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The Primitive Vision of John Millington Synge

Jean Comiskey Hunter
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THE PRIMITIVE VISION OF
JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE

by
Jean Comiskey Hunter

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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VITA

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone familiar with the current literature of the human sciences knows that as soon as he uses the term primitivism he is in the midst of a labyrinth without the saving threads of tradition and authority to guide him to safety. This is partly because primitivism is not a dogma or revelation per se in the sense that Christianity and Marxism are complete, unified systems embracing the whole of human existence, and partly because its syncretic nature allows for all sorts of modifications which color each historical exemplification. Historically considered, the expression connotes either a chronological event, a philosophic statement, or an existential action, but in modern times it is usually taken to signify "a series of related social, economic, psychological and psychiatric meanings." Thus it implies both "a certain level of history and a certain mode of cultural being."2

With other contemporary "isms," modern primitivism shares several common denominators. Like existentialism, it is an attitude toward reality, a new accent, not a new conception of man and nature. And like phenomenalism it

emphasizes intuition over abstract thought, and the process of obtaining truth rather than truth itself. Together with existentialism and phenomenalism, it represents a transitional viewpoint; that is to say, modern primitivism is geared toward helping man maintain some semblance of psychic and social stability in an era in which none of the time-honored value systems seem to work.

Broadly speaking, primitivism signals a return to elementary human values, a re-examination of basic human drives and instincts in order to confirm their absolute validity and necessity for human growth and development. To oversimplify the matter somewhat, primitivism is a "natural value system" whose locus is not in some theory or hypothesis "out there," but inside the soul of man, in his innermost being. As an organic philosophy directed toward getting in touch with the "ground" of one's being, primitivism seeks to achieve wholeness and aliveness through "dynamic" living.

In their definitive work on classical primitivism, Professors Lovejoy and Boas distinguish between two interrelated but distinct forms of primitivism: chronological primitivism and cultural primitivism. When employed by certain historians and philosophers the first designation is simply a yardstick for measuring the amount of salutary

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goodness and value that exist in any given period of time. According to the chronological primitivists, the beginning of civilization was the ideal milieu for the "real" expansion of the human faculties. During this "Golden Age" men lived in total harmony with the organic world; the earth produced abundantly and spontaneously, and war, injustice and violence were unheard of:

Like gods they lived with hearts free from sorrow and remote from toil and grief; nor was miserable age their lot, but always unwearyed in feet and hands they made merry in feasting, beyond the reach of all evils. And when they died, it was as though they were given over to sleep. And all good things were theirs. For the fruitful earth spontaneously bore them abundant fruit without stint. And they lived in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, rich in flocks and beloved of the blessed gods.5

The Golden Age passed quickly, and at least as far as the Ancients were concerned, without cause. Each succeeding age was less conducive to human peace and contentment until finally those elements which separated the Iron Age from its predecessors became coterminous with the human condition: man was an animal laborans, a victim of moral and physical weakness, condemned to spend his days in unproductive work and to suffer the evils of impiety, civil disorder, and poverty.6 To record this sudden fall from grace and man's

4Hesiod's term.
5Hesiod, Fragment 82; cited in Lovejoy, p. 27.
6Ibid., p. 31.
vain struggle to regain his original idyllic state became the proper task of the chronological primitivist.  

Though not historical in its orientation, cultural primitivism has more of a basis in fact than its chronological counterpart. It is generally linked with three specific epochs—the end of the Classical Era, the close of the Middle Ages, and the beginning of modern times—when it can be conclusively shown there occurred a general breakdown of cultural, political, and spiritual values. Indeed, many contemporary historians are of the opinion that certain indeterminate psychological and sociological factors are responsible for the periodic recrudescence of this particular philosophic tendency.

In the main, cultural primitivism represents a protest, a radical denunciation of civilization and the effects of civilization. Traditionally, the protest has been leveled against the sovereignty of reason, against mass conformity in matters of taste and mores, against sterility, artifice, artificiality, and conventionality, but more recently its target has been scientism and its bedfellows, logical positivism and bourgeois materialism. The cultural primitivist

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7Ibid., pp. 2-7.

desires to escape from his urban environment where deprivation, greed and intolerance have replaced human love and human warmth, and to enter into a state of existence where natural goodness, fraternity and contentment with one's lot in life prevail. He yearns for the simple, uncomplicated life of bush and cave, for the time when man had fewer desires and fewer material possessions, but more genuine happiness and greater spiritual well-being. But instead of immersing himself in the documents, lore, and customs of primitive societies, the cultural primitivist consciously imbibes the spirit of currently existing savage peoples.9

For all his complaints about the debilitating effects of industrialization, political revolution, and mass standardization, the cultural primitivist is unwilling to forego many of the comforts and refinements of civilization. Not wishing to return to the state of Nature limned in myth and legend or to bring back the "good old days of yore," the proponent of this viewpoint merely wants to restore things to their proper perspective. His catchword is experience; and along with a recognition of the essential role of feeling in human existence, he seeks to celebrate the glories of nature, the imagination, and the sensual life.

More than an abstract proposition, then, modern primitivism is a Weltanschauung. It is an attitude toward

9Lovejoy, pp. 7-11.
existence, a way of looking at the universe, a philosophy of man and nature encompassing both art and experience. To the primitivists can be credited the current rebirth of Franciscan simplicity and the all but fanatical preoccupation with ecology and comparative religion. In the realm of philosophy, their rejection of the doctrine of evolution has spawned a new idea of history and a new conception of time. Within the last fifty years emphasis has shifted from a post-Darwinian notion of history as a linear development proceeding in the direction of greater and greater progress to a more human, man-centered theory of cyclic return\textsuperscript{10} and from a quantitative view of time to a consciousness of interior duration, of time flowing.\textsuperscript{11} Congruently, this revolt against historicism has created an awareness of a higher temporal order—an order built upon "transrational" principles and conforming to subjective standards of judgment. If in the past the classical precepts of uniformity and irreversibility reigned supreme, now the Protean norms of change, flexibility, and transformation are in the ascendancy.\textsuperscript{12} In the sphere of art, no less than in the philosophic and

\\textsuperscript{10}See Eliade for a development of this point.  
\textsuperscript{11}Hans Meyerhoff, Time in Literature (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1955), studies the relationship between current notions of time and literary practice.  
\textsuperscript{12}On modern Proteanism, see G. Kateb, "Utopias and the Good Life," Daedalus, 94 (1965), 471-472.
social disciplines, the primitivistic tendency has provided an aesthetic justification for the "child cults" of Klee and Miro and the "symbolic animism" of the Blue Riders, while in literature it has sparked an interest in folklore, balladry and nature mysticism. More importantly, it has spurred countless individuals to search for their own cultural identities and to become conscious of ethnic backgrounds, milieux, and uniquenesses.

II.

The word primitivism has not always been appended to social or artistic movements which adopted its major premises. Only within the last few years have students of modern Irish literature recognized the fact that the so-called Celtic Revival of the 1890's subsumed under its banner strains and tendencies which hitherto have been designated primitive:

This 'celtic revival' of the last decade of the century was no new phenomenon in literature. It was essentially a renaming and a reordering of a familiar trait, the 'folk spirit,' marked by the heightened passions and superstitions common to all literature rising from the people, and given new life by the recent scientific studies of folklore and myth culminating in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* of 1890. In addition, it possessed a strong tendency toward melancholy which

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13This topic is the subject of a full length study by Robert Goldwater entitled *Primitivism in Modern Art*, New York, 1967.
attracted the mystics of Maeterlinck's school.\textsuperscript{14}

In a very real sense, the essence of the Celtic Revival was expressed in the plays of John Millington Synge, the subject of this dissertation. In 1896, while a student of French letters at the Sorbonne, Synge met William Butler Yeats, and when Yeats learned that the young Dubliner had read enthusiastically the works of Arnold, Renan and the French Pan-Celticists, he 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."\textsuperscript{15}

Synge accepted the gospel of Pan-Celticism with certain reservations. While he shared the Pan-Celticists' interest in Ireland's past, her heroes, and her peasants, he could not force himself to sacrifice artistic truth to national feeling. As a consequence, his works were not written to "regenerate" Ireland or to "teach or prove anything"; they had the more cosmopolitan intent of dealing "manfully, directly, and decently with the entire reality of life."\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{15}Cited in David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, \textit{John Millington Synge: 1871-1909} (New York, 1959), p. 61; For a detailed account of Synge's involvement in the Pan-Celtic Movement, see Chapter III.

\textsuperscript{16}From a letter written by Synge to Stephen MacKenna on January 28, 1907; Cited in \textit{ibid.}, p. 158.
Thus the primitivism embodied in them is psychological rather than national in that it focuses primarily on the innate fundamental character of man with his intrinsic qualities, his essential attributes, and only secondarily on habits of thought or modes of behavior which might be classified as constitutionally Irish.

All of the major commentators on Synge from Bourgeois to Saddlemeyer have alluded to customs, situations, and stylistic devices in Synge's plays derived from his several trips to the Aran Islands, but none has presented conclusive evidence from psychology, anthropology, religion, and comparative literature which attests to the essential folk character of his work. In addition to outlining the basic features of Synge's primitivism, it is the purpose of this dissertation to prove that Synge's primitive vision is as much a reflection of his own personality and the emotional climate of the age as it is a by-product of his four encounters with the Irish peasantry of the Gaeltacht. Underlying the entirety of the paper are two basic assumptions: 1) that primitivism is a quality of mind, a habit of thought different from what we have traditionally regarded as rational, logical thinking; and 2) that before primitivism can become an authentic model, medium, or end of artistic creation it must exist as a fully developed Weltanschauung.

The Table of Contents plots our course. Before taking a synoptic look at Synge's rhetoric in so far as it shapes
and is shaped by his primitive vision, we shall treat questions relating to individual plays. Thus within each chapter a different frame of reference will be used. For instance, _In the Shadow of the Glen_ lends itself naturally to an analysis of the nature and function of the primitive landscape. On the other hand, in _The Well of the Saints_ the psychology of the artistic mind is pivotal; the form and content of the play can be advantageously integrated into the bardic tradition. Similarly, in _The Tinker's Wedding, Deirdre of the Sorrows, and Riders to the Sea_ another type of "situating" can be established with the pattern of such eternally recurring motifs as the myth of the seasons, the flight into the "Green World," and the archetype of motherhood. Again, in _The Playboy of the Western World_ a legal spectrum merits attention: the initiation rite which Christy Mahon undergoes in Mayo should not blind us to the fact that Synge is making a very serious appraisal of primitive justice.

These contexts, which by no means exhaust the possibilities of our theme, overlap considerably; and every play, along with every prose essay, poem, and translation, can be said to deal peripherally with the "matter" isolated for closer scrutiny in each chapter. Since Synge's plays are more often concerned with "space-actions" (life-crisis) than with "time-actions" (sequential events), a "field" approach to the subject has been adopted. An attempt has been made to describe the systems or "fields" in which a particular
play operates and to determine the relationships between the various systems operating within the works as a whole. In this way it is possible to communicate not only what Synge apprehended in his environment, but also how he apprehended it, and in what fashion the phenomenon or object affected his view of the universe. The nature of the project did not permit its author to stylistically reflect the "spirit" of Synge's oeuvre or to approximate that "all-at-oneness" which pervades his finest achievements. This is the direction of future scholarship. However, the chapters are organized in a manner which hopefully will lead to a more correct critical response.
CHAPTER I

THE PRIMITIVE LANDSCAPE

When *In the Shadow of the Glen* was first produced at Dublin's Molesworth Hall in 1903, it caused a national uproar. With the exception of Jack Yeats, who felt that Synge's attack on mercenary marriages "did not go far enough," ¹ Dublin critics damned the play for its "Unirishness": not only did it "barter away the finest national asset, the unimpeachable chastity of Irish home life," ² but it presented as a typical Irish matron "a woman who wears her lust on her sleeve." ³ Nora was "the kind of woman who follows star after star, and ends in ditches," ⁴ and as Maud Gonne had so angrily protested, Irish playwrights were conscience bound to portray Eire as the Isle of Saints. ⁵ Such a "monstrous slander of Irish womanhood," wrote the impassioned Arthur Griffith in *The United Irishman* for


⁵Ibid., p. 179.
October 17, 1903, could only have been concocted by a "hedge school master" under the inspiration of that "decadent cynicism that passes current in the Latin Quartier and the London salon." Even if adultery were possible, Griffith and his fellow-critics insisted--half-believing it were not--taste would prohibit the dramatization of such unseemly material.

The plot of *In the Shadow of the Glen* is common enough. While still a young colleen, and under the illusion that security, a respectable income, and a comfortable residence were the ingredients of a happy life, Nora Burke wed a cold sterile man at least twenty years her senior. On the surface the union could be considered a blueprint for the perennial May-November marriage of convenience. For a time both parties accommodated themselves to the arrangement, but as the years passed the combination of loneliness, childlessness, and an increasingly unsympathetic mate compelled the Irish lass to seek companionship elsewhere. First Patch Darcy, then Michael Dara, and finally a Tramp strolling through the glen become the object of Nora's pent-up emotions. Burke retaliates by feigning death in the presence of one of his wife's paramours, and in the dramatic confrontation which follows his sudden "resurrection,"

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7Bourgeois, p. 158.
Nora relinquishes her marital rights and "takes to the road" with the Stranger.

If the "matter" of In the Shadow of the Glen offended most Irishmen, it was not because of its modernity, for the tale which Synge related had numerous analogues in the peasant lore of the Western Districts. In Galway alone the Irish Folklore Commission had unearthed four versions of the Faithless Wife motif, and one of these was probably the source of the story Pat Dirane recounted to Synge during the latter's first visit to Inishmaan. Furthermore, several of the most famous heroines of Celtic legend--Grania, Dervorgilla, and Iseult--had been guilty of Nora's sin. And indeed, hadn't the great Parnell himself been the lover of Kitty O'Shea?

When the details of Parnell's adulterous affair were publicized in the Dublin newspapers in 1879, the shocked Irish electorate refused to give a vote of confidence to the man whom they had once hailed as the Uncrowned King of Ireland. Now a quarter of a century later, these same Dubliners were rejecting Synge's histrionic plea for tolerance

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and understanding. Unwittingly most Irishmen realized that the drama's essential meaning involved a direct criticism of that moral and social code to which better than ninety-five percent of them gave their allegiance. Try as they might, they could not overlook the fact that the seeds of Nora's conflict were embedded in the very fabric of Irish life, or that Synge was questioning that mode of existence which prized financial security and ecclesiastical approval over the actualization of one's full potential. Perhaps each one secretly feared that at some time or other he, too, would be tempted to imitate Nora's action. In any case, among the scores of commentators only Yeats faced the truth of Nora's predicament:

If he (the spectator) sees The Shadow of the Glen, he will ask, why does this woman go out of her house? Is it because she cannot help herself, or is she content to go? Why is not all made clearer? And yet, like everybody when caught up into great events, she does many things without being certain why she does them....She feels an emotion she does not understand. She is driven by desires that need for their expression, not 'I admire this man,' or 'I must go, whither I will or no,' but words full of suggestion, rhythm, of voice, movements that escape analysis....She is intoxicatated by a dream which is hardly understood by herself, but possesses her like something half-remembered on a sudden awakening.10

The emotion which Nora does not understand is fittingly concretized in the play's central image of the shadow. On

the literal level, as the primitive means of calculating time, the shadow carries the action: Dan Burke was "destroyed" the hour "the shadow was going up through the glen." But even in terms of plot, the significance of the shadow issues less from its particular temporal function than from its juxtaposition with the attendant images of darkness and fog. Everywhere references to the gloom and desolation of the upland world abound. Early in the play Nora describes the "wild" nights when the rain is falling and she "a lone woman" with "no house near me at all." Later she complains bitterly of "seeing nothing but the mist rolling down the bog" and "hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees...left from the great storms." There were nights when the fog was so dense and so black that a stick seemed as "big as your arm" and a stack of turf "as big as the towering church in Dublin."

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11 J. M. Synge, Collected Works, ed. Robin Skelton, Alan Price, and Ann Saddlemeyer (4 vols.; London, 1962-1968), III, 35. In Works, II, 66, Synge points out that on Aran time is defined qualitatively or serially. He writes: "The general knowledge of time on the islands depends, curiously enough, on the direction of the wind. Nearly all the cottages are built, like this one, with two doors opposite each other, the more sheltered of which lies open all day to give light to the interior. If the wind is northerly the south door is opened, and the shadow of the door-post moving across the kitchen floor indicates the hour; as soon, however, as the wind changes to the south the other door is opened, and the people, who never think of putting up a primitive dial are at a loss."

12 Works, III, 37.

13 Works, III, 49.  
14 Works, III, 37.
It was no wonder that under the impact of sweeping rains and forcible isolation "great" men—men of Patch Darcy's calibre—went "queer in the head."

The web of imagery which weaves through the play linking shadow, fog, madness, and death does more than fix the atmosphere or provide a backcloth to the scene performed in the foreground. In many ways this primitive landscape serves as an emotional extension of the main action, but unless we understand the strange kinship which exists between man and nature in the counties of Western Ireland,¹⁵ and the still more curious primitive habit of intermingling the natural and the supernatural,¹⁶ we cannot fully appreciate the profound psychological import of this cluster of symbols. In this land of mist and gloom where it is believed "mystical" properties can accrue to any person, place, or natural phenomenon,¹⁷ and death can occur at the hand of malevolent fairies,¹⁸ objects are frequently endowed with a reality other than their own; they become the outward manifestation of an inner tension which constant exposure to hostile elements engenders. Whenever Synge's peasants experience the

¹⁵In Works, II, 142, Synge remarks that the men of Inishmaan "seemed to be moved by strange archaic sympathies with the world. Their mood accorded itself with wonderful fineness to the suggestions of the day...."

¹⁶See Works, II, 128, for Synge's views on this matter.

¹⁷Works, II, 99.

¹⁸Works, II, 51 and 165.
physical universe, they experience it not as a res extensa, but as an all-powerful and numinous body of sufficient magnitude to encompass the uncanny feeling gripping their souls. They seem to be "psychologically continuous" with their environment. Not fully conscious of the meaning of her words, Nora confesses to the Tramp that for her, living in a country of dark mists and wailing winds, "it's other things than the likes of you, stranger, would make a person afeard." And he mournfully replies that Richmond Asylum is packed with men who too closely identified with the bituminous side of nature.¹⁹

This "mystical participation" of subject in object and object in subject which is present in such an acute form in Aran and the Congested Districts confirmed an earlier Darwinian opinion to which Synge had tenaciously clung, namely, that the mental processes of primitive peoples resemble those of childhood:

...[R]eflections upon one's childhood and youth can be useful. (Just as) the study of the distinctive adult—one who has appeared before his time—may indicate the progress of society, (so) the contemplation of childhood (which is,) I believe, linked in a way with the early stages of our race, has a singular value for those of us who are interested in primitive peoples and in folklore.²⁰

¹⁹Works, III, 37.

It was clear to Synge that the data obtained from his experiential study of certain native communities corroborated many of the findings of the English social scientists; still he could not endorse in toto their animistic presuppositions. Granted there existed a strong affinity between savage perceptions of reality and certain cosmological forces, and granted that the physical world and the psychological dimension interacted isomorphically, the conjunctive elements could not be so easily separated into cause and effect as Tylor and Frazer had claimed. The mysterious bond between Umwelt and Eisenwelt was more dynamic, more fluid than the academicians had realized: objects could function as stimuli, and contrarily, psychological events could affect material reality. If, according to the Tramp, sheep lie in the ditch "coughing and choking, like an old man," old men are like mountain ewes "a queer breed," and old women have "no more hair than you'll see on a bit of a hill and they after burning the furze on it."

In other words, the glensman's life-style seemed to be co-determined by his physical surroundings and the human

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22Works, III, 39.

23Works, III, 51. Here, as in The Well of the Saints, hair is associated with fertility, physical beauty, and youth.
"intention" which he imposed upon this landscape. His moods of "varying rapture and dismay," Synge was convinced, did not reside in the fact of alternating dense clouds and an unearthly moving light; on the other hand, it was not possible to attribute them to a defective psychic mechanism. And while it was true that the configurations of sky and soil influenced the thought-patterns of the Irish rustics, it was equally true that a certain habit of mind and a common cultural heritage affected the types of experiences which the group underwent as well as the quality of these experiences. Climate was not "inexorable"; it was only one of the "challenges" to which the rustic mentality must respond.

