, more brutal attempt to murder his father as it did with the word 'shift.'<sup>10</sup> Kotarbiński's visceral response to the play, however, reveals the extent to which Wyspiański's 'monumental' symbolism proved to be a greater barrier to Synge's reception than the Irish playwright's realism. 'In our great poetry,' Kotarbiński pointed out, 'we have examples of much deeper symbolism, which unites organically with the nature of thought, with the internal consequences of the vision.

9 Józef Kotarbiński, 'Przegląd teatralny,' Biblioteka Warszawska 2.1 (1914): 175.

10 Grene, Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays 145.

[...] The symbolism of 'The Wedding' combines itself with a certain unspecified visionary dream.<sup>11</sup> It was one thing, therefore, to appropriate the veneer of Wyspiański's dramatic style to help place Synge in the Polish context, but it was quite another to attempt to interject harsh, alien elements of realism into the transcendent dream life of the nation.

For Polish audiences, the particularities of the local in Synge's dramas proved difficult to intuit much less discern, which left little more than universalities to consider. Recent readings of Synge stress his closeness to the natural world and the people living in it as a stronger argument for understanding his place in the Irish tradition than his perceived alignment along political or cultural lines. '[In Synge's work] the very specificity of the local underwrote the universal,' Grene argues, 'and what Synge could imagine against the background of the desolate Wicklow mountains, inspired by the people he saw

11 Kotarbiński, 'Przegląd teatralny,' 176.

living among them, constituted its own form of compelling truth.’<sup>12</sup> In reading Synge, however, Poles were at a loss as to how to parse his humor or to interpret his characters. What struck some critics as brutal realism appeared to others as highly charged irony, if not outright satire. The timing of Synge's reception, during the Young Poland period, further complicated the matter, for the longing Poles felt to be modern and cosmopolitan at this time was ultimately colored by an even deeper desire to revitalize the essence of Polish national identity. The impulse to frame Synge as a fellow ‘national poet’ to Wyspiański, the guiding artistic genius of the day, exposed the extent to which Young Poland's universal reaction was ultimately in conflict with its cultural reaction.

The variety of reactions among Poles to Synge's work supports Grene's assertion that the disarming power of Synge's innovative work stems from his ability to draw in audiences by

12 Nicholas Grene, ed., Interpreting Synge: Essays from the Synge Summer School, 1991-2000 (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2000) 40.

defying conventions and forcing them to respond to the characters.<sup>13</sup> The barriers inhibiting Young Poland's understanding of Synge, therefore, were both cultural and artistic. As a dramatist, Synge was not always understood by his own countrymen, and so for Poles it was even more difficult to know how to respond to his work. The bending of dramatic conventions and the mixing of comedy, violence, and lyric beauty in the plays of the Irish playwright had few counterparts, if any, in either the Polish or the European theatre at the time. As an innovative dramatist in his own right, Wyspiański proved to be a convenient, if problematic vehicle for compensating for this lack of knowledge about Ireland. Jan Lorentowicz felt the stylized translation and the blatant association with Wyspiański left the Polish audiences doubting whether they were seeing the play as its author had intended it. 'The actors,' Lorentowicz explained in his review of the performance, 'looked for the

13 Ibid. 149.

tragic tones of Wyspiański, but meanwhile Synge himself called his work a comedy and treated the subject with bloody irony, even to the point of distaste.<sup>14</sup> Lorentowicz believed that the actors' approach to Synge's drama represented a grave mistake, because the audience ended up leaving the theatre 'thoroughly disturbed.'<sup>15</sup> For Lorentowicz, however, the difficulty in understanding Synge's play lay not so much in its Irishness as it did in realizing its innovative artistry in the face of Young Poland's innate obsession with its own Polishness.

The essential problem of interpreting Synge, both for Polish critics and audiences alike, was that the association with Wyspiański was clearer and more comprehensible than the intricacies of Irish culture. 'Does Synge's drama,' Kotarbiński wondered about *The Playboy*, 'have meaning as criticism and a

14 Jan Lorentowicz, Dwadzieścia lat teatru, vol. II (Warszawa: Hoesick, 1930) 197.

15 Ibid.



symbolic cross-section of the current moods and impulses in the life of the nation? It is not possible to evaluate this, not knowing Irish relations better. The Polish spectator is struck at once just by the strange anomaly.<sup>16</sup> Poles never questioned Synge's genius, but many Polish critics experienced difficulty in figuring out how to characterize Synge's work within the Polish context. For some Poles, the shock of *The Playboy's* volatility had to do with a basic discrepancy between Synge's dramatizations of rural Ireland and the Ireland of the mind. 'The golden harp of Erin,' Ignacy Baliński observed of Synge's work in a review of Szyfman's 1913 production of *The Playboy*, 'resonated to us in an unexpected manner, different than we had imagined from the ancient works of Celtic poetry.'<sup>17</sup> The puzzlement Young Poland felt at Synge's work was understandable, because it was quite different from the idealized images of Celtic Ireland already