The real protagonist of In the Shadow of the Glen, then, is the Celtic milieu—that totality of circumstances, including social, topographical, cultural, and ethical conditions, which directly comprise Nora's "situation" and indirectly set the boundaries of her freedom. Combined with the light/shade motif, the shadow-mist-fog sequence obviously refers to the grim world of bourgeois mediocrity. At once a physical fact, a psychological construct used to account for certain behavior patterns, and a complete model of Synge's Ireland, the shadow symbolizes the external pressures exerted by a somewhat outmoded social contract. At the same time it represents a constraining inner force

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24 See Works, II, 72-74; also Bryan, pp. 72-73.
against which the positive drive of natural inclination must struggle. It is, as McLuhan would say, both "medium and message": light and shadow mark the slow moving pattern of outer time, underscore the inner unexpressed tensions and hopes of the central character, and present a definite statement on the collective experience of the Irish people without recourse to axioms or tropes which "prove" or "explain." Furthermore, when viewed in the context of savage thought, the shadow has an added epistemological significance: it is an epiphenomenon. Belonging to the border region of reality, midway between the states of substantiability and insubstantiability, the shadow hearkens back to that primordial stage of human development when the dialectical elements of nature and spirit were intrinsically bound up with one another. As such it is a trenchant ideograph for reflecting the essentially emotional quality of primitive thought.25

The same tension between light and darkness imaged in the landscape of the play is extended to the characterization. Taking as a logical starting point Synge's remark that the "desolate splendour" of Wicklow "gives a local intensity to the shadow of one's moods,"26 critics have fastened onto the idea that the shadow symbolizes in some


26*Works*, II, 204.
nebulous way the psychological milieu of the heroine. Alan Price read the play as an "objective correlative" for the struggle between "free emotional fulfillment and material security." 27 To P. P. Howe it typified the contemporary antagonism between the "ambition for self-realization and the nullity of circumstances." 28 Bourgeois argued that the play "may be taken as expressive of the poetic revolt against settled existence, as the free escape into some ideal dream-world." 29 More recently, Professor Gerstenberger, using the jargon of the Eupsychian Movement, stated that the energizing force behind Synge's first dramatic endeavor was the contrast between "the life of having" and "the life of being." 30

But beyond these more conspicuous philosophical purposes, the characters of In the Shadow of the Glen are formal equations for the internecine war waged daily between one's latent and manifest personalities. In attempting to account for this natural antimony between the various poles and drives of the psyche, Jungian psychology has come to the conclusion that man has an "inferior personality" or "shadow-side" which forms a mirror-image to his consciously

29 Bourgeois, p. 151.
projected ego. This so-called "hidden" part of the psyche is the seat of repressed desires, impulses, and instincts which for social, moral, or personal reasons have been purposefully omitted from consciousness.\(^\text{31}\) Generally the term shadow is applied to those infantile and primitive traits of character which we like to conceal, particularly those we associate with rigidity, sterility, and intolerance. However, the shadow can also refer to those factors and potentialities which have remained undeveloped, and which though part of our inborn psychic disposition, have been denied a place in our conscious existence.\(^\text{32}\) At any rate, whether positive or negative, the contents of the shadow are emotionally charged, and unless they are assimilated by the conscious ego, they will make themselves felt in deleterious actions and reactions. Whenever this happens, the individual becomes the "victim" of his affects. Unable to make an objective appraisal of his own situation, he projects upon someone or something in his environment those qualities which are still shrouded in the mists of unconsciousness.\(^\text{33}\)

What contemporary scientists have learned about the alter-ego through the use of elaborate empirical techniques


\(^{33}\)Ibid.; see also VIII, 208.
and methods, the savage mind intuited by means of a rather unsophisticated process of association. In his widely-quoted monograph, The "Soul" of the Primitive, Lucien Levy-Bruhl points out that many uncivilized peoples regard the shadow as an "extension of the personality," an "appurtenance" necessary to existence. Neither wholly material nor wholly immaterial, the shadow signifies both a "visible object" and a life-force; that is to say, it has the dual sense of image and the qualities of mind connected with that image. In not a few primitive societies, the meanings assigned to the shadow are identical with those affixed to it in Zurich and Vienna: it is a "second self," a "replica of the individual," a character "double." "It is not enough to say," writes Levy-Bruhl

that the shadow or the likeness is a 'second self,' as if it really had an existence apart from that of the 'first self.' It is only another aspect of the same 'self.'

But to return to the characterization of the play. In *In the Shadow of the Glen* we are confronted with a group of people, barely sketched, who personify antithetical attitudes, and who in their few conscious gestures express the deep fissure within the human soul. Long before the Theatre of the Absurd devised situations in which the assembly of players


stood for the various divisions of the psyche, Synge had unconsciously created characters which performed this same function. Taken in this way, the main personages of the play are dramatic equivalents for the several aspects of the shadow.

In support of our thesis, let us begin with the Wicklow housewife. To gauge accurately the extent and gravity of Nora Burke's dilemma we must keep in mind certain sociological factors which tended to restrict the autonomous development of the female species and to equate woman's destiny with her maternal function. Bryan, Arendsberg, and O'Brien all attribute the mariage de convenance so prominent in the agrarian districts at the turn of the century to a type of "rural familism" which sprung from the poor quality of the terrain. In County Wicklow, where there was a scarcity of males with economic means, and where most of the population consisted of "subsistence farmers," the young woman able to marry a man with "a bit of a farm, and cows on it, and sheep on the back hills" was indeed fortunate. All that was required of her was that she recognize her husband's absolute authority in the family, that she bear a number of healthy children who would insure the perpetuation of the paternal line, and that she respect the clear division of labor and duties set up by the society. If she failed in any of these areas--especially in the matter of procreation--she lost her status in the community. But if she conformed to the collective code and adjusted her desires and interests to those
of her spouse, in return for her submission she was accorded public honor and respect.37

For most Irishmen schooled in the hard tradition of poverty and "rack rents," love and physical attraction were the stuff out of which poetry and romance were fashioned; marriage was a legal and social institution involving elaborate parental negotiations between the contracting parties for dowry, acreage, and social position. Since a young girl exercised little or no free choice in matrimonial affairs, any happiness which she might have expected from a conjugal union had to come from her roles as mistress of a well-run household and "supplier of new persons to the family." Very quickly she learned that her affective needs were circumscribed by those of her husband, for regardless of the intolerability of the situation, once the marriage was consummated the bond was indissoluble. Not only did the Catholic Church forbid divorce, but public opinion and the rigidity of the social structure made defection virtually impossible.38

Initially Nora accepted the philosophy of containment dictated by the rural social organization and the Irish

37 The best study of "rural familism" in Ireland remains Conrad M. Arendsberg, The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study (New York, 1937); Bryan's The Improbable Irish also deals with the problem.

38 Arendsberg, pp. 89-91.
Church. In time, however, the utter desolateness of life on this forsaken "ridge of the world" spawned a host of neurotic symptoms, including depression, anxiety, and irritability which perforce altered her viewpoint. Had there been any "genuine dialogue" between husband and wife, or any children toward which even a modicum of blocked-up psychic energy could have been directed, the situation might not have reached the critical stage. But circumstances being what they were, the only opportunities for interpersonal communication were the none-too-frequent talks with Patch Darcy whenever the latter "passed" up and down the glen. Patch's conservations eased the built-in tension of glen life, quenched Nora's thirst for reciprocity, and pointed the way to inner freedom. We know that she looked forward to these rare chats as occasions for releasing painful emotions and exploring uncongenial feelings.

Between visits there were many hours to indulge in fantasy-wishes or to brood about one's shadow-side. But after Darcy's death, the situation changed. With no outlet for frank and honest self-disclosure, the pressures brought to bear by cultural and religious institutions multiplied. As things happen--at least in good plays--the Tramp who stopped at Burke Cottage the night of Dan's "death," was a man of good will and a sympathetic listener. He was joyful, warm, integrated, someone to confide in--a perfect foil for Burke. Neither a pillar of society, nor a Socrates who
delighted in castigating the "Establishment," the Tramp took the world for what it was and enjoyed it immensely. Always radiating a _joie de vivre_, he had succeeded in grappling with life without the elaborate security measures of the middle class. Nora felt comfortable with him; she was not afraid to reveal her true self in his presence, for he was free of the guilt which plagued her society. In comparing her world-view with his, in dropping her carefully constructed public mask and exposing the contours of her Anti-Self, Nora initiated a process of personality transformation. Opaque as the revelation was, it constituted a way "in" to her truest Self. Certainly as this juncture the desire for illumination took precedence over any "matter" uncovered in the course of these necessarily fragmented dialogues.

Either implicitly or explicitly each of the principal figures embodies some trait of the heroine's shadow-side. Some, like Michael Dara, complement Nora, draw sustenance from her emotional attitudes, and combine with her to provide a unity of vision. Others, like the Tramp, are the raw material for her unique perceptions of reality. Indeed, what we know about this particular gallery of players is not what they are in fact, but what they connote to Nora, what they signify to her and to the puppeteer who pulls her strings. Quite obviously, Mary Brien, that young mother who looms large in Nora's mind as a "spectre" from the past,
represents "what might have been"—the happiness and sense of well-being which Irish women associate with the gratification of certain maternal instincts. And by dramatic juxtaposition, Peggy Cavanagh becomes Mary's psychic corollary. A shrunken old woman, Peggy knows intimately the feebleness of mind and body which accompany old age. She has experienced first hand that demise of "spirit-titre" and loss of physical beauty which terrorize all of Synge's women and compel them to seek fully integrated lives in the present.

Save in the context of the "ghostly" images of Mary and Peggy, Nora's personal relationships with the male members of the cast are truly enigmatic, if not completely obtuse. Consider, for example, Nora's alliance with Michael Dara. In essence, we are presented with a miniature version of the primitive bond between son and mother so magnificently formalized in the Greek legend of Attis and Cybele. Just as Cybele's attachment to the timorous Attis sprang ultimately from her identification with the mother imago rather than from any natural sexual urge, so, too, Nora's

39 In Works, II, 144, Synge comments that "the greatest merit they (the islanders) see in a woman is that she should be fruitful and bring many children....The direct sexual instincts are not weak on the island, but they are so subordinated to the instincts of the family that they rarely lead to irregularity. The life here is still at an almost patriarchal stage, and the people are nearly as far from the romantic moods of love as they are from the impulsive life of the savage."
involvement with the young herdsman coincided with the activation of the archetypes of mate and parent. Michael Dara was both Nora's "spouse" and "enfant terrible." Over this hypersensitive, moody lad—in reality a surrogate for the child she had so earnestly desired—Nora spread the mantle of her love and affection. Not only did she protect him from the wrath of Dan Burke and the acidic tongue of the Stranger, but subcutaneously she spun a web of containment about him which prevented him from developing a strong masculine identity. "Let you not mind" the Tramp, Nora consoles Michael, "he has a drop taken and it's soon he'll be falling asleep." In exchange for Michael's devotion, Nora was willing to put up with his childish behavior, for as she reasoned, if Michael feared death and madness, he could be counted on to dispel some of the intense loneliness of Glen life. Anything was better than "living a long time with an old man...and...talking again like a herd that would be coming down from the thick mist." Yet Nora's part in this conspiracy of mutual self-betrayal was not carried out without its share of adverse side effects. Michael's constant pleading to "get me out of this" impeded any real interpersonal communication. But it was not until Nora had paused to watch her son-lover gleefully finger

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\(^{40}\) *Works*, III, 47.

\(^{41}\) *Works*, III, 53.
Burke's gold that she saw Michael for what he was—a corrupt peasant willing to sacrifice every shred of human decency for a few currency certificates:

That's five pound and ten notes, a good sum, surely!... It's not that way you'll be talking when you marry a young man, Nora Burke, and they were saying in the fair my lambs were the best lambs and I got a grand price, for I'm no fool now at making a bargain when my lambs are good.42

"Making a bargain" was Dan's favorite topic of conversation. History was repeating itself, but luckily there was a way out of this infantile relationship: one could "take to the road" with a tinker, a Tramp, or a man of the ditch.

Michael Dara's avaricious interest in tangible wealth aligned him philosophically with Dan Burke and estranged him socially from Patch Darcy. Like Burke, Dara belonged to that company of men whose lives are dedicated to fabricating an "objective world of things" which will compensate for and transcend the unstable and hostile natural environment. Their watchwords are productivity, reliability, durability; their goal, the establishment and preservation of "fixed standards" of conduct for every phase of human life.43 Dan could not understand—nor for that matter could the conservative citizenry of Dublin—how anyone in her right mind could give up "the half of a dry bed and good food in your

42Works, III, 51.

43In The Human Condition (Chicago, 1958), Hannah Arendt compares the homo faber and animal laborans outlooks.
mouth" for a "fine bit of talk." He was "downright impatient with any fancy language," and whenever he spoke his "pedestrian" thoughts signalled an ever-growing spiritual vacuity. 44

Against this mechanistic code Synge pitted the primitive viewpoint with its complementary activities of labor and action. Where the former concentrated on use, on "whatness," and preparation, the latter emphasized "doing," "wholeness," and participation; in other words, Synge was principally interested in concrete experience and the phenomena of organic life, and opposed to all rationally systematized conceptions of reality. For this reason in delineating characters intended to embody compensatory value systems, Synge dwelt upon spontaneity, wholeness, and resiliency. In this way he could show how at variance with man's true nature were "textbook" norms and standards of value. 45

In In the Shadow of the Glen the "labor" side of the primitive Weltanschauung is represented by Patch Darcy; the


45Cf. Yeats' lines from "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory":

And that enquiring man John Synge comes next,
That dying chose the living world for text
And never could have rested in the tomb
But that, long travelling, he had come
Towards nightfall upon certain set apart
In a most desolate stony place
Towards nightfall upon a race
Passionate and simple like his heart.
"action" side, by the Tramp. But whereas the Tramp's primitivism takes the form of a conscious reactionary world-view and a method of examining reality, Darcy's is for the most part unconscious and automatic. In several passages Patch is described as a living folk hero, a legend in his own times, known throughout the district for his strength, courage, and vitality: everyone in County Wicklow owned that Patch was blessed with a fine natural instinct for identifying lambs and that he could run from Wicklow to Dublin without catching his breath. 46 There was a certain savagery about this dynamic Lord of the Beasts, a certain "barbarous rudeness," as Spencer would put it, which made him physically aware of the richness of nature and the mutability of all living things. Daily contact with his flock had taught Patch that the functions of man were no different from those of the natural world: man, too, was an animal laborans, a part of that life-force which continually energizes the universe. "A human being," wrote Synge in an early notebook

finds a resting place only where he is in harmony with his surroundings, and is reminded that his soul and the soul of nature are of the same organization. 47

46 Works, III, 47. Compare Darcy's animation with Burke's lifelessness. Synge seems to identify movement, transmutability, and speed with life. In this he is following the traditional definition of soul as "quick-moving."

Among the chorus of Darcy's admirers none sung his praises with more gusto than the Tramp who lured Nora from dark Wicklow into the plein air of the Irish countryside. It is sometimes said that Synge created the Tramp in his own image as "a sort of heroic compensation for the dusty Celtic mythology," and as an "antitype" to the bourgeois conception of man. Synge's biographers Greene and Stephens support this view:

For Synge--indeed for many Irish writers and painters--the vagrant is the personification of a romantic element in Irish life and an antidote to the devouring concern for land that had dominated Irish life for centuries. The vagrant came... from a peasantry which had vitality enough to create an occasional temperament of distinction....Either through envy or self-pity Synge began to see the tramp as a shadow of his own mood.

An example par excellence of the vagabond poet, Synge was an "eternal wanderer," with all of the restlessness, and all of the strong resistance to the settled life by which, in addition to their love of the outdoors, the "road poets" are defined. Like the Tramp he had little interest in speculative knowledge and no time for insipid platitudes about the nobility of human life. He preferred to live his philosophy of affirmation by moving from town to town and from country to country in search of reality. Not infrequently,

49 Greene and Stephens, pp. 91-92.
he traced his ancestry back to Villon and Walther Von der Vogelweide, and perhaps to them can be credited one of his cardinal aesthetic principles, namely, that "healthy" poetry comes only after one has been exposed to all that is "wild and superb in reality." In the final moments of The Shadow, as Nora gathers her belongings into her shawl, the Tramp has this to say about vagrant life:

Come along with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm, and it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a talk of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up....

If we compare this statement with Dan's remark that someday they'll find Nora "stretched like a dead sheep with the frost on her or the big spiders, maybe, and they putting their webs on her, in the butt of the ditch," Synge's artistry becomes apparent. Although a definite "core" of human values underlies the Wicklow play, nowhere is this "system" expounded. Very skillfully through the use of contrasting verbal images, Synge persuades us to adopt his vision of the world. Note how often Dan Burke speaks about the grave, spiders, and ditches--"things" of the earth carrying pejorative connotations--instead of "grand evenings"

50 Works, III, 57. 51 Works, III, 55.
and "birds soaring." And yet we have the feeling that the Tramp knows the "clay and worms" more intimately than Dan. There will be times, he tells Nora, when "you'll be feeling the cold, and the frost, and the great rain," but "you'll not be sitting up in a wet ditch" in the half-darkness "making yourself old with looking on each day, and it passing you by. You'll be saying...It's a wild night, God help us, but it'll pass surely". The sun will shine once more and the south wind will blow ever so sweetly through the glen. The Tramp offers Nora not only an imaginative life, but a chance to make that imaginative life a reality, and Nora responds to his lyricism as only a woman with a poetic soul can: "You've a fine bit of talk, Stranger, and it's with yourself I'll go."  

Regarded from a structural point of view, Nora's realization of her latent personality might be said to be the "plot" of The Shadow inasmuch as this revelation provides

52 Works, III, 57.

53 Ibid. Looked at psychologically, Nora's action is simply a case of projection and transference. In Animus and Anima, p. 10, Emma Jung explains it this way: "This state of being fascinated by another and wholly under his influence is well known under the term 'transference,' which is nothing else than projection. However, projection means not only the transference of an image to another person, but also of the activities that go with it, so that a man to whom the animus image has been transferred is expected to take over all the functions that have remained undeveloped in the woman in question, whether the thinking function, or the power to act, or responsibility toward the outside world."
the "why" for her final departure. The action, if we mean by dramatic action an event or sequence of events which is manifested externally,\textsuperscript{54} forms an objective correlative to the plot mimicking as it does the transformation of consciousness experienced by the heroine. At first glance Dan’s "resurrection" and Nora’s histrionic exit seem to be thematically unrelated, but a closer reading of the text discloses that the two movements are variations on the theme of death and rebirth.

For the duration of the play Nora exists in a marginal state of consciousness. This is Eliot’s "time of tension between dying and rising/the place where three dreams cross." This is the time of transit, the time when the percipient feels inwardly disturbed. For primitive man it is a time of passage when certain "rites of intensification" must be performed to insure a proper adjustment to the new cycle of life which the individual is entering.\textsuperscript{55} Like an artist driven by an inner compulsion to write but unable to find an appropriate form for his vision, Nora is unable to respond adequately to her inner impulses and drives. When she suddenly

\textsuperscript{54}See Elder Olson, \textit{Tragedy and the Theory of Drama} (Detroit, 1961).

\textsuperscript{55}On the psychological basis of life-crisis behavior, the relation between critical periods in the life history of an individual, and the function of ritual behavior as a device for restoring psychic equilibrium, see Arnold van Gennep, \textit{The Rites of Passage}, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago, 1966).
bursts the shell of convention and acts independently, she
does so perhaps without complete self-knowledge or acqui-
escence. Communitywise, Nora's departure represents a de-
liberate renunciation of her Catholic faith, and from that
moment in the eyes of her kinsmen she is spiritually "dead."
But ironically, her "death" promises to be followed by a
dramatic reawakening in which the twin aspects of her being,
sense and spirit, will be welded together in a new harmo-
nious alliance.

Dan's "resurrection," on the other hand, is a sham. Re-
stricted by an essentially negative personality and an appar-
ent paralysis of will, Dan epitomizes the death-in-life state
so poignantly fictionalized in Joyce's The Dubliners. His
lack of affection, coldness, and self-interest are indicative
of that general spiritual numbness which accompanies any con-
certed national effort to minimize the life of sensation. As
we see him clutching his gold in the final "frame," we re-
alize that all of his gestures are fundamentally uncreative.
Dan was "destroyed" long before the shadow passed through
the glen--destroyed by a social and religious order which
preferred imitation of life to the real thing. Whereas
Nora's renewal signifies a reaffirmation of life and the
life-giving principle, Dan's "wake" symbolizes the tomblike
existence of those living in the midst of a senescent cul-
ture. If, as Synge would lead us to believe, the essence
of life is choice, if authentic existence means devoting
one's full energies to making significant moral choices, then a life regulated solely by external norms lacks authenticity. When man is not free to choose wrongly and to question the legitimacy of the collective code, he is only half-alive. The "soul" which no longer casts a shadow is dead.
CHAPTER II

THE NORMALITY OF SUFFERING

In 1897 while a student of French letters at the Sorbonne, John Millington Synge attended a lecture on Brittany given by the world renowned author and folklorist Anatole Le Braz. Le Braz's astute comments on the customs, taboos, and superstitions of the Bretons greatly intrigued the young Dubliner. Later that year Synge journeyed to Brittany where "in spite of the agony of the world," he found "men and women joyous enough to leap and skip with exultation."

On his return to Paris Synge read voraciously not only Le Braz's works, but also those of two other Pan-Celticists, Pierre Loti and Ernest Renan. The Breton experience remained with him, and after his first visit to Aran in 1899 he wrote a brief essay on Le Braz for the Dublin Daily Express. In it he spoke about the primitivity of a seafolk related ethnically and culturally to Le Braz's seafarers:

If an Irishman of modern culture dwells for a while in Inishmaan or Inisheer, or perhaps, anywhere among the mountains of Connacht, he will not find there any trace of an external at-homeness but will rather yield himself up to the entrancing newness of the old.

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2 Cited in ibid., p. 65.
Synge visited the Aran Islands again in 1899 and 1900. On his third trip he witnessed a discussion among the islanders concerning the identity of a young man whose body had just been washed ashore. When the dead sailor's sister had determined that the clothing, purse, and tobacco box belonged to her brother, she began to keen softly. For a time the people sat respectfully silent, but then one of the men mentioned the new boats headed for Inisheer, "and the conversation went back to its usual round of topics." "The loss of one man seems of slight catastrophe to all except the immediate relatives," Synge explained. "Often when an accident happens a father is lost with his two eldest sons, or in some way all the active men of the household die together."3

The Donegal incident furnished the raw material for Synge's second play, Riders to the Sea. Liturgical in tone, ritualistic in content and form, Riders to the Sea provided the ideal framework for Synge to explore primitive attitudes toward time, death, and suffering.

I.

The primitive world of Aran as envisioned in Synge's Riders to the Sea is a world of irrationalities, of mysterious forces which must be endured but can never be

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controlled. The islanders are profoundly aware that their fate rests in the hands of a raging sea; yet they are compelled to rise above the "pressure of reality" and to courageously pit themselves against this devouring void. With the exception of the innocent young priest, who vainly tries to mollify the effects of the murderous sea with reassurances of a benevolent God personally interested in the welfare of each of His creatures, these fisherfolk face death squarely and accept it as part of the eternal cycle of growth and decay. For them, sorrow and joy are the common denominators of human experience. While there is a genuine awareness of the transitoriness of all things mortal, and perhaps even an intuitive understanding of flux and extinction, there is no intellectual probing of the meaning of suffering and evil. The soul of the primitive islander is "satisfied" if it can muster the strength to survive; it is not sufficiently conscious to demand that "tragic knowledge" which comes when one openly risks defeat in order to attain truth.  

For the primitive men of Aran the only fixed reality is The Sea. The sea is at once the source of all regeneration and dissolution, providing sustenance for the weak and disabled and adventure for the strong. To the countless generations of Irish Niobes who have stood on the shores of the

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Atlantic and watched the monstrous waters swallow their sailor sons and husbands, the ocean spells death. Those who say "the Almighty God wouldn't leave her destitute with no son living," know "little of the sea," Maurya tells her daughters Cathleen and Nora:

I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house—six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world—and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them.5

But for Maurya's son Bartley the sound of the sea is a summons to affirm his manhood, to undergo a rite of passage which will assure him full membership in the adult male society. Riding out the storm is tantamount to passing through a series of symbolic ordeals "intended to cut off the youth from his negligible past as if he had died and then to resurrect him into an entirely new existence as an adult."6

Bartley's sister senses this deep human need. When her mother complains that it's a "hard and cruel man won't hear a word from an old woman, and she holding him from the sea," Cathleen replies, "It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea."7 The sea is a demonic temptress bent on driving a wedge between parents and children and luring the

5Works, III, 21.


7Works, III, 21.
young from the safety of their homes. And until the islanders can find an effective counterforce to the blind fury of these malignant waters, they will be required to sacrifice periodically their finest young men.

More than "the enemy and challenger of the young," the sea is an "empowered presence with definite religious connotations." Mysterious, awful, terrifying, the sea is a concrete manifestation of that "unnamed Something" from which all possible existence proceeds. Barth and Brunner call this pre-existent principle the "other"; Rudolph Otto termed it the "numinous"; and Carl Jung designated it "libido" or "energy," but behind the various nomenclature is the primitive conception of a natural force so overwhelming and tremendous that man can not help but feel puny before it. All her life Maurya has waged an unceasing war with the sea, and when her last son is brought home in a red sail she bows before her superhuman antagonist and says pathetically: "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me."

The relationship between Maurya and the sea is a

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10Works, III, 23.
magical one; in Synge's eyes, we can be sure, nothing more aptly expressed the difference between modern and primitive visions of nature than the emotional reaction of this singularly noble fisherwife to the immeasurable and boundless ocean. For Maurya the sea is menacingly alive—a personality in its own right. It is as if the sea had its own designs, moods, and passions which must be considered and adjusted to. Knowing that its actions cannot be predicted or programmed, Maurya is never tempted to reduce it a la modern scientists to an "it." For her it will always be a "thou," a being to be experienced rather than explained, to be confronted directly and bargained with. The effect of the sea on her life and the lives of the Aran Islanders is inestimable. Writes Donna Gerstenberger:

The sea is not merely a part of a tapestry-like background as in The Shadowy Waters; it enters into the small cottage in every speech, in the clothes of the drowned man, in Maurya’s fears for Bartley, and in every memory of the past, a past defined by the sea.11

Connecting the visible and the invisible, the living and the dead, the sea transcends the laws of time and space. It unites Bartley and Michael in an untimely death, and while depriving them of their mortal existence, supplies the sacramental means for their safe conduct to another more perfect world.

II.

As an agent of death, the role of the sea in Synge's 1904 play is pivotal. Here the word "agent" needs to be stressed, lest we fall into the perfidious modern habit of identifying agents and causes—something a primitive would never do. As far as the Aran Islanders are concerned, the actual cause of Bartley's death is unknown; the sea is only one of the instruments of an occult power which willed his demise, the other two being the pale pony that pushed him headlong into the treacherous waters and Maurya's "unlucky word." Since all three agents—the sea, the mother, and the gray mare—are potential sources of death, all three are involved in what anthropologists call "a system of mystic participations and exclusions." 12 Thus any one of the three can be readily substituted for any other as a legitimate symbol for both the life-force and the death-demon. Primitive psychologists have attempted to explain this confusion of ends and means by comparing the three agents. They "reason" as follows: Like the sea, woman has her tides and

rhythms which affect both her physical and "spiritual" life. And just as "all life sprang from water in the beginning," so "every embryo repeats the pattern as it lies in the womb, bathed in maternal fluid." Moreover, maternal energy is vital energy inasmuch as life originates in the fertile uterus, itself a microcosmic counterpart of the pregnant sea which covered the earth in primordial times. Then again, the horse, traditionally symbolizing power, strength, death, and "the libido which has passed into this world," resembles both the sea and the mother.

In a recent study of the archaic content of modern dreams, psychologist Edgar Herzog tells us that death frequently took the form of a horse in Occidental myth and folklore. If the snorting anger of the steed connoted danger to primitive man, Herzog observes, its speed, often compared to "the swiftness of the wind," symbolized "that which carries man into the realm of the beyond." Speed allows the

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14 Ibid.
15 On the horse as a symbol of power and strength, see Henn, p. 37; Gerstenberger, p. 47; also Pat Barnett, "The Nature of Synge's Dialogue," English Literature in Transition, 10 (1967), 121. For a discussion of the chthonic and funereal significance of the horse, see Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Cleveland and New York, 1967), pp. 143-144.
horse "to appear from nowhere and disappear as suddenly." When joined to the idea of either a visible or invisible rider--a common motif in Germanic and Danish lore--the horse "plays a fateful role which fulfills life with a remarkable intensity and then disappears (together with its rider), as mysteriously as it came." It was this "intense suddenness" which prompted Albrecht Durer, Alfred Rethel, and Arnold Brocklin to envision death as a powerful steed.

In ancient times, moreover, the horse's chthonic role was complicated by recurrent references to fertility and motherhood:

> If a galloping horse is a symbol of abduction by some frenetic power, it may refer to being carried away to the world beyond, on the one hand, and to being carried away by the ecstatic emotion associated with impregnation and procreation on the other: moreover, the horse is also a symbol of maternity, usually representing its dangerous aspect.

All of the Horse Sacrifices in ancient Rome, Egypt, and India had the earmarks of a fertility rite. Even their modern approximations have the same archetypal meaning. Commenting on Picasso's "Minotauromacry," a contemporary symbolic representation of the primitive horse-sacrifice, C. G. Jung writes:

17Ibid.
18Ibid., pp. 68-69; note 2.
19Ibid., p. 70.
When the horse is sacrificed then the world is sacrificed and destroyed, as it were....We previously saw that the 'mother libido' must be sacrificed in order to produce the world; here the world is destroyed by the repeated sacrifice of the same libido, which once belonged to the mother. The horse can, therefore, be substituted as a symbol for this libido because...it had manifold connections with the mother. The sacrifice of the horse can only produce another state of introversion, which is similar to that before the creation of the world.20

Primitive thought is associative. Its truth is founded on correspondences between different orders of reality rather than on discursive reasoning or scientific verification. Ideas and images hover in an emotional context around a symbolic center in a system which closely resembles an electronic field. Just as waves and particles interchange, merge with one another, and regroup into new units, so, too, in the savage scheme an event or a "thought" participates in many larger structures, which include not only the perceiver himself but also other elements which interact to produce a complex, dynamic whole. Whereas in civilized societies a clear-cut differentiation between the "I" and the "not-I" is a desideratum, in tribal cultures the "same symbol may indicate or evoke a whole series of realities, which only profane experience would see as separate and autonomous."21


21Eliade, p. 189.
This distinction is particularly fateful for those who seek to explain the actions of preliterate peoples in terms of cause and effect relationships. In fact, a failure to fully comprehend the primitive mode of thought has led many critics to argue vehemently that the catastrophe in *Riders to the Sea* is improperly motivated, when in reality Synge's placing the responsibility for Bartley's death jointly on the sea, the grey pony, and Maurya accurately approximates the Aran psychic situation.

III.

From the standpoint of primitive psychology, Maurya's role in Bartley's death is particularly illuminating in that it incorporates three important aspects of savage culture: protective rites, omens, and the representation of qualitative time. In primitive societies death is seldom attributed to natural causes. Generally speaking, a man dies "because he has been 'doomed' by a sorcerer" who is the instrument of some sinister power.22 In Ireland in Synge's day the peasant folk professed to be Christians; yet they believed that all young persons who died were "taken" after they had "fallen prematurely into the power of the supernatural forces."23 To protect the young from these mysterious, malevolent forces

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various "protective formulae" were devised by the local shamans. If you wish to escape the wrath of the fairies, Old Pat Dirane advised Synge, "take a sharp needle and stick it under the collar of your coat, and not one of them will be able to have power over you." 24 If a "fairy ship" approaches, make the sign of the cross. And if one of these supernatural beings appears before you, recite the prayers of the dead, "for none of those creatures can stand before you and you saying the De Profundis." 25 Should a human being neglect to perform a proper rite or omit a "precaution," he might well expect "a visitation of ill-luck and disaster." 26

We can understand, then, why Maurya's daughter reproaches her mother for refusing to give Bartley a parting blessing: "Isn't it sorrow enough is on every one in this house without you sending him out with an unlucky word behind him, and a hard word in his ear?" 27 A few minutes later, Cathleen instructs her mother to go down to the spring well and give Bartley a bit of bread when he passes by. She will see him then and "the dark word will be broken." 28 Maurya departs, only to return despondent and grief-stricken. Bombarded by her daughters' questions and too weary to submit

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24 Works, II, 80.
26 Arendsberg, p. 192.
27 Works, III, 11.
to any further interrogation, Maurya finally discloses that she has seen Michael. Cathleen objects: Michael's body was discovered in the far north that very morning. But Maurya will not listen:

I'm after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare, and I tried to say "God speed you," but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly, and "the blessing of God on you," says he, and I could say nothing. I looked up then, and I crying, at the gray pony, and there was Michael upon it—with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet. 29

As Maurya finishes her woeful tale, Cathleen begins to keen, "It's destroyed we are from this day. It's destroyed, surely." 30

It is evident from their reactions to Maurya's disclosures that Nora and Cathleen view Michael's spectre as an unfavorable omen. With them there is no doubt of the truth of Maurya's vision. Not willing, or perhaps sophisticated enough, to differentiate between an action taking place in a revelation and one that has occurred in reality—a matter to which we shall return later—the two girls look upon the evil portent as simultaneously predicting and bringing about Bartley's death. To put it another way, the Aran community regards visionary experience as absolutely real. This attitude may strike civilized men as irrational. But to the folk mind

29 Works, III, 19.

30 Works, III, ibid.
which makes no distinction between what is actually present to the senses and what is intuited all forms of experience are interrelated. An omen, therefore, is both an active physical agent and a passive psychic expression. To quote Levy-Bruhl:

As the manifestations of mystic and occult powers, which alone are causes, they (omens) play an essential part in the production of that which they announce. It is not their only function to reveal what will happen; what they reveal would not take place without them. The future which the omens predict being felt as direct and real, they are felt to determine it at the time when they manifest it.31

The custom of noting omens and regulating behavior by them was prevalent among the Celtic fisherfolk. On this point we have the evidence of several Gaelic scholars. According to Peter Anson, death omens were noted by most fishing communities throughout northern Europe. Not infrequently, death was forecast by "the apparition of a still living or dead person." Among the Bretons, for example, "there was a widespread superstition that if a man died at sea his mother or wife would be told of it in some paranormal manner."32 T. R. Henn confirms Anson's testimony. Alluding specifically to the Aran Islanders, he writes:

31 Levy-Bruhl, p. 125.
Since the sea takes them, the islanders do not learn to swim, for that would only prolong suffering. And there are strange stories connected with the ritual of drowning: of a man’s hands being smashed with a stretcher as he clings to the gunwale, for you must not take back what the sea has claimed; how, if your cap blows off, you must not look at it, but ask another whether it is floating crown or brim uppermost, and if the crown is on top, you must leave it, for the sea may think you are beneath it, and take it as a simulacrum of you. All are aware of an immanence of the supernatural, of omens, far older than Christianity.\(^3\)

Finally, we have the corroboration of J. M. Synge himself. On his third trip to Aran Synge met a young boy who recounted the events immediately preceding the drowning of a village lad:

> Before we went out on the sea that day his dog came up and sat beside him on the rocks, and began crying. When the horses were coming down to the ship an old woman saw her son, that was drowned a while ago, riding on one of them. She didn’t say what she was after seeing, and this man caught this one, and after that he went out and was drowned.\(^4\)

The Aran Islanders not only feared a dog’s crying, but also a hen’s smashing a household item, for then they knew that someone would be "going away."

\(^{3}\)Henn, pp. 34-35.

\(^{4}\)Works, II, 164.
say, a human being in which sacrament and reality are so closely related that it is impossible to make a distinction between the individual and the archetype.\textsuperscript{35} Maurya not only participates in the ongoing tragedy; in her person she concretizes the tragedy itself. From the very first words of Nora "Where is she?" until the curtain falls on her silent, majestic figure as she passively accepts the cruel destiny which is hers, Maurya's presence fills the stage. To be sure, she initiates and concludes the tragic action. It is Maurya who in a moment of angry frustration sends the fate-ridden Bartley out to sea "with a hard word in his ear." It is Maurya who "sees" the gray pony galloping with Michael upon it. And it is Maurya who conducts the funeral rites for her last surviving son. But though she exists in a particular place and a particular time, she is not an individual; she is prophet, priestess, Mother, Suffering Innocent—"a type of the women's life upon the islands.\textsuperscript{36} More than a lamenting Hecuba or a woeful Cassandra, Maurya is the symbol of that primitive mode of existence which inspired Synge to visit the far-flung Aran Islands.

By her own physical and psychological situation Maurya is deprived of that violent release of tension which accompanies male frustration. Weakness, fragility, and emotion


\textsuperscript{36}Works, II, 136.
dispose her to anxiety and passivity. When Bartley seeks to register his protest with the sea, he does so with ropes and horses and curaghs; and if he is ultimately "destroyed" by the demon floods, he has the consolation that he is meeting his antagonist on only slightly unequal grounds.

The Aran sailor, writes Synge in his voluminous notebook, is a skilled fisherman, and can manage a curagh with extraordinary nerve and dexterity....The danger of his life on the sea gives him the alertness of the primitive hunter, and the long nights he spends fishing in his curagh bring him some of the emotions that are thought peculiar to men who have lived with the arts.37

Thomas A. Mason, a distinguished member of the Royal Irish Academy, expresses the same sentiment:

The men do not fear the sea, but they respect it and will not take unnecessary risks. They know its power and their own capabilities; their whole life is spent in a constant struggle to win a living from angry seas and bare rocks.38

The masculine urge to dominate spurs Bartley on. He feels lost when he is ashore, for subconsciously he knows that sailors attain their existential meaning only in the context of storms and fog. In a sense, his sea-voyage is an act of worship; it incorporates him in the life of the community and gives him an experiential knowledge of "the inexpressible vastness and power of the 'other'.'"

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37 Works, II, 133-134.

Neither Maurya nor her daughters will ever know how it feels to take the initiative in adventure or to be victorious over the forces of the unknown. Maurya may feel that she is in mortal combat with the sea for possession of her son, but she also knows that she can never stand up to this irrational and savage opponent. When the sail-clad body of her son is ritualistically laid on the kitchen table, she admits that her bad luck and aborted prayers are blessings in disguise:

It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking.39

Crushed beneath the weight of a hostile universe, her heart "broken" and her energy depleted, Maurya is reduced to wordless keening. The keen's low pitch, hypnotic rhythms, and muffled tone trigger purgative physical reflexes which divest this sorrowing mother of all consciousness of self.40 As the geyser of emotion kept underground through years of suffering and anxiety breaks through to the surface of consciousness, this simple peasant woman's particular lament

39Works, III, 25.

for her dead child becomes a universal lament for all victims of wind and water:

The grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one...but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island. In this cry of pain the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas. 41

Once "the pain has been resolved in a passion of relief," 42 Maurya is able to reflect on her life of torment: how her husband and father-in-law "were lost in a dark night and not a stick or sign was seen of them when the sun went up"; how her two sons Stephen and Shawn were carried home "on one plank"; how her daughters will bear children to be offered as tribute to the sea. 43 Yet despite a lifetime of suffering Maurya is never tempted to retreat in madness from the stark reality of her tragic situation. Her primitive instincts tell her that a mother's prayers, no matter how earnest they may be, cannot alter the decrees of fate. The most that one born into this world of pain and suffering can hope for is a fine white coffin or a deep grave. "No

41 Works, II, 114.

42 In his Autobiography (Works, II, 14), Synge concludes that music shows that "a cycle of experience is the only definite unity, and when all has been passed through, and every joy and pain has been resolved in one passion of relief, the only rest is the dissolution of the person."

43 Works, III, 21.
man at all can be living forever and we must be satisfied." 44

Those Aran Islanders who endure are confident that eventually every joy and every pain will be transcended. Everything will return to the womb of the sea to become part of that watery chaos which existed before creation: "They're all together this time," Maurya whispers as she anoints Bartley's feet and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn. And may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of every one is left living in the world. 45

The dissolution of Maurya's world is, paradoxically, the resolution of all earthly tensions and conflicts. In identifying her lot with that of nature, Maurya points up the primitive belief that death is but the downward movement in the eternal cycle of repetition and renewal. "In all things," observes Donna Gerstenberger, the opposites which make up the flux of man's uncertain existence are accepted without question by the people of the Islands, and in this, their lives are whole. Days of dense fog which gave to Synge a "strange sense of exile and desolation," may be followed by "the intense insular clearness one sees only in Ireland"; and the sea, which is a source of livelihood for its harvest of fish and of kelp may one day seem to yield itself to the needs of man, the next to become the unappeased destroyer. 46

44 Works, III, 27.
45 Works, III, ibid.
46 Gerstenberger, p. 25.
Much has been made of the static response of Maurya to her tragic fate. It has been argued that "passive suffering" is not the "stuff" of great tragedy,⁴⁷ that "the play would have had a more powerful effect if Maurya had been more active."⁴⁸ Granted that Maurya "does not act," her passivity is in character. Synge had a sympathetic understanding of the primitive mind, and in Maurya he sought to microcosmically reproduce the folk mentality. What marks Maurya particularly as the primitive par excellence is her emotionalism. Faced with the fact of Bartley's death, she makes no attempt to cope rationally with the situation. Instead she "lets herself go" in wild lamentation, and in typical primitive fashion seeks to apprehend and transform the world through her emotions. Finally, when all paths for action are closed to her, she tries to live "as though the relationship of things to their potentialities are not ruled by deterministic processes but by magic."⁴⁹

For those modern philosophers who stake everything on reason, Maurya's inability to formulate basic questions with anything like rational awareness represents an inferior state

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⁴⁸ Fred Millet, Reading Drama (New York, 1950), p. 103.
of consciousness. The same line of reasoning underlies the argument of those critics who maintain that "human conflict and active engagement of the characters in their fate" are completely absent from Riders to the Sea. To these charges we can only reply ad nauseam that there is more than one way to experience the world, to express, control and give meaning to one's external situation. An awareness of one's inner tensions and inner activities may lead to a greater appreciation of man's potentialities, but it does not change the fact of death. In the end, philosophy and history offer no escape from the "suffering of existence." The only comfort for peasant and metaphysician alike is the realization that man's physical being belongs to a wider organic unity apart from which the problems of birth, suffering and death are unintelligible.

V.

The notion of death as an organic phenomenon is closely bound up with primitive man's understanding of time. In cyclically ordered cultures, such as Aran, where existence is thought to be governed by the universal law of recurrence,

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50 Gerstenberger, p. 52.