16 Kotarbiński, 'Przegląd teatralny,' 174.

17 Ignacy Baliński, 'Rozmowy o teatrze,' Tygodnik ilustrowany, Nr. 47 (1913).

encountered in Polish translations of *The Countess Cathleen* and poems such as 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' and 'The Heart of Spring,' which Stanisław Lack and Jan Kasprowicz had published over a decade earlier.<sup>18</sup>

This is not to suggest that Synge's value as an Irish writer and innovative dramatic artist was entirely lost on the Poles. On the contrary, knowledgeable commentators on Irish-Ireland such as Marya Rakowska and Adolf Nowaczyński not only considered the emergence of the drama of Irish-Ireland to be among the most promising developments then taking place in modern English literature, but also that Synge represented its leading talent.<sup>19</sup> In spite of this genuine enthusiasm for Ireland's

18 Lack published his translation of 'The Heart of Spring' in the Kraków journal *Nowe Słowo* in 1902. Kasprowicz's translation of *The Countess Cathleen* appeared in the influential literary journal, *Chimera*, in 1904, while the poems 'Down By the Salley Gardens,' 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree,' 'The Madness of King Goll,' 'The Sorrow of Love,' 'When You Are Old,' 'The Sad Shepherd,' 'The Death of Cuchulain,' and 'Ephemera' were published in Lwów in *Nasz Kraj* in 1906 and then again in book form in *Poeci angielscy. Wybór poezji w przekładzie* (English Poets: A Selection of Poetry in Translation) in 1907.

19 See Adolf Nowaczyński, ed., *Oskar Wilde. Studium. Aforyzmy. Nowele* (Kraków: W. Wiedeger, 1906), Adolf Nowaczyński, 'Odrodzenie Erynu,'

cultural resurgence, it was difficult for Young Poland not to be self-referential in its perception of Irish-Ireland. It was, after all, this inherent tendency toward essentialism that allowed Nowaczyński, the self-ascribed *enfant terrible* of Young Poland, to co-opt Irish-Ireland's success, epitomized by Synge, as Young Poland's own. Nowaczyński, who published a number of articles about Irish-Ireland and Oscar Wilde, readily attributed the strength of the Irish cultural resurgence to the success of its drama. '[Ireland],' Nowaczyński explained in his article 'Teatr irlandzki' (The Irish Theatre), 'is making such powerful forward progress in its spiritual development that it is a double of our nation, these 'Poles of the Western World.''<sup>20</sup> The oblique

Świat. 9-10 (1907), Adolf Nowaczyński, 'Odrodzenie Erynu,' Co czasy niosą (Warszawa: 1909), Adolf Nowaczyński, 'Irlandzkie 'Nowe Ateny',' Świat IX.13 (1914), Adolf Nowaczyński, 'Polska w literaturze angielskiej,' Sfinks (1915), Adolf Nowaczyński, 'Teatr irlandzki,' Szkice literackie (Poznań: Ostoja, 1918), Marya Rakowska, 'List angielski: współczesna poezya,' Krytyka (1909), Marya Rakowska, Zarys literatury angielskiej, vol. Część 1 (Warszawa: Biblioteka Dzieł Wyborowych, 1911), Marya Rakowska, 'Teatr irlandzki,' Krytyka T. XXXI (1911), Marya Rakowska, 'John Millington Synge,' Przegląd Warszawski Tom IV, Rocznik 3.Nr. 27 (1923).

20 Nowaczyński, 'Teatr irlandzki,' 61.

reference to Synge was intentional, for the Irish dramatist exhibited what Nowaczyński believed to be the most vital characteristic of Irish-Ireland as a movement. Of all the writers of Irish-Ireland, Nowaczyński felt that Synge wielded the most powerful influence on this push for artistic, political, and social re-awakening. ‘All around,’ Nowaczyński observed, ‘there is such activity, such life, such strength coming from the earth that it altered, shaped, tempered, and purified the soul of a once lazy, desperate, drunken, obstreperous, deceitful people, utterly depraved people under the baton and perfidious, vampiric politics of John Bull.’<sup>21</sup> To Nowaczyński Synge represented the model dramatist, because in his ‘symbolic satires’ he was able to thrust the brutal reality of Irish rural life in the face of his audience in the guise of a fantastic legend. ‘Synge,’ Nowaczyński explained, ‘does not part company with the right of the oppressed or the poor Irish cottage, but with a caring,