51 See Jaspers, p. 116, note 3.

"the significance of individual death is limited and veiled." The circular course of time manifested in the cycle of the seasons, the revolution of the sun, and the phases of the moon seems to suggest to the folk mind that there is no "final" time, no separation between yesterday, today, and tomorrow. There is only "primordial" time, the time of the beginning which exists "today as in the past and in the most distant future." Human life, no less than animal and vegetable life, is lived in an "eternal now."

Writes Helmuth Plessner:

Where sun and moon are taken as measures of time, 'thought rises to the idea of the temporal order as a universal order of destiny, dominating all being and change,' to a truly cosmic power that binds all things, men, demons, and gods.

In myth and folklore the cyclic conception of time is objectified in the circle, a "symbol of recurrence, rebirth and eternal life." Modern Irish literature exhibits the same tendency. According to William York Tindall, the circle is one of Joyce's most important symbols. Dependent upon Vico's conception of the circle as the most perfect equivalent for the essential relationship between time and destiny, Joyce's "Wheel of Fortune" in Finnegans Wake embodies the

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54 Ibid., p. 337.
55 Plessner, p. 239.
56 Ibid., p. 247.
theme of "temporal recurrence." Equally attracted to vertical and horizontal correspondences, Yeats used the pattern of overlapping gyres in conjunction with the "Great Wheel" to represent the unending alternation of life and death. Synge, too, "was prone to cyclical theories," and in Riders to the Sea the thematic unity of the play revolves around the "myth of eternal return"; that is to say, the relationship of time to death is presented through the juxtaposition of a number of "encircling" images, each of which expresses a unique, but complementary, aspect of the central theme.

Cathleen is seated at a spinning wheel when the play opens. The presence of this "spinning woman" and the subsequent discussion of "dropped stitches," Professor Gerstenberger asserts, suggest immediately that "the pattern of fate is being spun and woven as inexorably in Riders to the Sea as in any classical tragedy." Not only in Greek


59 Gerstenberger, p. 46; Durbach makes the same point. He writes:

The image of the spinning women helps to illuminate that other dimension of the drama in which the wheel and the weaving form part of an inexorable circle of fate slowly establishing itself as a ritualistic pattern in the formal structure of the play....As women, they (Cathleen, Nora, and Maurya) embody, like the
mythology, but in the mythologies of other nations the "sense of destiny" has been linked with the "rhythm of life and death." In Nordic lore, for example, the Norns spin, knit, and weave the threads of destiny. Like the Greek Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, they are "the active executives of the over-riding laws which govern all things." Because they "rise out of the ground with the spring of living water," the Norns are universally looked upon as agents of both life and death.60

Maurya herself is the archetype of the Spinning Woman. To "protect" her son from impending doom, she attempts to weave a web of loyalties around him. "What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave?" Maurya tearfully asks Bartley as he prepares to depart for Connemara.61 But Bartley is obstinate. In the interest of life and growth he foregoes his loyalty and devotion to his natural mother in order to reenter the primordial womb of the sea. In the end both son and mother suffer the same fate: both are robbed, bereaved, and experience deadly pain.

Whereas Maurya's net is invisible, and its encircling action psychological, the rope and net which Bartley takes

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sea, the principle of fate, the rhythm of destiny, the cycle of birth and inevitable death...(p. 368).

60 Herzog, pp. 97-98.

61 Works, III, 11.
from the boards are menacingly real. Partially eaten by the ominous pig with black feet, the rope is at first a banal fisherman's tool, but by the end of the play it has been transformed into a "noose of death."62 Death literally has Bartley "on the rope,"63 as he futilely tries to restrain the red mare with this makeshift halter. Equally important, the mariner's net suggests the collective aspect of Bartley's death. Like the fish in the Aran Islanders' nets, Bartley and his companions will eventually lay side by side, indistinguishable from one another, in the bosom of the earth. Taken together, then, rope and net repeat the idea that "the dead man is snatched away into darkness and obscurity" to become a victim of time and destiny.64

Finally, even the horse is an emblem of the notion of circularity. Significantly enough, in the October rites of ancient Rome, the horse-sacrifice occurred immediately after the chariot race. A ritualistic gesture, the irresistible circling of the horses symbolizes both the circular course of the year and the all

62 Herzog points out (p. 77) that the Old Testament frequently alludes to the entangling "noose of death."

63 A German expression; noted in ibid.

64 Ibid., p. 78; Durbach suggests that the nets evoke an "atmosphere of entrapment." Then he adds:
Man, consigned to live off the sea, is by virtue of this fact destined to die by it. That which sustains life is, at the same time, a death dealer. And the arbitrary rhythm of man's precarious existence in this world is the rhythm of the sea (p. 367).
conquering power of fate.\textsuperscript{65}

Here, as in \textit{Riders to the Sea}, the horses represent "irresistible instinct and fertility on the one hand, and irresistible destiny and death on the other."\textsuperscript{66}

VI.

Unlike the naive twentieth-century materialists who either refuse to deal with the problem of suffering or delude themselves into thinking that one day science will eliminate all physical pain, the primitive Aran Islanders regard suffering as "normal." Deprivation and hardship, whether imputed to the Christian God, to emissaries from the pagan spirit world, or to the negligence and curses of a stubborn fisherwife, are tolerated in the same way that time and hostile nature are tolerated. Knowing the inevitable catastrophes that befall their clan, the Aran seafolk would rather endure than struggle against their oppressors.

The normality of suffering was as existential an experience for Synge as it was for his Aran fisherfolk. An asthmatic child, Synge was unable to attend a regular school or to engage in any strenuous physical exercise.\textsuperscript{67} Later, as an adult, he was periodically confined to hospitals and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[65]\textit{Ibid.}, p. 69.
\item[66]\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 69-70.
\item[67]Greene and Stephens, pp. 5-7.
\end{footnotes}
nursing homes for the treatment of cancerous tumors, but even when the pain was excruciating and his weakness extreme, he continued to write. Only a week before his death his brother brought home the unfinished manuscript of Deirdre of the Sorrows which Synge had taken to the hospital. In it Synge admonished his fellowmen to "put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn out and muddy," for "we've a short space only to be triumphant and brave."70

There are as many responses to suffering as there are levels and capacities of the human soul. Life only demands that man react as the Aran seafarers did--passively and with "stoic resignation." Yet a few men are able to use their particular suffering to explore the depths and shades of suffering itself. In time they discover that pain is universal, that beneath the patina of civilization all men are intrinsically the same:

Every man who lives, regardless of his cultural and ethnic differences, faces the identical human problem of loving, of suffering, of dying. In the isolation of pain, the sufferer faces these realities and gradually realizes that pain...brings clarity to intuitions, unclouds perceptions, and opens up the whole area of intuitive knowledge known as 'prephilosophy' that can replace cultural distortions with a

68 Ibid., pp. 117-118.
69 Ibid., p. 300.
70 Works, IV, 209.
realities which such distortions can no longer stand.\textsuperscript{71}

These "creative sufferers" use the psychic energy activated by their physical pain for constructive purposes. Because they are "open" to the experience of suffering, their pain may sometimes transport them to imaginary countries where new facets of life are revealed.

Even the "appalling agony" of the operating table may yield unexpected "visions" and "raptures." While under ether for the surgical removal of an enlarged gland, Synge momentarily teetered between life and death. In this twilight state, he later wrote,

I seemed to traverse whole epochs of desolation and bliss. All secrets were open before men, and simple as the universe to its God. Now and then something recalled my physical life, and I smiled at what seemed a moment of sickly infancy. At other times I felt I might return to earth, and laughed aloud to think what a god I should be among men. For there could be no more terror in my life. I was a light, a joy.\textsuperscript{72}

This brief glimpse into the "surreal" world beyond the senses lasted only a few seconds, but if left an indelible mark on all of Synge's work.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{71}Alan Paton and others, \textit{Creative Suffering} (Philadelphia, 1970), p. 32.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{72}Works, II, 42.}
CHAPTER III

THE BARDIC TRADITION

Among the various commentators on the Abbey Theatre Movement there is general agreement that The Well of the Saints occupies a unique place in the Synge canon. Alan Price, for example, upholding the Yeatsian thesis that all of Synge's dramatic achievements are thematically concerned with the "tension between dream and actuality," claims that the 1905 play is "perhaps Synge's most profound and sombre work."¹ Bourgeois concurs with Price. As he understands it, the play "beautifully expresses...the oft-noted tendency in the Celtic temperament to take refuge in a world of dreams away from the foulness of an actuality transfigured, fortunately, by imaginative illusions."² At the other extreme, Donna Gerstenberger argues that Synge "compromised" both his aesthetic principles and philosophical position in committing himself to this Ibsenesque "life-lie" situation. To choose blindness over sight a la Martin and Mary Doul, Dr. Gerstenberger insists, is to prefer illusion to truth.

and to contradict "what Synge himself had learned about reality."³

Knowing full well that Synge detested accommodations of all kinds and that he had personally suffered for refusing to adhere to a sterile traditionalism, we are swiftly brought to the conclusion that current approaches to The Well of the Saints have not sufficiently taken into account Synge's particular Weltanschauung: not only are the details of the play in tune with his primitivist outlook, but more importantly, as Corkery has so eloquently indicated, the real "flavour" of the play originates from "the folklore atmosphere in it, an untender atmosphere, in which the sentimental cannot breathe."⁴ Further, we are of the opinion that while the play apparently ends with a preference for fictionalizing, it is not meant to be read as a blanket condemnation of the rational life. It is our contention that the view of life outlined in The Well of the Saints is neither wholly rational nor anti-rational. It is, more properly speaking, irrational.

I.

In a delightful post-World War II essay on Synge's lyricism poet-critic Ronald Peacock attends to what he calls the "exotic appeal" of Synge's dramas. No doubt, Peacock


writes, "Synge himself experienced the language and life he found in the Aran Islands as something rare and strange, beautiful because it was unsophisticated, remote, elemental."\(^5\) Once we realize that Synge's "consciousness was nineteenth-century and romantic,"\(^6\) that "he looked backward, not forward," and that he threw "a halo around an everyday of... sordid, almost brutish motive,"\(^7\) Peacock declares, we can begin to appreciate his particular fondness for Wordsworth and the *Sturm und Drang* poets. Like the Transcendentalists, Synge fled from civilization, and like them, his flight heightens itself into a symbol of his nostalgia for the primitive—in manners, nature, in speech and scene and music, in the whole setting of life and culture.\(^8\)

Synge is "the last progeny of Rousseau and Herder," the last of that race of minstrels who deployed their envenomed pens against "rationalism and its concomitants: system, rule, form, classification—in short against any expressions...resulting from the exercise of ratio."\(^9\)

The case for arationalism as the propelling force

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\(^6\) Ibid., p. 97.

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 89.

\(^8\) Ibid.

behind much Edwardian literature has received support from many quarters. In his highly publicized study of the origins of modern Existentialism, William Barrett contends that the whole of contemporary thought from Romanticism to Phenomenology is at bottom an attempt to escape from Swift's Laputa. Having summarily disposed of Romanticism as "the protest of feeling against reason," and dubbed Wordsworth the cultural embodiment of man's inherent drive toward "fullness and naturalness of Being," Barrett affixes the label "primitivist" to everyone from Goethe to Rimbaud—primitivism signifying for him a desperate struggle to free oneself from the "meddling intellect" and that "whore reason."  

Barrett's stand is very similar to that taken by James Baird in Ismael, and might have been derived from it. The bulk of nineteenth-century literature, Baird maintains, is "atavistic." Spiritually weakened by the apparent collapse of the Judao-Christian tradition, in need of an interim system of political and ethical values, poets and painters sought out "prototypic" cultures in which life-symbols could be existentially encountered. But because of the severe psychological limitations of these newly-acquired lifestyles, many experienced deep personality "splits" in laboring to reconcile the Dionysian elements of Paganism with

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the Apollonian factors of Western Civilization. Although the struggle between "the world of the senses" and "the world of the selective logician" continued well into the twentieth century, notably in the Imagistic desire to enter "our minds perceptually, rather than dogmatically," it reached its climax in the nomadism of the 1890's. If none of the artists who journeyed to Africa or Samoa found the "elixir of life," a substantial number came to realize that the odyssey was its own reward. 11

About mid-century throughout Europe the arational viewpoint asserted itself. In part a reaction to historicism and the whole utilitarian value system to which progressivism had led, in part a response to Darwinian evolutionism, in more than one country arationalism became synonymous with a "predisposition to folkery." According to folklorist Margaret Dean-Smith, the collection and dissemination of folk ballads was widespread during the 1850's and 1860's. Hundreds of societies devoted to the publication of "historical remains" and "popular literature" were established, and movements to study first hand the economic, social, and religious organization of extant tribes gained momentum both on the Continent and in the British Isles. By 1870 the "philosophy of the folk" had become so fashionable in Britain that a new word "folk-song" was introduced into the language:

"folk-song" specifically applied to that type of music which directly expressed the sentiments of the heart and the natural emotions. At the same time, native dances were incorporated into as many of the performing arts as possible. D'Arcy Ferris resurrected the Morris Dance at Stratford-on-Avon in order to show that Shakespeare was a true "Bard."

In his plays, Ferris said, Shakespeare stressed the salutary effect of "natural" activity. 12

The term "folkery" was not always appended to those social and artistic movements which adopted its major premises, and in Eire the primitive outlook was subsumed under the general designation Pan-Celticism:

This 'celtic revival' of the last decade of the century was no new phenomenon in literature. It was essentially a re-naming and re-ordering of a familiar trait, the 'folk spirit,' marked by the heightened passions and superstitions common to all literature rising from the people, and given new life by the recent scientific studies of folklore and myth culminating in Sir James Frazer's The Golden Bough in 1890. 13

What was unique about the Irish brand of Pan-Celticism was its "sense of place" as compared with the nebulous and semi-allegorical atmosphere of the Welsh and Breton varieties, and its commitment to relevant experience. Where Renan had lost

12 Margaret Dean-Smith, "The Predisposition to Folkery," Folklore, 79 (1968), 161-175.

himself in speculation concerning "pure race" and the "will" of a people to be united,¹⁴ where Taine had rejected the findings of linguistics for a "zoology" of the Gaulic mind,¹⁵ where Arnold had focused on vague and general qualities of the Celtic personality,¹⁶ the Abbey Theatre membership used heroic ideals for the practical purpose of liberating Ireland. While Synge and Lady Gregory were sympathetic to the Pan-Celtic cause and ardent supporters of Celtic research, they were too sensible to fall victims to the "rising Celtomania" sweeping France at the turn of the century. The Gauls were not "the most ancient people on earth," nor was the Celtic tongue "the original speech that the animals spoke to Adam in the Garden of Eden."¹⁷ Under the guise of Michael Robartes Yeats might aver that the true Celt is "airy," "melancholic," and "Titanic," but even Robartes would smile at those who alleged that Shakespeare's plays are "drenched and intoxicated with the fairy-dew of that natural magic


which is our (Celtic) theme.  

Side by side with this passionate interest in folklore, and sometimes contaminating it, there arose among the intelligentsia of Dublin an almost fanatical curiosity about the "world beyond the veil" as revealed in certain types of psychic experiences. Yeats' joining Madame Blavatsky's spiritualistic circle in 1887 was symptomatic of an international movement to counterbalance "material" science with "arational" or "Christian Science." Science, the leading exponent of occultism in Paris had declared, is dependent upon facts; it is a product of the head and not the whole man. If we must have faith, our faith should not be codified or anchored in traditional doctrine. It should represent a protest "against the monstrous paradox of progress," and help us to get in touch with the "dazzling obscurity."  

Self-contradictory phrases such as the above appealed to Yeats, who at that moment was personally experiencing the flux and divisiveness which this conjunctio betokened. For the first time the young Celt could artistically justify his "mystical" notion of poetry. With new fervor he immersed himself in the "sacred texts" of Theosophy, consciously noting on every page all possible correspondences between the

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natural and supernatural worlds. Yeats' enthusiasm for the new hermetic gospel was unbounded, and within a short space he had persuaded Maud Gonne and Synge to acquaint themselves with the esoteric secrets of alchemy.20

Synge, by nature unfitted for communication with the spirit world, was inducted into Maud Gonne's newly-formed L'Association Irlandaise in 1897. For several months he attended gatherings of the clan, "saw manifestations," and toyed with the idea of becoming a full-fledged Theosophite. But he was not ready to go as far as his zealous compatriots, and by May of 1897 his ardor for spiritualism had definitely cooled.21 "In me," Synge wrote

science was (not inconsonant) with imagination, and through this (intercourse) the forces which rid me eventually of theological mysticism reinforced my innate feeling for the profound mysteries of life.22

If we survey the evidence assembled so far, we can hardly escape several conclusions which signal the course which The Well of the Saints will take. In the first place, we should not interpret Synge's interest in primitive values


as a protest against science and reason per se. Unlike the other heroes of the Irish pantheon, especially AE and Yeats, Synge was not intent upon striking out in new directions which would clearly and irrevocably establish his distance from the mainstream of contemporary thought. For him the scientific revolution was a fact, an uncomfortable fact to be sure, but nevertheless a reality which had to be reckoned with. It presented a new challenge to the creative man:

In reading French literature one is tempted to wonder what (path) nature literature is likely to take in the distant years when the science of men like Huxley and Haeckel...will have taken a place definitely in the intelligence of writers and readers....It makes one ask...what in the new literature I have dreamed of will be the conception of love for it will depend a good deal on the fortunes of humanity....what form in this case would the new representatives...of St. Theresa and St. Thomas a Kempis take with an outlook on the world like Haeckel's? In what way will they create for us a romance of reality....

If Synge had any quarrel, it was not with science, the "romance of reality," but with the odious "mechanical" thinking of the gelded middle class. Massmindedness, uniformity, unexamined attitudes and prejudices--these were the "real" enemies of truth and insight. If the primitives inhabiting the backwaters of Ireland were inferior to the commercial community in technical knowledge, they were their

emotional and artistic superiors. In their refinement, grace, and courtesy, the residents of Inishmaan approached more nearly to the finer types of our aristocracies—who are bred artificially to a natural ideal—than to the labourer or citizen, as the wild horse resembles the thoroughbred rather than the hack or cart horse.24

Traditional, noble, imaginative, the untutored rustics of Mayo and Connaught formed a "kind of entente cordiale" with the Protestant Ascendancy against the city and everything connected with industrialization. In no mean sense, Aran was the meeting place between savagery and civilization, for despite their immense cultural differences gentleman and peasant shared a common world-view: both distrusted "pure intellect" and sought to live as much as possible by instinct and perception. Like the bohemian Martin Doul in The Well of the Saints, Synge eschewed abstractions, or perhaps more correctly, employed them to get beyond the world of Mind to that larger reality:

All theorizing is bad for the artist, because it makes him live in the intelligence instead of in the half-conscious faculties by which all real creation is performed....Young and therefore fresh and living truths have a certain diffidence or tenderness that makes it impossible to state them without the accompanying emotional or imaginative life in which they arise.25


25Works, II, 347.
"Real" thought was concrete. It was engendered in the "blood" of man and therefore capable of effecting a metamorphosis in either the individual or the collectivity.

II.

Unlike his respected colleagues at the Abbey Theatre, Synge entertained no mystical or semi-mystical notions about the imaginative life. He begins his Autobiography by stating that only those who can "translate" the music of their lives into some form of creative expression deserve to be called artists, and then goes on to suggest that the one quality which separates the creative person from the rest of mankind is his "innate feeling for the profound mysteries of life." In this early work "life" seems to be equated with the sights and sounds of the natural world, but over the years the concept was expanded to include, first, humanity, and then the cosmological processes until it had grown wide enough to encompass simultaneously the life-styles of Rabelais, Vico, and Anatole France. Throughout his short career as a literary critic, Synge castigated Browning and Hugo for not "getting life" into their verse, and Tennyson for not capturing

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26 Works, II, 1.

27 Works, II, 10.

28 Works, I, xvi. (From a letter accompanying MS of poems sent to Yeats in 1908).
"the inner and essential mood" of things. At one point he intimates that a poacher living on the fringe of society and finding joy in the "heavy scent of hemlock" is more truly a poet than the author of that "artificial" and "worthless" *Idylls of the King.*

If we add to Synge's pejorative comments on Victorian poetry his derogatory remarks about Baudelaire and his progeny, and his almost neurotic insistence that the poet exhibit in his writings manly strength and enthusiasm for living, we may rightly conclude that Synge's philosophy of art was formulated partly in answer to the question what is man and partly in reaction to the views promulgated by the Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolists. The true poet sees human life as a commingling of joy and sorrow, in which comedy and tragedy are the warp and woof of a single fabric, Synge wrote in his notebook; he would no more exclude humor from his narrative than he would the "catastrophes of life," for he realizes that the poles of great art touch each other, if only by the negation of their corresponding position. If a writer wishes to become a significant force in the cultural life of his people, he will not invent preternatural kingdoms from which the harsh realities of human existence

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29*Works*, II, 349.


31*Works*, II, ibid.
are barred, or relate personal experiences which revel in sensation for sensation's sake. Rather than focusing on the poem's originality or uniqueness, the emerging poet should ask himself in what manner does the "matter" of the poem form a mirror-image to the outside world. Is it universal enough to be understood in a cottage on Dingle Bay?\(^{32}\)

There is no place in great art for triviality, for perversity, for vices which signal boredom and pathological anxiety. Art is not therapy, or self-revelation, or even self-affirmation; it is a form of expression "conceived by a soul in harmony with some mood of the earth," and unless the writer is "able to produce a myth more beautiful than nature--holding in itself a spiritual grace beyond and through the earthly--it is better to be silent.\(^{33}\) In Synge's own plays the delicate balance between comedy and tragedy is not always maintained without some sign of tension, and again and again he takes up his pen to review the state of the question. Somehow the answer is always the same:

There are beautiful and interesting plants which are deadly, and others which are kindly. It is absurd to say a flower is not beautiful nor admire its beauty because it is deadly, but it is absurd also to deny its deadliness.\(^{34}\)

Synge's ideal poet is marked, above all, by his symbolic attitude toward the existential Umwelt in which he lives and

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\(^{32}\)Works, II, 351.  
\(^{33}\)Works, II, 35.  
\(^{34}\)Works, II, 349.
affirms his being. All of his work is self-conscious, arising out of his own vision, and out of the "intangible emotions" lurking behind the image of things. Yet there is no attempt on his part to communicate truth or to deal in realities, no desire to "teach or prove anything." By establishing a peaceful co-existence between inwardness and outwardness, by expressing the "whole of life" with all of its many intricacies, by recording the actions of men instead of judging them, he hopes to arrive at that synthesis of "stoicism, asceticism, and ecstasy" which is the hallmark of fine poetry:

What is highest in poetry is always reached where the dreamer is leaning out to reality, or where the man of real life is lifted out of it, and in all the poets the greatest have both these elements, that is, they are supremely engrossed with life, and yet with the wildness of their fancy they are always passing out of what is simple and plain. At his greatest moments the artist is an image-maker, deciphering a pattern in the universe, shaping his own destiny and that of his society. He may like Martin Doul, that perpetual dreamer of young girls with beautiful white skin,

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35 In an early draft of the Preface to The Tinker’s Wedding, cited in Works, IV, 290, Synge wrote: "It is a mistake altogether to say that the dramatist is to teach, his duty is to feed only. Teaching is always presumptuous, the position of the view of some fallible person, but literature is a preparation more or less unique and skilful of the everlasting fruits of the imagination and the body. In literature as in love and war—when the eminently real and personal prevail—there is no division of labour, and the poet must hunt his game in many strange moods before he draws and roasts it."

36 Works, II, 347.
"lean out to reality" and discover in a personal encounter with a shrunken old woman the wonder of mutual admiration and mutual love, or conversely, like Nora’s Tramp wandering through the glen, raise the common life of the ditch to an uncommon height. But regardless of the path he chooses to follow in his quest for meaning, he must have the courage to extricate himself from the collective norms of his community and to participate mystically in his natural surroundings. The "law-maker and the law-breaker are both needful in society." To be a poet is to involve one’s flesh and blood in the search for universal standards and values; to sacrifice, if necessary, one’s psychic equilibrium for transpersonal goals and insights.

III.

Literature, says Yeats, "is one man’s vision of the world, one man’s experience," and it is the business of the poet, chimes in Synge, to transmit that vision by exploring "the inner and essential mood" of those whom the artist designates as his spokesmen. Alan Price is right when he asserts that Martin Doul has "the temperament and imagination of the artist," though the statement needs to be qualified.

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38 W. B. Yeats, Explorations (London, 1962), p. 34.
39 Price, p. 144.
Martin Doul has the temperament and imagination of the primitive artist.

Taking a broad view, Martin Doul is the symbol of that class of itinerant bards who have more of Whitman in them than Wordsworth, who are less romantic and more realistic about life on the open road. Martin could never be described as a Transcendentalist; his passion is for the earth, not Nature, and there is nothing mystical about "walking with a slough of wet on the one side and a slough of wet on the other, and you going a stony path with a north wind blowing behind." The nomadic life is full of uncertainties and peradventures, and unless a man has an ingrained wanderlust and a deep-seated aversion to the routines and conventions of ordinary life, he is not likely to spend his days "running the hills."

Restlessness is only one of the motivating forces behind Martin's strange decision to remain "dark" when the opportunity for sight presents itself. To determine the others, we must view the weather-beaten beggar as he relates to his three main antagonists: Molly Byrne, "that fine-looking girl with fair hair," Timmy the Smith, and the Wandering Friar. In undertaking this task, we should keep two thoughts uppermost in our mind: 1) that Martin's primitivistic conception of the world is Synge's yardstick for measuring the validity

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40 Works, III, 151.
of all other world-views encompassed by the play; and 2) that Martin is the "last gleeman"; that is to say, he manifests those qualities of mind and that sameness of experience which we associate with the great errant-troubadours of the past, with Villon and Vogelweide and Assisi. In this sense, he is an archetypal hero.

Throughout his literary career, Synge subtly paid tribute to the Troubadours of Provence and the Minnesingers on the Rhine. As a young man he studied Charles d'Orleans, Colin Musset, and Ronsard, and while experimenting with peasant dialects, translated Villon, Leopardi, and Petrarch into "Folk Speech." Later, at the home of the von Eikens, he read with interest the works of Walther von der Vogelweide. In October, 1908 he paraphrased several passages from the Coblenz poet which he said epitomized his relationship with Molly Allgood. Indeed, the words might have been spoken by Martin Doul to Molly Byrne:

I never set my two eyes on a head was so fine as your head, but I'd no way to be looking down into your heart. It's for that I was tricked out and out--that was the thanks I got for being so steady

41 In "Yeats, the Popular Ballad and Ballad Singers," English Studies, L (1969), 185-197, Georges-Denis Zimmerman points out that Yeats' "Last Gleeman" was "a poet, a blind man, and a beggarman." Lady Gregory tells us that Raftery, a blind wandering poet was a "pattern-figure" for Yeats and his ilk. The Irish pantheon, she wrote, "learned to connect the legends of rural Ireland with a central body of underground tradition" (A Book of Saints and Wonders, London, 1906, p. 10).

42 Bourgeois, pp. 50-58.
in my love. I tell you, if I could have laid
my hands on the whole set of the stars, the
moon and the sun along with it, by Christ I'd
have given the lot to her; she's bad to her
friends, and gay and playful to those she'd
have a right to hate. I ask you can that be­
havior have a good end come to it? 43

As for "God's Troubadour," Masefield reports that Synge had
long planned to translate Assisi's works into English. Not
until an excellent version of Francis' poetry appeared on
the English literary scene did he abandon the project alto­
gether. 44

Synge was a troubadour by nature. He instinctively
appreciated the life-style of the Provencal poets--their keen
enjoyment of the pleasures of life; their childlike delight
in the colors and sounds of nature; their sensitivity to
beauty; their inordinate hostility toward middle class vir­
tues and institutions which smacked of "public policy." 45
Yet he recognized the limitations of their "soft" primitiv­
ism. For one thing, he missed that impish sense of humor


44 John Masefield, John M. Synge: A Few Personal Recol­
lections with Biographical Notes (Churchtown, Dundrum, 1915),
p. 27. Among the Pan-Celticists Francis had the stature of
a cult-hero: he was regarded as the "natural" man par ex­
cellence, his whole intent being to wake man up to the won­
ders of creation.

45 Background material for this section of the paper was
gleaned from Arnold Fleming, The Troubadours of Provence,
Glasgow, 1952.
which marked Gaelic literature from ancient times.\textsuperscript{46} For another, he found no examples of that unique religious spirit which could accept the miraculous cure of two blind beggars as uncontested fact and then proceed to examine the situation for its comic overtones.\textsuperscript{47} For a third, the Irish climate nullified much of the midional viewpoint. In damp Eire, a vagabond poet was no more in harmony with his environment than with his family or neighbors. The leisurely pace of unhurried days devoted to sipping wine in the warm sunshine belonged to the world of fantasy, and while a man could dream of supping poteen the "handy way" from "a still behind the rocks," in the morning he would discover that he was

the like of the little children do be listening to the stories of an old woman, and do be dreaming after in the dark night that it's grand houses of gold they are, with speckled horses to ride, and do be waking again, in a short while, and they destroyed with the cold, and the thatch dripping, maybe, and the starved ass braying in the yard.\textsuperscript{48}

On "raw, beastly days," when "gray clouds (are) driving on the hill" and people's eyes are "weeping and watering," the beauties of Nature are nothing but figments of the imagination.


\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 9.

\textsuperscript{48} Works, III, 112.
Walther von der Vogelweide was nearer to the mark: in his **Volklieder** historical motifs balanced the more languid themes of Provence; epic elements mingled with lyrical strains; and despair tinged the fiercest affirmations. Proper place was given to the stoical endurance demanded of those who eke out an existence under less-than-ideal climatic conditions. There was space for undercutting picturesque scenery with the recollection of bracing winds and stormy nights, for cursing the day of one's birth, for mourning one's lot in life.⁴⁹ There was even a niche for the ludicrous:

But the great-great-great-great bastards  
Of high queens that Walter knew  
Wear pot-bellies in their breeches,  
And bald heads are potted too.⁵⁰

By Synge's own admission the **Volklieder** approximated that "peculiar colour-quality of the dialect" used in *The Well of the Saints*.⁵¹

So it was in the Minnesinger tradition that the roles of the primitive bard were to be sought: the new troubadour must be critic, satirist, and lover. But he must also be Irish, popular, and national. Hence Synge wove into the

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⁴⁹Fleming, p. 45.

⁵⁰Cited in Greene and Stephens, p. 294.

pattern of his 1905 play Celtic folk-legend and custom.

IV.

Ireland, the noted Celtic historian Arendsberg observed, is "a land of the devout," of "holy wells and pilgrimages and roadside shrines," of "black-frocked priests," and "well-filled churches." Its lore is packed with legends involving magic wells which were once the site of pagan ceremonies and which now--in the wake of Christianity--are associated with tutelary saints. During Victoria's reign various theories were proposed to explain this assimilative process. In 1840 Philip Dixon Hardy published an "account of those various places of pilgrimage and penance which are visited annually by thousands of the Roman Catholic Peasantry." During the Dark Ages, Hardy maintained, the Church, having fruitlessly attempted to put an end to the worship of aquatic divinities, superimposed on local "myths" Christian beliefs and doctrines. Frequently, as in the instance of Sleve-na-Gridel, a famous ancient water cult site, a monastery or church was erected to accommodate the popular need


for periodic purification.  

Three subsequent studies on the structure of early Gaelic society collaborated Hardy's findings—William Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1843), Eugene Curry's *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish* (1873), and John Rhys' *Celtic Folklore* (1901)—and in all three stories of miraculous healings are reported.

One such "wonder-tale" provided the structural framework for *The Well of the Saints*. Witness the conversation between Timmy and the Douls in the opening scene of the play:

TIMMY. Did ever you hear of a place across a bit of the sea, where there is an island, and the grave of the four beautiful saints?

MARY DOUL. I've heard people have walked round from the west and they speaking about that.

TIMMY (impressively). There's a green ferny well, I'm told, behind that place, and if you put a drop of the water out of it, on the eyes of a blind man, you'll make him see as well as any person is walking the world.

MARTIN DOUL (with excitement). Is that the truth, Timmy? I'm thinking you're telling a lie.

TIMMY (gruffly). That's the truth, Martin Doul, and you may believe it now, for you're after believing a power of things weren't likely at all.  

From the germ of this folk legend sprang a modern "miracle" play: in three tightly compressed acts Synge shows how a  

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55 Works, III, 79.
blind couple have their sight restored by a Wandering Friar, pitifully confront their own physical ugliness and the greater moral ugliness of the community, lose sight again, and when blindness recurs, refuse to be cured a second time.

The Well was not the first work in Irish literature to espouse a return to, and an emulation of, the folk spirit; Synge had an outstanding precedent for his hermit/beggar colloquy in the medieval "Bardic Dialogues" between Saint Patrick and the blind minstrel Oisin. According to legend, Oisin returned to Ireland from Tir na nOg, the fabulous home of the Shee, in order to check Patrick's efforts to convert the heathens to Christianity. For three hundred years blind Oisin had sojourned in the Land of Youth and Happiness and what he saw on his second visit to Eire appalled him: civilization had decayed since the Golden Age of Fionn and Fionna Mac Cumhaill; a once joyful race of peasants who had found perfect satisfaction in harvesting and singing and making love were now a pack of malcontents afraid to express their inner feelings lest they fall into mortal sin; fear rode rampant throughout the countryside. Under Patrick's aegis Ireland had "gone to Hell." All the while Patrick proselytized, Oisin exhorted his people to remember their ancient lineage, the glorious legacy of Deirdre and Naisi, of Aegnus and Edaine.

Several times the highly respected opponents met to defend their respective viewpoints, and with each confrontation
the participants grew more hostile. Arguing in favor of formalized religion and against relative morality, Patrick accused Oisin of irresponsibility and immorality. Oisin retorted that since moral laws are based on natural laws, one should focus on the world of the senses, not shun it. The clash went beyond the antagonists' particular Weltanschauungen to encompass the larger issues of imagination and the heroic life. Conscious of his rank and position, Patrick acted like a true Prince of the Church, displayed an aristocratic mien, and was careful not to expose his choleric disposition. Full of that scorn, impatience, and irreverent humor which Synge imputed to the folk temperament, the blind bard also acted in character, betraying his plebeian roots and his pagan orientation. The "dialogues" end in an impasse, with both men discrediting the other's way of life, though Oisin, like Martin Doul, wins the audience's sympathy.56

The Ossianic tradition dates from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but the only large body of Ossianic dialogues probably was written in the sixteenth century in reaction to the tyranny of an over-zealous Irish clergy. What emerges from the Renaissance colloquies is a satiric portrait of the Roman Catholic priest not unrelated to the anti-clericalism which pervades the folk ballads of twelfth

century Eire. Interest in Celtic lore again was awakened in 1762 and 1763 with James Macpherson's "translations" of two heroic epics supposedly composed by Oisin in the third or fourth century. We know that the Abbey playwrights were acquainted with Macpherson's Fingal and Temora and with the whole Ossianic tradition as well, for in 1899 the "Great Founder"--as O'Casey had dubbed Yeats--told his version of the wanderings of Oisin in a long narrative poem. In Yeats' rendition nature imagery and the oral tradition become "memorable symbols" for Ireland's legendary past:

The lover in the Irish folk song bids his beloved come with him into the woods, and see the salmon leap in the rivers, and hear the cuckoo sing, because death will never find them in the heart of the woods. Oisin, new come from his three hundred years of faeryland, and of the love that is in faeryland, bids St. Patrick cease his prayers a while and listen to the blackbird....Surely if one goes far enough into the woods, one will find all that one is seeking.

We further know that Lady Gregory jotted down variations on the Ossianic motif during her study-tours of Western Ireland, and that at least one Celtic scholar, David Krause by name, believes Oisin was the "patron-hero" of both Synge and O'Casey. Be that as it may, while Synge was staying in West

57 Ibid., pp. 270-273.
59 Cited in Krause, p. 281.
Kerry, an old man showed him a neck of sand where Oisin was summoned to Tir na nOg. 60

We need not belabour the ramifications of the plot of The Well. Its obvious references to the necessity for illusion and the power of self-deception have been insightfully treated by Gerstenberger, Price, Henn, and Liljigren. 61 But we might point out that the "spells" cast by Molly, Timmy, and the Saint have their origin in Celtic folklore. Lord save me from the "spells of women and smiths and wizards," an eighth century anthem implores, from those who are agents of the forces of darkness. 62

V.

Of the several bardic roles played by Martin Doul none expressed his peculiar disposition quite so well as the persona of poet-lover. Like the authentic troubadours of old, Martin carried within his soul an image of woman fashioned from his own romantic notions of feminine beauty. Hugger of

60 Works, II, 271.


62 In remarks addressed to Meyerfeld Synge notes that the phrase "the words of women and smiths" is "almost a quotation from an old hymn of Saint Patrick." For the complete text of the song, see Works, III, 90.
dreams, natural philosopher, artist of life, our dark minstrel endowed every "sweet voice" with goodness, innocence, and charm. In this "blinded" condition he first imagines his fifty year old spouse to be a beautiful damsel with flawless white skin, a soft, round figure, and golden tresses. Afterwards, when his eyes are unsealed and his poetic image of Mary Doul is shattered, in conventional bardic style he transfers his affections to a village colleen named Molly Byrne. Martin woos Molly like an incipient Don Juan, pleading with her to leave her fiance and to go off with him "to the lands of Iveragh and the Reeks of Cork, where you won't set down the width of your two feet and not be crushing fine flowers, and making smells in the air." We'd have a "fine life passing abroad through them towns of the south," he assures her, "telling stories, maybe, or singing songs at the fairs."

Molly, the typical arrogant heroine from the troubadour's bag, mocks and berates her aspiring lover for his awkwardness and "queer talk." Did the "old, wicked, coaxing fool" think his "power of words" could compensate for "a house with four rooms in it above on the hills?" "Them that lose their sight lose their senses along with it," Molly declares. Crestfallen and disappointed, Martin finds

\[63^{\text{Works, III, 117.}}\]
\[64^{\text{Works, III, 115.}}\]
himself once more at the crossroads, his sight dimming, his dream of beauty gone forever. He is listlessly sitting among the rushes bemoaning his miserable state in life when Mary gropes onto the stage. As might be expected, the two quarrel bitterly. Gradually, however, out of the ashes of blind fury, a new relationship is born. Not only do they exhibit real tenderness and sympathy for each other's shortcomings, but now for the first time they experience the joy of mutual acceptance. Mary teases Martin about his "slouching feet" and "two knees is black with knocking one on the other." And Martin counters with apparent delight, "There's talking for a cute woman. There's talking, surely." Here the tone of the conversation shifts. With all the grace of a nineteenth century pas de deux husband and wife approach each other and begin to fabricate a new myth:

MARTIN DOUL. If it's not lies you're telling you have me think you're not a wrinkled poor woman is looking like three scores, or two scores and a half!

MARY DOUL. I would not Martin. (She leans forward earnestly). For when I seen myself in them pools, I seen my hair would be gray or white, maybe, in a short while, and I seen with it that I'd a face would be a great wonder when it'll have soft white hair falling around it, the way when I'm an old woman there won't be the like of me in the seven counties of the east...

MARTIN DOUL (bursting with excitement). I've this to say, Mary Doul. I'll be letting my beard grow in a short while, a beautiful, long, white, silken, streamy beard, you wouldn't see the like in the eastern world.
MARY DOUL (laughing cheerfully). Well, we're a great pair, surely, and it's great times we'll have yet, maybe, and great talking before we die.65

The Douls may be blind, Synge intimates, but unlike the majority of mankind they have confronted their shadow-sides and reached a stage of enlightenment known to few. The hand of Fate had guided them to perpetual darkness. But a second hand gave them the opportunity to reverse that decision. Rather than submit to their destiny, they deliberately determined its course. As for Molly, that "well-reared, civil girl" (her own description by the way), she married Timmy the Smith, and in place of the customary epithalamion our vagabond poet pronounced his famous malediction:

...may God blight them this day, and my own soul the same hour with them, the way I'll see them after, Molly Byrne and Timmy the Smith, the two of them on a high bed, and they screeching in hell....It'll be a grand thing that time to look on the two of them, and they twisting and roaring out, and twisting and roaring again, one day and the next day, and each day always and ever. It's not blind I'll be that time, and it won't be hell to me, I'm thinking, but the like of heaven itself; and it's fine care I'll be taking the Lord Almighty doesn't know.66

The curse, Synge later remarked, is straight out of the Celtic book of superstitions. The hero of The Well of the Saints, Synge wrote to his German producer, "wishes to deceive God, his theology--folk-theology--is always vague

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66 Works, III, 123.
and he fears that even in Hell God might plague him in some new way if he knew what an unholy joy Martin had found for himself. 67

Synge's fireside chats with the Aran fisherfolk made him realize how interlinked were their primitive superstitions and Christian beliefs. He was touched by their naive "Catholic theory of fairies," by their sincere efforts to account for all supernatural phenomena naturally. Whenever a new dogma or a new conception of law was not understood, miracles abounded. On Aran alone

miracles enough happen every year to equip a divine emissary. Rye is turned into oats, storms are raised to keep evictors from the shore, cows that are isolated on lonely rocks bring forth calves, and other things of the same kind are common. 68

If an irrational incident occurred, the half-civilized islanders felt it should be explained irrationally. Those who searched for "causes" were a "strange lot." God did not trouble himself about "causes" and "effects," the peasants reasoned, so why should man. Martin's restored sight was "a rare, unexpected event," to be sure, but only "a little rarer and a little more wonderful than the thunderstorms or the rainbow." 69

68 Works, II, 128.
69 Works, II, 129.
VI.

Just how far removed from the root facts of life Synge's contemporaries were can be recognized if we bear in mind with what intensity the playwright's artistic double rebelled against the village blacksmith's bourgeois existence. For a few weeks following his miraculous cure, Martin was apprenticed to Timmy the Smith. While in Timmy's employ, Doul had a chance to observe and experience indirectly the insipid life of the average working class man, his petty ideals and philistine crassness. An ill-natured, grasping curmudgeon whose sight was weak from endless days at the forge, Timmy put his faith in the "power of things." Not only did he look upon those uninterested in material goods or getting ahead in the world as public enemies bent in some subversive way on destroying the nation's underlying social and economic structure, but also he viewed a life without competition or enterprise as unnatural. To talk of "nothing" and think of "nothing" save one's rapport with Nature was downright pathological. However appreciative of beauty or flowers or soft breezes a man might be, if he did not develop a subsistence pattern based on "useful" service to the community, he was a parasite. No one had the right to expect society to give him "a hand's turn or a hap'orth of meal" or to do "the little things you need to keep you at
all living in the world.\textsuperscript{70} Martin assessed the situation differently. He saw Timmy at his forge "sitting there by himself, sneezing and sweating, and...beating pot-hooks till the judgment day." He saw him avariciously pluck his ducks in winter and let them run "round in their skins in the great rains and the cold." He saw him reduce Molly to a function. That his days were spent in singing and dreaming and romancing Martin was willing to own. He did not even mind being tagged a "lazy, basking fool." And as for his "wilful blindness," who was to say that the artificer is superior to the beggar. Why should everyone toil? Why should everyone accept the world's practical scale of values:

For if it's a right some of you have to be working and sweating the like of Timmy the Smith, and a right some of you have to be fasting and praying and talking holy talk...I'm thinking it's a good right ourselves have to be sitting blind, hearing a soft wind turning round the little leaves of the spring and feeling the sun, and we not tormenting our souls with the sight of gray days, and the holy men, and the dirty feet is trampling the world.\textsuperscript{71}

By presenting standards and norms which, by comparison and contradistinction, allowed the more open-minded members of the group to evaluate their particular life-styles, Martin felt he contributed to his rustic society.