21 Ibid.

unforgetting, and maternal love he reveals the wounds of this eternally suffering country.<sup>22</sup>

Nowaczyński's response to Synge as a writer is typical of Young Poland's natural tendency toward essentialism and self-reflection in its perception of foreign cultural impulses. Known for his bitterly satirical wit, Nowaczyński was one of Young Poland's most virulent self-critics, relentless lampooning what he perceived to be the propensity of his fellow countrymen toward self-delusion, the cult of Romanticism, and shallow cosmopolitanism. Equally disgusted by the Art for Art's Sake movement and the nationalist worship of the past, Nowaczyński considered it his duty as a socially engaged writer to confront the nation with what he perceived to be the harsh truths of its shortcomings.<sup>23</sup> For Nowaczyński, Synge was the foremost

22 Ibid. 66.

23 Associated with writers such as Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and the French symbolist poets, among others, the art for art's sake grew out of a belief that in the absence of any pure, identifiable truth the only real way of finding value and meaning in life was by means of the aesthetic

representative of a new generation of Irish writers who 'looked reality straight in the face and who not only did not cover their eyes with their hands, but decided to intervene, form, and reform.'<sup>24</sup>

The question as to why Nowaczyński got Synge so wrong is critical, because it speaks to the core of Young Poland's identity as a cultural movement. By casting Synge in his own image, as a virulent satirist and destroyer of Irish self-delusions, Nowaczyński presented a strangely distorted portrayal of Synge that suggested the bitter rhetoric of D. P. Moran in *The Leader* more than it did the lyrical artistry of the Abbey Theatre. Much like Moran, Nowaczyński felt that the Poles themselves were to blame for their plight as a nation through a collective self-deception that was equal parts

experience. In the context of Young Poland, the art for art's sake banner was associated with those artists and writers who advocated art free of any tendency (social, political, or historical).

24 Ibid. 64.

nationalist nostalgia, modernist pretension, and triloyalist careerism. By presenting Synge as a socially confrontational writer, a destroyer of illusions, Nowaczyński ultimately revealed the extent to which he was recasting the Irish writer in terms of Polish needs rather than grasping him as an original artist of universal genius.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of the difficulties Young Poland experienced in placing Synge, Corkery's assertion about the impenetrability of Irish literature fails to explain entirely the problems it experienced with Irish-Ireland. While the obvious barriers of language and cultural reference existed, causing confusion about the authenticity of Synge's representation, the difficulties Poles experienced in understanding Synge ultimately resided on the Polish, not the Irish side. It could be argued that intuitively

25 The extent to which Nowaczyński was doing this can be seen in the comparison he made between his play *Nowy Aten* (The New Athens), a harsh satire of Polish society in his native Galicia, and *General John Regan*, by George Birmingham. Nowaczyński admired Birmingham's play, which triggered a riot when it was performed in Westport, because it met his ideal of drama as a necessary form social confrontation and stripping away of illusions.

Young Poland did understand the Irish. Well-informed critics such as Nowaczyński and Rakowska repeatedly pointed out what Adam Zamoyski has termed the historical ‘parallels of predicament and reaction’ that existed between the Poles and the Irish in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>26</sup> Polish observers also recognized and appreciated the significance of the Abbey Theatre, the Gaelic League, and the push for Home Rule to Ireland's cultural and political resurgence. Where Young Poland experienced the greatest difficulty in fully understanding the Irish was in overcoming its own innate tendency of essentializing the world around it. It was not so much a question of entering the Irish consciousness, as Corkery might have suggested, but rather the primary challenge Young Poland faced in truly understanding the Irish was a matter of transcending the deeply held sense of Polishness that informed the core of its artistic sensibility.

26 Adam Zamoyski, ‘States of Mind: on the myths of national identity,’ Encounter LXXIII.2 (July/August 1989).



Lacking the shield of a Polish state, a predicament with which Poles had had to live for over a century, the intellectuals of Young Poland recognized that it was critical for writers and artists to foster and to give expression to the essence of Polish identity in order to preserve their imaginary core as a nation. Ironically, the problems Young Poland experienced in understanding Synge were informed by precisely the same kind of behaviors that Corkery described in his argument for a truly native Irish national literature in the 1930s. Overcome by a strong sense of self, Poles were not fully able to appreciate Synge and by extension, the Irish-Ireland movement. In the end, then, Young Poland was incapable of really understanding the Irish, and so the best they could do was to associate with them. As a result, Poles may have been able to appreciate Synge as an original dramatic talent, but his place in the repertoire of the Polish theatre would be limited to meeting the internal cultural

needs of Young Poland in the decades leading up to Polish independence.

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