Synge contrasts the narrowness of Timmy's existence with the blind bard's ever-expanding horizon chiefly through

\textsuperscript{70}Works, III, 143. \textsuperscript{71}Works, III, 149.
allusions to sight and sound. When I "was a young man, and had fine sight," Martin declares, "it was the ones with sweet voices were best in the face." Darkness had taught the ragged beggar to listen—to hear not only the mellifluous tones of fair maidens, but also lambs bleating, bees humming, the "sound of his breath," the "noise of his feet." And from the cries of animals and his own bodily rhythms he learned Nature's manner of operation. In the silence of the ditch, Martin tells Molly, the heavens speak; one can hear the music of the stars.

In direct opposition to all these auditory images connoting wholeness, vitality, and freedom, is a series of antithetical symbols epitomizing the constricting forces which impede full and authentic Selfhood. Timmy is imprisoned by his house and his forge, and in the course of the play these enclosures come to stand for the walling effects of habit, convention and routine. His eyes dulled by custom, his natural powers atrophied by artificiality, Timmy has ceased to "see" the world. He is too blinded by the appearance of things to judge their real worth. Here Synge seems to be voicing the eternal protest of the cultural primitivists against those who equate knowledge with "light" and "reason." Knowledge is transmitted from all five senses, the arationalists maintain, but because the non-visual senses do not arrange their data in accordance with the presuppositions of conscious rational activity, their "truth" is
seldom appreciated. Sensation and intuition have always been more important than conceptualization to artists and rustics; for too long they have been denied their just place in the mental life of civilized peoples.72

VII.

Like Martin's other antagonists, the Holy Friar passing through the lonely mountain district healing the afflicted in body and soul represents a class of individuals. Clothed in an old sack, with bleeding feet, welted knees, and arms pitifully thin from fasting, the Saint stood apart from both villagers and itinerants. Around him hovered that atmosphere of stilled passion and arrogant self-denial peculiar to the religious elite, especially those gifted with supernatural powers. His glance becomes severe whenever the issue of Martin's wilful blindness is raised or his own austere life of "thou-shal t-nots" is questioned. At length he discourses on the virtues of work, charging that real faith and real piety are grounded in hardship and suffering:

Men who are dark a long while and thinking over queer thoughts in their heads, aren't the like of simple men, who do be working every day, and praying and living like ourselves....73

If Martin were a "seeing man" he'd "put a black curse on him would weigh down his soul till it'd be falling to hell,"

72See Runge, pp. 25-43, for a development of this point.
73Works, III, 147.
but since he is a "poor blind sinner" he will forgive him his "foolish words" and ideas. To the Saint's sharp reproofs Martin responds angrily that he is a blind man fighting blind men:

If I'm a poor dark sinner I've sharp ears, God help me, and have left you with a big head on you and it's well I heard the little splash of the water you had there in the can. Go on now, holy Father, for if you're a fine Saint itself, it's more sense is in a blind man, and more power maybe than you'd thinking at all. 74

Martin respects and admires the Wandering Friar for his dignity, courage, and commitment to an ideology, but at the same time he believes that there is more than one road to spiritual illumination. The kernel of Act III is, in fact, the meeting and confrontation of two types of religious sensibilities, which might be called, for simplicity's sake, "primitive," the first being characteristic of those who wish to infuse new life into old rituals by reviving ancient ascetic practices; the second of those who, finding traditional orthodoxy "irrelevant," acquire new ethical frameworks to replace values discarded in the past. If we compare the Saint's Weltanschauung with the blind minstrel's we can see that they have at least one point in common: an inordinate desire to return to fundamentals, to recreate those conditions which fostered and nourished a Golden Age. Both yearn for a simpler, less involved existence, free from the

74 Works, III, 149.
senseless scurrying of civilization, more unspoiled and genuine than the currently popular life-styles. Both desire to abolish shallowness and deceit from everyday life. Agreement of substantives, however, does not extend to the methods or contents of these ideal states. For the Friar, this present world is a fallen world, a consequence of the rupture between man and God. To rise above his corrupted state and attain the Beatific Vision man must chastise his body, renounce home, family, and friendship, submit his will to a higher will. In time he will learn that all earthly pleasure is illusory, that Utopia lies beyond the grave. Martin, on the other hand, wishes to reinstitute the mythological Tir na nOg. Against the monk's gloomy bell, chastity, and breast-beating, he pits melodious songs, the love of country lasses and the sounds and fragrances of Nature. One need not shave one's head or wear a sad countenance to worship God, Martin states emphatically; paradise is in the "furze sprouting on the hill," in "the dogs barking," in the "shining" beauty of young girls. Each must find his own way, travel it as he sees fit, judge for himself which experiences should be undergone and which should be avoided. It was good for men to flee the world in the Dark Ages, but in the meantime civilization had somersaulted and

the modern feeling for the beauty and mystery of nature...has gradually risen up as a religion in the dogmatic sense has gradually died. Our pilgrimages are not to Canterbury or Jerusalem, but
to Killarney, Cumberland and the Alps.\textsuperscript{75}

Though Synge's mouthpiece avowedly rejects the orthodox approach to spirituality, he does not repudiate wholesale the ideals of Roman Catholicism. Synge was a typical Edwardian, and if he held that the world was "secular" and "profane" he did not think it irrational or meaningless. He did, however, believe with Yeats that the old pieties and rituals should be revived "in the universal colors of art instead of the hue of a single creed."\textsuperscript{76} Be religious about life itself, the hero of the unfinished \textit{When the Moon Has Set} says, for

\begin{quote}
God is in the earth and not above it. In the wet elm leaves trailing in the lane in autumn, in the deserted currents of the streams, and in the breaking out of the sap, there are joys that collect all the joy that is in religion and art.\textsuperscript{77}
\end{quote}

For all its bardic traits, Synge's perspective in \textit{The Well of the Saints} is curiously modern. In perfect consonance with the primitive tradition explored earlier in this chapter, the play is nevertheless based on a contemporary notion of time and history. The masses of men, unable to face reality in all its starkness, live on the fringes of the moment. Some, like Martin Doul at the beginning of the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{75}Works, II, 351.
\item \textsuperscript{77}Works, III, 164.
\end{itemize}
dramatic action, cling to an imaginary past; others, like Timmy and Molly, live in anticipation of a not yet existing future; still others, like the Saint are lost in thoughts about some distant place. Most prefer a "beautiful illusion" to the here-and-now. Synge was an exception. His ill health convinced him that he could not afford to live in another time or another locale; he had "a short space only to be triumphant and brave." And so he elected to go beyond and outside his cultural milieu, to Connemara and Wicklow and Aran to learn the truth of nature and human existence.
CHAPTER IV

SPRING AND ALL

The insouciant spontaneity advocated by blind Martin in

The Well of the Saints was the staple of Synge’s dramaturgy

in The Tinker’s Wedding, but in contrast to the former, in

which the disputants are all bad-tempered and the alternatives blurred, in the latter the playwright’s choice is

plain. The gulf between the life-styles of the settled community and the vagrants is impassable, and there is no question that Synge is predisposed toward those impudent, reckless souls who periodically act out the myth of the seasons.

The Tinker’s Wedding had its origin in several Wicklow happenings, one of which was witnessed by a man whom Synge met near Aughavanna:

One time I seen fifty of them (tinkers) above on the road to Rathdangan, and they all match-making and marrying themselves for the year that was to come. One man would take such a woman, and say he was going such roads and places, stopping at this fair and another fair, till he’d meet them again at such a place when the spring was coming on. Another, maybe, would swap the woman he had with one from another man, with as much talk as if you’d be selling a cow. It’s two hours I was then watching them from the bog underneath where I was cutting turf, and the like of the crying and the kissing, and the singing and the shouting began when they went off this way and that way, you never heard in your life.

1J. M. Synge, Collected Works, ed. Robin Skelton, Alan
Evidently not everyone in the clan approved wholeheartedly of "natural" unions, for according to another Wicklow resident, many tinker couples sought to have their marriages blessed by the Catholic Church. Synge was told of one tinker and his doxy who

went up to a priest in the hills and asked him would he wed them for half a sovereign....The priest said it was a poor price, but he'd wed them surely if they'd make him a tin can along with it. 'I will, faith,' said the tinker, 'and I'll come back when it's done.' They went off then, and in three weeks they came back, and they asked the priest a second time would he wed them. 'Have you the tin can?' said the priest. 'We have not,' said the tinker; 'we had it made at the fall of night, but the ass gave it a kick in the morning the way it isn't fit for you at all.' 'Go on now,' said the priest. It's a pair of rogues and schemers you are, and I won't wed you at all.' They went off then, and they were never married to this day.2

The action of The Tinker's Wedding is substantially derived from this particular account with one notable addition: the play concludes with the tinkers tossing the priest in a bag and throwing the bundle into a nearby ditch. It is small wonder that the play never reached the boards in Catholic Dublin.

I.

Depending upon your social and political orientation, tinkers are either public "nuisances" or "precious


2 Works, II, ibid.
possessions" consoling us "for the manifold and beautiful life we have all missed who have been born in modern Europe."3 The negative viewpoint is clearly set forth in a little known Report of the Commission on Itinerancy published by the Stationer's Office in Dublin in 1963. Though ostensibly a study of the means whereby the gap between the itinerant population and the "settled" community could be narrowed, the completed report is in fact a biased policy statement proposing numerous legal measures which might be taken to "encourage" tinkers to "leave the road" and enter into the life of the general community.4

The report, bolstered by interviews with doctors, clergymen, and social workers who had directly come into contact with tinkers for purposes other than their occupational activities, suggests that the tinker way of life is "harsh, primitive, and of low economic value" to those who choose it and to Ireland as a whole. It tends to create a segregated, closed society which will become "increasingly inferior to the rest of the national population and from which it will be increasingly difficult to escape."5

Contrary to popular belief, the itinerancy paper indicates that tinkers do not constitute a "single, homogenous

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3 Works, II, 199.
5 Ibid., p. 104.
group" or have any unified social organization. They main-
tain strong ties with one another chiefly through inter-
mariage between related groups. Even after a tinker has his
own son and travels in another caravan, he still regards his
father as the head of the family and treats him with honor
and respect. 6

Because ties of kinship are unusually strong, great
importance is attached to clan-gatherings—to funerals, wed-
dings, fairs and race-meetings. It is not uncommon for a
tinker to travel hundreds of miles to attend a marriage cere-
mony or to pay his last respects to a fellow vagrant. 7 Testi-
mony from many sources convinced the Commission that the
success of a clan-gathering was determined by the amount of
alcohol consumed and the number of men and women engaged in
brawling. There was general agreement that intemperance was
a "way of life" with tinkers and that dissipation would not
cease until the itinerants had become "sufficiently dissatis-
fied" with their life-style to do something about it. 8

Drunkenness and brawling were among the paramount rea-
sons given by the Commission for the "settled" population's
bitter hostility toward itinerant folk. In nearly all middle
class neighborhoods, the survey showed, tinkers were looked
down upon as "inferior human beings," chronically dependent
on the resources and charity of the community-at-large.

6 Ibid., p. 37. 7 Ibid., p. 38. 8 Ibid., pp. 86-87.
Most middle-class Irishmen said that they were acquainted with victims of tinkers' pilfering, trespassing, and disorderly conduct. Nearly everyone felt that the tourist trade had been seriously hurt by the tinkers.

To the average citizen, the itinerancy report points out, tinkers are a "dirty, slovenly" lot, morally and intellectually "different" from the working classes. A substantial number of those interviewed mentioned the "low standards of personal cleanliness and hygiene" which exist in tinkers' camps. They complained that the camp sites were muddy during the rainy season, that the parking areas were littered with trash, debris, and discarded scrap metal, that the clothing worn by the majority of tinkers was "ill-fitting" and "untidy." Many felt that the presence of tinkers in the area "lowered the tone of the neighborhood." Those who lived near a camp site were very unhappy until the tinkers had "moved on."

Middle class Irishmen were particularly infuriated by the tinkers' attitude toward employment. The sanctified notion of work on which they had been raised was continually being undermined by what they considered to be a group of

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9 Ibid., p. 102.
10 Ibid., p. 90.
11 Ibid., pp. 38-52.
12 Ibid., p. 102.
undisciplined worthless wastrels who felt no compunction to conceal their views on property and regular employment, who openly spoke of those engaged in work as fit subjects for exploitation. The experts did concede, however, that not all tinkers were social parasites. Some worked under contract for a stipulated sum; others made or mended tinware; still others earned a sizable income dealing in horses or collecting scrap. The Commissioners voiced their hope that future social welfare programs designed to "absorb" and "integrate" these gypsy-types would "generate a desire to acquire a trade or craft."\(^{13}\)

About the process of integration that it intended to initiate, the Commission was not too optimistic. Local housing authorities in Dublin reported that whenever itinerants were persuaded to "settle down," they made poor tenants: besides quartering animals in their domiciles and gardens, they had been known to strip the cottages of fittings and other saleable items.\(^{14}\) What's worse, tinkers have "few inhibitions about asking anything they need from the settled population."\(^{15}\)

Because tinkers put little store in formal education (those who had attended public schools boasted that they had

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\(^{13}\)Ibid., pp. 72-73.

\(^{14}\)Ibid., pp. 60-61.

\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 84.
never used their educational training), the Commission was of the opinion that they were not aware of the "amenities" of civilization; itinerants had no respect for "social conventions, law and order, and for the rights of property that are inculcated in the children of the normal family in the settled community by word and example in the house, in the school and in the community generally." Statistics showed that vagrants seldom attended Church on Sundays or Holy Days. But they did see that their offspring were baptized and confirmed. While many eventually married in the faith, a significant number preferred a "natural" marriage ceremony frequently alluded to as "jumping the budget." Available data also seemed to indicate that few solemnized tinker marriages end in divorce despite frequent beatings and outbursts of violence between husband and wife.17

For all their boisterousness and over-indulgence, the Commission admitted that the tinkers possessed "engaging personalities." Nearly all of the interviewers described their manner as "frank" and "easy." There was general agreement that the itinerants were "cheerful and good-humoured, polite without being deferential, informative and intelligent in discussing the problems of their own way of

16 Ibid., p. 65.
17 Ibid., pp. 87-89.
life and the attitude of others toward them." In fact, they had a surprisingly "realistic outlook on life." 

To ameliorate the itinerancy problem in Ireland, the Commission recommended that the Irish parliament enact strong laws to hasten the absorption of these "roving wanderers" into the mainstream of Celtic society. Restrictions on scrap collection and distribution were proposed along with closer supervision of public assistance allowances. A plan to separate children from parents was advanced, but quickly discarded as unacceptable. Likewise a suggestion to confine itinerants to government-controlled camps. Finally, the Commission urged that no solution be adopted which would give the tinkers "the feeling that they were being placed on a reservation." 

The itinerancy report exudes bitterness, fear and hostility. There is the gnawing feeling that the familiar totems--the work ethic, concern for property values, the stability of family life--must be preserved at all costs. Absent from it is that aura of vitality which irradiates

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18Ibid., p. 84.
19Ibid., p. 104.
20Ibid., p. 19.
21Ibid., pp. 73-76.
22Ibid., p. 62.
Synge's evocation of this primitive life not wholly innocent but yet rejecting the social responsibilities that accrue to community living. The tinkers live through Synge's eyes in a world of inexplicable beauty where years of joyous freedom are laced with tragedy and loneliness. Says Synge in *Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara*:

In these hills the summer passes in a few weeks from a late spring, full of odour and colour, to an autumn that is premature and filled with the desolate splendour of decay; and it often happens that, in moments when one is most aware of this ceaseless feeling of beauty, some incident of tramp life gives a local human intensity to the shadow of one's own moods.23

In the tinkers' mixture of whimsy and anger, moral outrage and Rabelaisian humour Synge recognized his own responses to Irish life. There is a "certain wildness that gives it (tramp life) romance and a peculiar value for those who look at life in Ireland with an eye that is aware of the arts also," he wrote.24 With his fine bodily health and coarse liveliness, his free-wheeling life-style and keen intuitions, the tinker was not so much an individual as a representative of what Edwardians termed the primitive mentality. "I have met an old vagrant," Synge recalls, who believes he was a hundred years old last Michaelmas....Though now alone...he has been married several times and reared children of whom he knows no more than the swallow knows of broods

23*Works*, II, 204.
24*Works*, II, 208.
that have flown to the south. Like most tramps he has the humour of talk and ideas of a certain distinction... and this old marauder who (has) lived twice as long and perhaps ten times more fully than the men around him (is) aware of this distinction. 25

Later he adds:

The slave and beggar are wiser than the man who works for recompense, for all our moments are divine and above all price though their sacrifice is paid with a measure of fine gold. Every industrious worker has sold his birthright for a mess of pottage, perhaps served him in chalices of gold... 26

Synge himself was a folk-hero among the second generation of Abbey playwrights, not for dramatizing a world hospitable to their Utopian dreams of political freedom, but simply for incarnating that spirit of openness derived from a realization of common humanity, simple needs, and the contingencies of everyday life.

II.

The Tinker’s Wedding focuses on Sara Casey’s sudden desire to marry and rid herself of the "dirty name" given her by the "settled" community. Michael Byrne, the prospective husband, is understandably cool to the idea, inasmuch as the two have cohabited for many years and raised several children, but to avoid a hassle he agrees to go along with Sara’s scheme. Michael’s mother thinks the pair

25 Works, II, 195.

26 Works, II, 196.
must be "raving mad." To her son's gloomy protest that Sara might go off with the wealthy horse-dealer Jaunting Jim if he doesn't marry her, the "immer durstige"27 Mary responds: "And you're thinking it's paying gold to his reverence would make a woman stop when she's a mind to go?"28

Eavesdropping on the conversations of middle class folk has convinced Mary that for women love has nothing to do with the institution of marriage or legal contracts, that no amount of ecclesiastical or social pressure can safeguard a union in which the affective bond between the two parties is "destroyed." Nor can Mary fathom why a young attractive woman like Sara Casey would want a permanent liaison. The exchange of solemn vows, Mary claims, contributes little to a woman's physical or psychic well-being:

Is it putting that ring on your finger will keep you from getting an aged old woman and losing the fine face you have, or be easing your pains, when it's the grand ladies do be married in silk dresses, with rings of gold, that do pass any woman with their share of torment in the hour of birth, and do be paying the doctors in the city of Dublin a great price at that time, the likes of what you'd pay for a good ass and a cart?29

The nucleus of Mary's case against regularized unions revolves around the symbolic import affixed to wedding-rings.

28 Works, IV, 35.
29 Works, IV, 37.
At first this magical circlet will not fit—an ill omen to
be sure—and when it does there is always the danger of
Sara's cutting her skin when she'd "be taking the ass from
the shafts, and pulling the straps the time they'd be slippy
with going around beneath the heavens in rains falling."30
Apart from the many allusions to this ubiquitous object, the
ring-metaphor is woven organically into the pattern of the
action. As a final gesture of defiance against the Church
and its institutions, the tinkers place a ring on the con-
fined priest's finger to remind him of his promise to remain
silent about the day's events.

From the standpoint of folklore, the ring symbol is
significant. In his classical analysis of ritual behavior
and its relation to the dynamics of group life, Arnold van
Gennep asserts that among peasant societies love and amo-
rous inclination are altogether spontaneous, whereas mar-
riage is a tribal affair, a "rite of incorporation" entered
into for the mutual economic and social benefit of the con-
tracting families. More than joining two individuals, the
bonds of matrimony join two collectivities to whom the
maintenance of such cohesive ties is advantageous.31 Spe-
cial rites are observed to commemorate the merger of the

30Works, IV, 47.

31Arnold van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, trans.
Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London, 1966),
p. 116ff.
two clans, and during the elaborate nuptials some symbolic act is performed to impress upon the principals the seriousness of the occasion. Giving or exchanging rings, binding one another with a single cord, tying each other's garments together, and being wrapped in a single piece of cloth are among the more common matrimonial customs. Without exception these encircling actions are meant to have "a real coercive effect," so much so that the constraining power of the wedding ring is a popular folk motif.

The mystical significance attached to rings from the most remote periods was not limited to those exchanged on wedding days. Rings were supposed to protect primitive men from demons, hidden dangers, and evil agents of all sorts; in many uncivilized societies they formed a part of the shaman's ceremonial attire. With the advent of Christianity rings became symbols of ecclesiastical authority and of the spiritual union between the Church and the priesthood. Certainly much of Synge's satire in The Tinker's Wedding arises from the contrast between the priest's inflated opinion of his role in society and the vagrants'

32 Ibid., pp. 131-132.
33 Ibid., p. 132n.
irreverent attitude toward God's ministers.

The "ring episode" was an appropriate means for Synge to indirectly comment on two matters close to his heart: sexual freedom and clerical celibacy. Like many of his Edwardian compatriots, Synge believed that the bourgeois system of marriage led either to mutual boredom or prolonged deceit. "Love must be alive," wrote social scientist Edward Carpenter in a volume familiar to the Pan-Celticists. "If we would have a living thing, we must give that thing some degree of liberty—even though liberty brings with it risk." 36 But even marriage is better than perpetual chastity. The irritable behavior of the Tinker priest, his self-pity and brooding nature are not unrelated to his unnatural repression of sexual drives and instincts, critic Alan Price insists. 37 And at least one of Synge's heroes, Colin Sweeney, would heartily agree. In When the Moon Has Set Sweeney exhorts a young nun to forsake the convent and "obey the earth." Pointing to Mary Costello, a madwoman who had chosen to remain a virgin, Colin says:

In a few years you will be as old as she is. There will be divine nights, but nothing will reach you, as nothing reaches my (dead) uncle at the other side of the hall. I am not a woman and I cannot judge of all your feelings.


yet I know you have a profound impulse for what is peculiar to women. You realize that the forces which lift women up to a share in the pain and passion of the world are more holy than the vows you made. Before this splendour of the morning you cannot lie. You know that the spirit of life which transfigured the world is filling you with radiance. Why will you worship the mania of the saints when your own existence is holier than they are. People renounce when they have not the power to retain. You have power and courage....I implore you to use them.

When the Moon Has Set was Synge's first dramatic effort. After reading the script Yeats tactfully suggested that Synge "go to Aran and express a life that needs expression."

III.

Not all of the critics who reviewed The Tinker's Wedding were convinced that the "ring episode" was an appropriate means for Synge to comment on the cramping effects of bourgeois morality. "In this crucial matter of the marriage," writes Donna Gerstenberger in a generally perceptive study of the play,

Synge fails to properly motivate the action of the play; for the audience is not convinced by this sudden whim of Sarah, even when she says that she wishes to stop the evil insults of the respectable members of society. Nor is the explanation that her desire for marriage is simply a vagary of springtime satisfactory. Her desire is necessary to create the situation of the play, but Synge is never able to make it more; and this sense of a contrived situation is one of the principal weaknesses of the play.39

38 Works, III, 175.

Productionwise, Dr. Gerstenberger's criticism may be valid, but since *The Tinker's Wedding* has never been staged we cannot even be sure that the "living" text would suffer from improper character motivation. In the main, Dr. Gerstenberger's assertions are based on two widely accepted presuppositions: 1) that all art must be founded upon rational argument; and 2) that the folk mentality is exactly like—though admittedly less sophisticated than—the mentality of highly educated civilized men. Both of these premises, we shall see, were rejected outright by the Abbey Theatre membership.

In the first case, we have Synge's very emphatic statement that "real art is always a suggestion; an intangible emotion lurks behind the things that we produce as life lurks within the body." Drama, like the symphony, observes Synge in an analogy borrowed from Nietzsche, embodies feelings, emotions, rhythms; each incident, symbol, and character is part of a huge network of mutually supporting perceptions revolving around a feeling-toned center. In the great writers such as Ronsard "one feels with them a direct delight—not a thinking or moralizing about it—" in

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41 Works, II, 347.
the objects (and personae) with which they unwittingly identify themselves."42

A similar declaration is made by Yeats in *Dramatis Personae*. Commenting on the symbolic import of Synge's work, Yeats distinguishes between two kinds of art which, in his estimation, correspond to the two kinds of knowledge:

The literature of suggestion belongs to a social order when life conquered by being itself and the most living thing was the most powerful, and not to a social order founded upon argument...The literature of logic, the most powerful and the most empty, conquering all in the service of one metallic premise, is for those who have forgotten everything but books and yet have only just learnt to read. They fill their minds with deductions, as they fill their empty houses, where there is nothing of the past, with machine-made furniture....I now believe that they do this because they have broken from the past, from the self-evident truths, from naked beauty displayed...

Robinson should become a celebrated dramatist if this theatre lasts long enough. He does not argue like the imitators of Ibsen, though his expression of life is as logical....In the drama of suggestion there must be sufficient loosening and slackening for meditation and the seemingly irrelevant, or else a Greek chorus, and neither is possible without rich leisurely minds in the audience, lovers of Father Time, men who understand Faust's last cry to the passing moment.43

For Yeats, as for Synge, mood and configuration were primary and basic; moral or psychological insight was necessarily subordinate to structural and tonal considerations.

42Cited in Saddlemyer, p. 246.

In the case of the primitive mentality, the underlying premises are harder to discount. A substantial number of reputable scholars still hold with H. and H. A. Frankfort that "where we would see no more than associations of thought," the primitive mind finds a "causal connection." Within the last ten years, however, this widely supported hypothesis was shaken by the investigations of the world-renowned anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss found that primitive peoples are not "backward" or "retarded": in fact, they may possess genius in certain areas "that leaves the achievements of civilized peoples far behind."

In the realm of "sociological planning," for example, many so-called "archaic" societies have "devised systems of astonishing complexity" which rival those of "higher" cultural levels. Similarly, there seems to be greater "integration of emotional life within a complicated system of rights and duties" in tribal societies than in civilized nations. Almost everywhere, Levi-Strauss asserts, primitive man uses religious and moral sentiments "to establish a viable, if not always harmonious, synthesis of


46Ibid., p. 101.
individual aspirations and the social order." 47

It is Levi-Strauss's carefully thought out opinion that "magical" or "primitive" thought forms "a well-articulated system" which is "independent of that other system which constitutes science." 48 According to the French scholar, there are two distinct modes of thought "at which nature is accessible to scientific inquiry: one roughly adapted to that of perception and imagination; the other at a remove from it." 49 In both realms "the universe is an object of thought," though quite obviously the conceptual and perceptual approaches to the "not-me" are different. The conceptual or analytical approach presupposes that one thing always replaces another, that the effect always supersedes the cause. Elements in a particular context, therefore, have only one set of possible relations. This being the case, values and ideas can be isolated from the events or situations which engendered them. Ultimately, values are accessible to the masses only through philosophic intermediaries who have become proficient at codifying experience. 50

Savage thought, on the other hand, has much in common

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47 Ibid., p. 98.
49 Ibid., p. 15.
50 Ibid., pp. 17-.8.
with that turn of mind which has been labeled Neo-Platonic.

Its method, Levi-Strauss points out, is "metaphorical" rather than "metonymical"; that is to say, the primitive mind classifies natural phenomena by means of "a vast system of correspondences" derived from "whatever is at hand." Adept at drawing parallels from the "raw material" he encounters in his environment, primitive man "speaks" not only with things, but also through the medium of things, giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. He "may not ever complete his purpose but he always put something of himself into it."

To further differentiate the two kinds of knowledge, Levi-Strauss borrows an analogy from the sphere of economics. He contrasts "engineering" with what he calls "bricolage." Like the engineer, the bricoleur (our Jack-of-all-trades) is "adept at performing diverse tasks, but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each task to the availability of raw materials conceived and procured for the purpose of the project."

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51 Ibid., p. 25.
52 Ibid., p. 17.
53 Ibid., p. 21.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., p. 17.
game is flexibility; he works with odds and ends which happen to be at his disposal. Whereas the modern scientific mind with its obsession "to be wholly transparent with respect to reality" operates by means of concepts, the primitive mind mingle "human culture" and "reality." The "preconstrained elements" of primitive thought are images, percepts, and signs. These elements, Levi-Strauss insists, obtain their meaning from the concrete situation in which they appear.

C. G. Jung expresses the same view in another context:

It is not enough for the primitive man to see the sun rise and set; their external observations must at the same time be a psychic happening; the sun in its course must represent the fate of a god or hero who, in the last analysis, dwells nowhere except in the soul of man. All the mythological processes of nature, such as summer and winter, the phases of the moon, the rainy season, and so forth, are in no sense allegories of these objective occurrences; rather they are symbolic expressions of the inner unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man's consciousness by way of projection—that is, mirrored in the events of nature.

In other words, the "signified changes into the signifying and vice versa," and instead of "creating events by means of structures," the primitive mind "creates structures by

56Ibid., p. 20.
57Ibid., p. 18.
means of events."60

The art of The Tinker's Wedding is a bricoleur's art—an
art dependent upon sensations and impressions and devoid for
the most part of depth and a sense of permanence. Because
Synge's tinkers exist only on the level of emotion, they are
incapable of self-analysis or self-reflection, and unless
the apparatus of primitive psychology is employed, it is
practically impossible to find motives for their actions.
Moreover, on the thematic level, the play is confined to an
exploration of the most commonplace human experiences. This
is not to say that the work lacks significance or authen-
ticity, but merely to point out that the philosophical specu-
lation so frequent in Yeats and Joyce is absent. True prim-
itives, the tinkers speak "with things" and "through
things." We are never sure, for instance, whether the moon
or Spring is responsible for Sara's aberrant behavior. At
any rate, both possibilities exist in the primitive psychic
economy: the one (Spring) interiorizes a sensory impression,
while the other (moon) objectifies a profound psychological
truth. Each implies the other, gains meaning from the other,
and with the other forms a totality which encompasses all
the values and norms of the play.

IV.

As an archetypal image, the moon has been generously

60 Ibid., p. 22.
endowed with a wide range of significant symbolic meanings. Cultural anthropologists tell us that from ancient times the moon has been indissolubly linked with the biological functions of women. "The attributes of the moon in primitive thought," writes Robert Briffault in The Mothers, "are the transferred characters, functions and activities of primitive woman, which are regarded as being derived and controlled by the magic power of the moon." 61 To primitive man, woman's monthly cycle, corresponding as it does to the phases of the moon, was the consequence of some unfathomable bond between the feminine nature and lunar activity. 62 The whole feminine "mentality" was determined by the moon, and in response to the latter's periodic waxing and waning women could be expected to act unpredictably. 63 Moreover, at certain times during the lunar cycle, it was believed, the moon put into women's heads strange and bizarre notions which sometimes produced a psychic condition known as "moon madness." While suffering from "moon madness," a woman was subject to uncontrollable impulses and phantasies which boggled her mind and forced her to submit to drives emanating from


the subterranean regions of her soul. 64

When Michael Byrne sensed that he could not cope with his doxy's unusual behavior, he immediately looked for an external factor on which he could lay the blame for Sara's actions. Almost immediately, he concluded that Sara must be under the influence of the moon. "Can't you speak a word when I'm asking what it is ails you since the moon did change?" he angrily upbraids Sara. 65 Michael assumes that Sara has capriciously changed her mind about marriage. But he also thinks that when she says she will go off with Jaunting Jim she will do it. Mary knows better. When the time comes for Sara to carry out her threat, she will renege as she does at the end of the play when she vows "it'll be a long day till I go making talk of marriage or the like of that." 66 As a woman it is Sara's prerogative to change her mind; yet because of inner circumstances involving the rhythmic ebbing and flowing of the life-force within her, her new viewpoint may have no relation to her own conscious wishes or desires. She has simply entered a new phase of her monthly cycle.

Historically, the moon has also symbolized man's ability to intuit, to possess knowledge which cannot be scientifically verified. Intuitive knowledge

64 Harding, p. 230.
65 Works, IV, 7. 66 Works, IV, 49.
is an inner possession, realized and assimilated by the personality but not easily discussed, for the inner experience behind it is scarcely capable of adequate verbal expression and can hardly be transmitted to anyone who has not undergone the same experience. 67

In its highest form, intuitive knowledge manifests itself as a type of wisdom which recognizes the paradoxical unity of life and death, time and fate, growth and decay. It is "the wisdom of peasants, of the earth and of women." 68 Synge attributes it to that "flagrant heathen" and Earth Mother, Mary Byrne. 69 Looking up at a "dry moon in the sky," Mary resolves to trade Michael's tin can for a pint of liquor:

Jimmy Neill's a decent lad; and he'll give me a good drop for the can; and maybe if I keep near the peelers to-morrow for the first bit of the fair, herself won't strike me at all; and if she does itself, what's a little stroke on your head beside sitting lonesome on a fine night, hearing the dogs barking, and the bats squeaking, and you saying over, it's a short while till you die. 70

67 Neumann, p. 65.
68 Ibid., p. 67.
69 The terms "pagan" and "heathen" are historically as well as linguistically significant. In a recent unsigned article in Time Magazine for June 19, 1972, p. 65, it was pointed out that "when Christianity spread through Europe, many in the countryside kept their rustic rites along with the new religion." The word "pagan" comes from the Latin Paganus meaning "country dweller" and "heathen" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon haethen meaning "dweller on the heath." See also Stanley Diamond, "The Search for the Primitive," Man's Image in Medicine and Anthropology, ed. Iago Galdston (New York, 1963), p. 72.
70 Works, IV, 27.
Along with the circular images of "ring" and "moon" are references to "spring-time," "kind air," "great smells," "rains falling," "cuckoos singing," and "the time of love." These words conveniently divide themselves into two groups, the larger related to the cycle of the seasons, the smaller clustered around the notion of transience. In perfect consonance with the primitive tradition, the play affirms the unity of man and nature by implying that the transformations of the natural world are analogous to those experienced by the tinker, his doxy, and his mother. Spring is the time of rebirth when the world is remade and the vital life-giving principles of love and growth are in the ascendancy. But it is also a time of melancholy when the sweetness of life is mingled with the impending fear of death. Fragility and exuberance are two sides of a single coin. Even as the trees burgeon and earthly pleasures are enjoyed, there is an intense personal feeling that the abounding life of May will soon be driven out by the hardships of winter and senescence. Though the ever-recurring cycle of life and death may still remain a mystery for Michael and Sara, it is a reality for those like Mary who have experienced all the "phases" and "seasons" of human life. Mary can remember "when we were young men and women, and were fine to look at." 71 Everything is hopeful and bright now for the young tinkers, Michael's mother muses

71 workers, IV, 49.
in words strangely reminiscent of Villon's Old Woman, but in a "short while" all will be sad and depressing.72 Periodic change is a condition of life itself.

V.

The inclusion of positive and negative elements in a single work is characteristic not only of primitive thought

72Compare Synge's dialectal translation of Villon's "An old Woman's Lamentation" completed in 1908:

The man I had a love for--a great rascal would kick me in the gutter--is dead thirty years and over it, and it is I am left behind, grey and aged. When I do be minding the good days I had, minding what I was one time, and what it is I'm come to, and when I do look on my own self, poor and dry, and pinched together, it wouldn't be much would set me raging in the streets.

Where is the round forehead I had, and the fine hair, and the two eyebrows, and the eyes with a big gay look out of them would bring folly from a great scholar? Where is my straight shapely nose, and two ears, and my chin with a valley in it, and my lips were red and open?

Where are the pointed shoulders were on me, and the long arms and nice hands to them? Where is my bosom was as white as any, or my straight rounded sides?

It's the way I am this day--my forehead is gone into furrows, the hair of my head is grey and whitish, my eyebrows are tumbled from me, and my two eyes had died out within my head--those eyes that would be laughing to men,--my nose has a hook in it, my ears are hanging down, and my lips are sharp and skinny.

That's what left over from the beauty of a right woman--a bag of bones, and legs the like of two shrivelled sausages going beneath it.

It's the like of that we old hags do be thinking, of the good times are gone away from us, and we crouching on our hunkers by a little fire of twigs, soon kindled and soon spent, we that were the pick of many. See Works, I, 80.
but also of primitive literature. This is especially true of the writings of existential primitivists such as Theocritus who strive first and foremost to reproduce as faithfully as possible the main conditions of the rustic peoples with whom they come into contact—their work, customs, rituals, social organization, festivities, and language. Careful not to transform rough peasants into romantic shepherds, or depict a preternatural Golden Age fraught with philosophical illusions about the inherent goodness of pre-literate man, the existential primitivist concerns himself with forces and energies operative in the primitive society, and when most successful documents the time and place in which he lives. Cultural primitivists, on the other hand, reserve the right to alter and embellish their subject matter in the interest of a more pleasing finished product. They argue convincingly that primitive art is before all else the art of sophisticated nations, that the very word "primitivism" is a "recognition of a contrast, implied or expressed, between pastoral life and some more complex type of civilization." As a literary mode, cultural primitivism consists of exacting "the naturalness and virtue of the simple man at the expense of the


complicated one, whether the former be a shepherd, or a child, or a working man," and thus involves a discernible moral position.75

A longtime student of Homer, Petrarch, Nashe, Beaumont, and Wordsworth, Synge was familiar with these two interrelated traditions. We can rightly assume that he incorporated elements from both traditions in The Tinker's Wedding. While he does exercise a certain amount of subjectivity in his selection of incidents and personages, he, nonetheless, confines himself to the emotions and interests of the itinerant class. Like the authentic primitivists who preceded him, Synge draws his principals from the lowest economic and social ranks, his scenery from the visible, physical world around him, and his point of view from the fairly narrow and limited Umwelt of the trampers. When he wishes to explore female emotions, for instance, he does not invent a mythological heroine; in Mary he creates a believable doxy--not unlike the tipsy rogues one might meet on the road to Connemara. And though he does not always avoid projecting his own values into the play, in the main he simply records the speech and actions of the itinerants. There are no big "conversion" scenes or soliloquies on the beauties of the simple life. Indeed, the tension between the thieving tinkers and the money-grubbing

priest is never resolved, nor will it ever be, for the whole thrust of Synge's vision lies in this tension. The tinkers mystify the cleric and vice versa. This cross-mystification, Dr. Gerstenberger points out, "symbolizes the fact that there is no lasting commerce possible between the two modes of existence." As the curtain falls,

    the tinkers take flight from the Latin male-dictions shouted 'in a loud ecclesiastical voice' by a priest who is determined to have the last word and who insists in this final action (as in everything) on the form and letter, not the spirit of the law. 76

   Much as we would like to agree with Professor Gerstenberger that Synge remains completely neutral in this dramatic confrontation between two opposing life-styles, we cannot honestly say that we do not know where Synge's sympathies lie. The priest's frequent tantrums and lack of concern for the spiritual welfare of his fold turn him into a stock comedy figure. Too busy preparing for the bishop's impending visit to worry about the state of a few tinker souls, this ambitious curate displays all the earmarks of those who identify with their social roles or offices. To Mary he complains that the priesthood is nothing but one dull monotonous round of saying Mass, running for sick calls, and hearing confessions. He has been told that religion would give him comfort and peace, but he has not progressed far enough in

76 Gerstenberger, p. 64.
the spiritual life to find joy in the renunciation of worldly pleasures. Toward those who do not follow the teachings of the Catholic Church, he is contemptuous; yet when his own position in the community is jeopardized, he forgets the seal of confession and appeals to the "peelers" for help. Hypocritical, vindictive, quick to condemn the tinkers for their shortcomings, the Wicklow priest is, if anything, the antithesis of those saintly "pastors" limned in the Bible and patristic literature.

Synge contrasts the artificial standards of morality and justice exemplified in the priest's constricted behavior with the natural charitableness of "pagan" Mary. A lonely old woman, Mary can appreciate the priest's predicament. "It'd break my heart to hear you talking and sighing the like of that, your reverence," she says. "Let you rouse up, now, if it's a poor, single man you are itself, and I'll be singing you songs unto the dawn of day." If Mary does not approve of the priest "meddling" in their lives, she approves even less of her son's violent response to the curate's accusations. All the while Michael is tying the priest in a sack, Mary apologizes to "his reverence" for subjecting him to such offensive treatment:

That's a good boy you are now, your reverence, and let you not be uneasy, for we wouldn't hurt

77 Price, p. 132.

78 Works, IV, 19.
you at all. It's sick and sorry we are to tease you; but what did you want meddling with the like of us, when it's a long time we are going our own ways—father and son, and his son after him, or mother and daughter, and her own daughter again—and it's little need we ever had of going up into a church and swearing....

At the same time she ironically admonishes him to "learn a little sense and patience." But the irate priest has no time for "heathen" sermons, and when the tinkers have freed him he calls "the fire of heaven from the hand of the Almighty God" upon them. "There's an old villain," shouts Mary, as the tinkers gather their belongings and head for the county fair. Alone at last, the priest is forced to meditate on his unpriestlike conduct.

The counterbalancing of polarities, here symbolized in the juxtaposition of Catholicism and Paganism, is a commonplace of the primitive mode of composition. So, too, is the "satirical reflex" used traditionally by cultural primitives to comment on ecclesiastical matters. From time immemorial churchmen have come under attack for their worldliness and corrupt practices. Usually, however, the satiric barbs are directed at only a small segment of the clerical population, and often the most vitriolic pieces are written by priests themselves. As a consequence, in many parts of the world, anti-clericalism is an accepted literary posture. But in

79Works, IV, 47.
80See Kermode, p. 36.
Ireland, where the Catholic clergy have suffered much during the long centuries of English persecution, priests are venerated for their courage and fearlessness in the face of imminent physical danger. Because of this delicate religious situation, Synge was afraid that *The Tinker's Wedding* would be unfavorably received by Dublin audiences. To circumvent this eventuality, he drafted a short Preface in which he defended his satiric stance:

I do not think these country clergy, who have so much humour, and so much heroism when they face typhus or dangerous seas for the comfort of their people on the coasts of the west, will mind being laughed at for half an hour without malice, as the clergy in every Roman Catholic country were laughed at through the ages that had real religion.\(^8^1\)

A later revised Preface omitted specific references to the religious question, but included a plea for open-mindedness. Yet despite this plea for tolerance, the play has been almost universally read as a sinister attack on Irish Catholicism. Bourgeois speaks for a generation of Irish critics:

Still we rather feel inclined to regret that Synge ever penned this immature comedy, which, though it constitutes a notable addition to the ever-amusing literature of rascality and vagabondage, distinctly offends against aesthetic decency and good taste. By its ludicrous representation of a young tinkerwoman as an earnest Catholic, its malignant portraiture of a covetous priest, the grotesque blasphemyousness of its language, it has wounded sincere religious susceptibilities which have a right to be

\(^8^1\)*Works*, IV, 3-4 (note).
respected in a country where religion dominates the public mind.82

In objecting to the commingling of erotic and liturgical elements in The Tinker's Wedding, Bourgeois betrayed not only his nineteenth-century Puritan biases, but also his ignorance of folk religion and the folk mentality. True primitives, Mary, Michael and Sara proceed empirically. They look at life concretely, and are therefore totally insensitive to the profundities and subtleties of Christian philosophy and theology. They have never theorized about their own nature, let alone God's, nor do they expect God to intrude Himself upon their lives. "What," says Mary,

is in it the Almighty God would care of the like of us? You'll never see the Almighty doing a thing to the larks or to the swallows or to the swift birds do be crying out when the sun is set, or to the hares do be racing about in the fine spring and what way would he be following us in the dark nights when it's quiet and easy we are, and we never asking him a thing at all.83

The tinkers think about God or religion only when they are camped near a Church or happen to meet a priest on the road. Otherwise they find Christianity incompatible with their natural life. Christianity is too abstract, too rigid, too closed, and the idea of an after life in which all longings are fulfilled does not square with the impermanence and


83From an earlier draft. See Works, IV, 34.
flux which surround nature and their daily existence. Nor can they accept the priest's attitude toward sex. They do not believe that God and nature (or woman) are in mortal competition and that the saintly man must choose between them. In their view fertility and holiness lie on the same plane inasmuch as both touch upon the mystery of life. Sexuality is tied to renewal, and renewal is always good, always positive.

In writing The Tinker's Wedding Synge sought to recover the original sense of integrity with the natural world which he felt the tinkers possessed and his own urban society had lost. He sought to recover a life that was rich and genial and spontaneous, a life that did not compartmentalize people and actions or separate spirit from nature. If he failed to convince his audience that the sacred and the profane are not mutually exclusive, it was only because in Ireland the people were not religious enough to laugh at the holy. Gerardus van der Leeuw put it simply: "When the sanctity of religion is not equal to the violent movement of the drama it has too much resemblance to an old, broken vase to be taken seriously." 84

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CHAPTER V

THE DARKER SIDE OF PRIMITIVISM

When the tale of that squint-eyed fellow who destroyed his da with the blow of a loy reached the Abbey Theatre in 1907, Dublin rioted. Lady Gregory attended the opening performances, and in Our Irish Theatre she recalls some of the hysteria which marked the first production of The Playboy of the Western World:

There was a battle of a week. Every night protesters with their trumpets came and raised a din. Every night the police carried some of them off to the police courts. Every afternoon the papers gave reports of the trial before a magistrate who had not heard or read the play and who insisted on being given details of its incidents by the accused and by the police.¹

The initial explanation for the fracas was that the Puritanical Irish objected to Christy Mahon’s allusion to “a drift of chosen females standing in their shifts from here to the Eastern Sea.”² But a later explanation comes closer to the truth: Playboy shattered the happy image of a pure, incorruptible race, unsullied by material concerns and


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reaching ever upward toward the glory of God—an image that men everywhere might envy. No one had the right to tamper with that image, and when a Protestant named Synge intimated to the world that beneath the veil of tolerance and good naturedness there lurked a sense of chaos, the embittered Irish rose up in anger and accused him of blaspheming. In his inimitable way Yeats explained the situation philosophically:

When a country produces a man of genius he never is what it wants or believes it wants; he is always unlike its idea of itself...Synge was the rushing up of the buried fire, an explosion of all that had been denied or refused, a furiou~ impartiality, an indifferent turbulent sorrow. His work...was to say all the people did not want to have said.3

The response to Playboy, Yeats continued, was violent, and "like most violent things, artificial, that defence of virtue by those who have but little."4

From a psychological viewpoint, then, the Playboy riots are understandable. The forty young men who stamped and shouted from the close of the second act to its bitter end were not reacting as much to the purported "slander on Irish womanhood" as they were to "the implied criticism of their


own ideals of patriotic violence. Dubliners to the core, they prided themselves on being decent, idealistic human beings. If a penchant for destruction and rage existed, it existed "out there," perhaps in "the peelers or the Justices of the Peace," but certainly not within the local community where "every living Christian is a bona fide." Like the Mayoites, they could applaud the extravagant boasting of the incomparable Christy Mahon, but when it was suggested that they too were capable of cold-blooded murder, they were indignant. Every Irishman knows, George Bernard Shaw later observed, that

to satirize the follies of humanity is to insult the Irish nation, because the Irish nation is, in fact, the human race and has no follies and stands there pure and beautiful and saintly to be eternally oppressed by England and collected for by the Clan.⁶

On more than one occasion since 1907 the Irish have had to face their own complicity in national movements which resorted to violence to attain political ends. No doubt a few who attended the first run of Playboy determined to re-examine their own fundamental assumption that evil is inherent "in the other." As for the rest, the play affected


no significant change in either their individual or national priorities: by 1916 the Dublin electorate would reject a peaceful settlement of the home rule question as impractical and move toward all-out revolution.

The violent response of Synge's audience to Playboy is a good barometer of the "weather" of the play, for eclipsing the "brilliant morning light" of the "wooing" scene is the ever-growing autumnal gloom of the opening and closing acts. Darkness and light reinforce the underlying conflict between Eros and aggression and provide a natural starting point for exploring the problem of violence which stands at the center of the play.

How prominent a role violence plays in the creation and staging of modern drama has been pointed out by Martin Esslin in a recent essay on contemporary theatre practice. According to Esslin, violence is always directed toward some person or some object, and in the case of modern drama, the "recipients" fall into three categories: characters, audience, and playwright. Besides the traditional clashes between characters within the play, a second, more subtle form of violence is becoming commonplace: more and more playwrights are presenting situations obliquely designed to "shock" or "create a feeling of aggression in the

audience." On the other hand, an audience may indirectly assault a playwright by reacting violently to the actors. In either case, the audience becomes involved, and in place of the "culinary theatre" in which the audience merely "consumes" the play, we have a theatrical experience which changes the lives of the spectators. Ultimately, Esslin concludes, the type of change produced in the theatregoer determines whether or not the aggressive acts or shock effects are morally justifiable:

If violence is used to heighten your sense of awareness of the world in such a way that the shock that has been administered to you makes you more capable of evaluating the reality of the situation you are in, then this violence has been rightly used and is ethically defensible. If the violence deprives you of your autonomy, forces you to act in ways that you would not otherwise want to, it is illegitimate.

It would seem, then, that the most violent theatre is the one that hides or conjures away man's baser instincts and drives by idealizing the human condition. Each of the types of violence described by Esslin can be found in The Playboy of the Western World. If we expand these categories to include not only the "experience" of violence, but also the rhetoric and functions of violence,

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8 Ibid., p. 165.
9 Ibid., p. 172.
10 Ibid.
we shall get a further insight into Synge’s primitivism.

I.

Synge set his *Playboy* in the bleak, isolated county of Mayo where the wild and rugged terrain becomes a symbol of the whole primitive society, but he peopled it with characters from stories he had heard when he traveled the length and breadth of ancient Connaught in 1904. The inhabitants of Connaught, Synge wrote in his Aran notebook, are a "half-savage" race harboring within their souls the "whole spirit of the west of Ireland, with its strange wildness and reserve." ¹¹ Far from the seat of authority, "debased and nearly demoralized by bad housing and lodging and the endless misery of the rain," ¹² the Connaught men frequently expressed their desolateness and feelings of oppression in jests which were a curious mixture of "wit" and "brutality." ¹³ In Connemara, for example, Synge was told of a fight which began "over nothing" and ended with the death of five men. According to the local raconteur, the men

were going down to cut weed, and a man was sharpening his knife on a stone before he went. A young boy came into the kitchen, and he said to

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¹³*Works*, II, 124.
the man--

'What are you sharpening that knife for?'

'To kill your father with,' said the man, and they the best of friends all the time. The young boy went back to his house and told his father there was a man sharpening a knife to kill him.

'Bedad,' said the father, 'if he has a knife I'll have one too.'

He sharpened his knife after that, and they went down to the strand. Then the two men began making fun about their knives, and from that they began raising their voices, and it wasn't long before there were ten men fighting with their knives, and they never stopped till there were five of them dead.\textsuperscript{14}

On another occasion after a jennet race when "the porter had begun to take effect," the inner anxiety and anger of these frustrated and forsaken men manifested itself in violent brawling. "There was great sport after you left," an old man said to Synge:

They were all beating and cutting each other on the shore of the sea. Four men fought together in one place till the tide came up on them, and was like to drown them; but the priest waded out up to his middle and drove them asunder. Another man was left for dead on the road outside the lodges, and some gentleman found him and had him carried into his house, and got the doctor to put plasters on his head. Then there was a red-headed fellow had his finger bitten through, and the postman was destroyed for ever.\textsuperscript{15}

The desperate situation of these savage people living on the edge of civilization was expressed no less in their merrymaking than in their quarreling and fighting. After a night of card-playing, Synge reports, "the young girls ran

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Works}, II, 156. \textsuperscript{15}\textit{Works}, II, 275.
wild in the twilight, flying and shrieking over the grass, or rushing up behind the young men and throwing them over... by a sudden jerk or trip."¹⁶ Earlier, to Synge's utter amazement, these same young women had found "romance" in the face of a man which was "raw and bleeding and horrible to look at."¹⁷

Synge was greatly affected by what he observed in the West. After his 1904 trip he wrote "Mergency Man" and "Danny," two ballads based on anecdotes he had heard in the Congested Districts. In "Mergency Man" colloquial speech patterns are used to recount the story of a land eviction agent who drowned while attempting to serve writs on unsuspecting peasants. "Danny," the more significant of the two, also ends in death, but here the emphasis is on the subhuman and irrational passions which move an Erris mob to cold-bloodedly murder a neighborhood dandy who refuses to abide by the existing social and moral codes:

But seven tripped him up behind,
And seven kicked before,
And seven squeezed around his throat
Till Danny kicked no more.

Then some destroyed him with their heels,
Some tramped him in the mud,
Some stole his purse and timber pipe,
And some washed off the blood.

¹⁶Works, II, 254.
¹⁷Works, II, 253.
And when you're walking out the way, 
From Bangor to Belmulet, 
You'll see a flat cross on a stone, 
Where men choked Danny's gullet.18

"Danny" was completed the same year as *Playboy*,19 and though the subject matter of the latter is decidedly more complex, the same mob mentality permeates the whole.

The violent response of the Erris men to Danny's philandering gives us a good insight into the primitive conception of law and order which governed the Gaeltacht. Synge tells us in *The Aran Islands* that the "natives" believed that the presence of police, constables, and courts increased crime. Correlatively, there was general agreement among the rural folk that when the local citizens themselves settled disputes and meted out punishment justice prevailed:

...if men have a little difference, or a little fight, their friends take care it does not go too far, and in a little time it is forgotten. In Kilronan there is a band of men paid to make out cases for themselves; the moment a blow is struck they come down and arrest the man who gave it. The other man he quarrelled with has to give evidence against him; whole families come down to court and swear against each other till they become bitter enemies. If there is a conviction the man who is convicted never forgives. He waits his time, and before the year is out there is a cross summons, which the other man in turn never forgives. The feud continues to grow, till a dispute about the colour of a man's hair may end in a murder, after a year's

18 *Works*, I, 57.

forcing by the law.\textsuperscript{20} Besides it was next to impossible for an outsider to get reliable evidence—"not because the people were dishonest, but because they think the claims of kinship more sacred than the claims of abstract truth."\textsuperscript{21} If the rural population had a profound commitment to justice, it also realized that justice represents but one aspect of the collective life, and unless it is administered in the context of the entire cultural milieu and as part of the total configuration of group responsibility, disaster will result. Social historian Walter Bryan put it simply:

Their (the common Celt) respect for law has always been accompanied by a determination that it should not be allowed to interfere with justice, and by justice they mean not an abstract principle but what they feel to be right.\textsuperscript{22}

What was right was, more often than not, tainted by a long history of foreign invasion and religious persecution. At least this is true of the Aran incident which provided the raw material for \textit{Playboy}. From the oldest man on Inishmaan Synge learned

about a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives with whom he was said to be related. They hid him in a hole...and kept

\textsuperscript{20}\textit{Works}, II, 96.
\hfill \textsuperscript{21}\textit{Works}, II, \textit{ibid}.
\hfill \textsuperscript{22}Walter Bryan, \textit{The Improbable Irish} (New York, 1969), p. 83.
him for weeks, though the police came and searched for him, and he could hear their boots grinding on the stones over his head. In spite of a reward which was offered, the island was incorruptible, and after much trouble the man was safely shipped to America.²³

This natural propensity to shelter the fugitive, Synge observed, was "universal in the west." The reasons for it were deep-seated:

It seems partly due to the association between justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but more directly to the primitive feeling of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime, that a man will do no wrong unless he is under the influence of a passion which is as irresponsible as a storm on the sea. If a man has killed his father, and is already sick and broken with remorse, they can see no reason why he should be dragged away and killed by the law.²⁴

The tendency to give sanctuary to the criminal, then, was both cultural and archetypal: not only did it reflect the Irish contempt for English domination, but more importantly, it attested to the primitive world view of the Western peasants.

A sharply analytical mind and a genuine sympathy for the plight of the impoverished tenant class contributed to Synge's understanding of primitive jurisprudence. Modern anthropological research has since confirmed his assumptions and proved his suppositions. According to Professor

²³Works, II, 95.
²⁴Works, II, ibid.
Bronislaw Malinowski, the foremost authority on primitive law, "hyperatrophy of rules rather than lawlessness is characteristic of primitive life:"\textsuperscript{25} to a remarkable degree, the rules regulating the various aspects of the social organization are "elastic" and "capable of adjustment."\textsuperscript{26} Primitive man's observance of the rules of law under the normal conditions, when it is followed and not deified, is at least partial, conditional, and subject to evasions; that it is not enforced by any wholesale motive like fear of punishment, or a general submission to all tradition, but by very complete psychological and social inducements.\textsuperscript{27}

Malinowski cautions against interpreting primitive law in terms of modern European systems of decrees "which foresee and define possible forms of non-fulfillment and provide appropriate barriers and remedies."\textsuperscript{28} The primitive mind is too diffuse, too concrete. It keeps several more or less independent authorities in a state of conflict, and each of these--religion, taboo, magic, and sentiment--figure to a greater or lesser extent in the enactment and enforcement of the law.

The penchant for violence which Synge discovered in the

\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{27}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 59.
lives and folktales of the Connaught men both fascinated and repelled him. He found that same aggressiveness in himself and in his relationship with Molly Allgood, and while he agreed with Yeats that in the majority of cases violence was "a defense mechanism employed by those who had little virtue," he also was of the opinion that the "dark side" of life in the West could not be dismissed so easily. In this he has gained the support of not a few modern psychologists who argue that the relation of aggressive impulses to socioeconomic factors has not been sufficiently explored. D. W. Winnicott, for example, states quite emphatically that "if society is in danger, it is not because of man's aggressiveness, but because of the repression of personal aggressiveness in individuals."29 Analogously, the researches of British psychiatrist Anthony Storr tend to show that when a society prevents an individual from developing in such a way that he can come to terms with his own aggressive drives, his aggression is either "turned inward against the self, or else disowned and attributed to others; or else expressed in explosive or childish forms."30 Alluding specifically to the periodic resurgence of nationalism in Ireland, Storr warns that hostilities will not cease until the Irish "feel they have a personal stake and sufficient access to power

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30 Ibid., p. 80.
to believe that they exert some influence in determining
the conditions of their own lives."  

All of the depressive reactions mentioned by Storr are
present in Playboy, and unless we take into account the un-
favorable geographical and political environment in which
the Mayoites exist, we will be hard pressed to explain the
cruelty and hostility which mark their corporate life.

II.

Synge's first draft of Playboy, begun in September,
1904, adhered very closely to the particulars of the Aran
case. The play was initially titled The Murderer: A Farce,
and in the rough scenario its author divided the work into
three acts: the "murder," "the murderer's boastings," and
the "resurrected father."  

In the original plan, Christy
was elected county counsellor, but immediately after his
public triumph he is exposed by his father as an impostor.
Later Synge deleted the election sequence, expanded the
characterization to include Widow Quin, Pegeen and Shawn
Keogh, and made the romance with the pubkeeper's daughter
the central incident. In addition, he complicated the plot
by raising Christy to the stature of a real hero who becomes

\[31\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 130.\]

\[32\text{Robin Skelton, } \text{The Writings of J. M. Synge} \ (\text{London,}
\text{1971}), \ p. \ 114.\]
the **imago** he had projected in the opening scene.  

The rehabilitation subplot represents an important development, for through it Synge was able to integrate his anthropological research with sound psychological insight. If Christy's primitive reactions to his *Sitz an Leben* have much in common with the violent responses of earlier heroes of myth and folklore to debilitating political and historical realities, they are not limited to preliterate societies. They are primitive only in the sense that they are primal, instinctual, spontaneous; in short, a biological inheritance which contemporary Irishmen must also learn to cope with and use for constructive purposes.

That *Playboy* originated in the "psychic state" of the "folk milieu" and patterned itself structurally after the Irish version of several Indo-European folktales now seems certain. Several critics have studied *Playboy* in the light

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33 Greene and Stephens, pp. 252-253; see also David H. Greene, "The *Playboy* and Irish Nationalism," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, XLVI (1947), 199-204.

34 Maurice Bourgeois insists that "to Synge, the Irish peasant is a latter-day Pagan, on whose old-time heathendom the Christian faith has been artificially and superficially grafted." See *John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre* (London, 1913), p. 90. As late as 1967 Wallace Johnson voiced the same sentiment:

I do not take *The Playboy* for an idyll about noble savages who live in a utopia which is free of the foibles fostered by a more complex society. Rather, in the people of Mayo, as they are recreated by Synge, we seem to have a miniature society living desperately in what Karl Jaspers might call a 'boundary situation.' See "The Pagan Setting of *Playboy*," *Renascence*, XIX (1967), 120.
of its affinities with ancient Celtic legends, and in one perceptive article the work is described as "the story of the Championship of Ulster after it has passed through the literary guts of an Irish Tramp." In another recent essay Thomas Whitaker sees Christy in the tradition of the legendary Puck, that Irish Dionysus who presided yearly over the West Kerry Fair. Less sweeping than Whitaker in her generalizations and more careful to cite textual evidence to support her thesis, Patricia Meyer Spachs suggests that Playboy is a modern adaptation of the popular European folktale of the foolish son who successfully undertakes the heroic quest after his older brothers have failed and manages by wit or accident to bring back the immortal trophy.

Mrs. Spachs is specifically concerned with the tone of Playboy as it affects the notion of patricide: the play's

35Richard Bauman argues convincingly that Playboy has all the characteristics of a shanachie story. See "John Millington Synge and Irish Folklore," Southern Folklore Quarterly, XXVII (1963), 267-279. Robin Skelton is of the same opinion. In The Writings of J. M. Synge, p. 122, he observes that "all the stories told Synge on Aran and elsewhere could be analyzed as conflations of several older stories, and most of them contain archetypal elements."


power, she argues, resides in the Mayoites' judgment of father-murder as a noble action. At the same time she reminds us that Irish folktales, no less than Grimm's, are "full of heroes (who) wade through blood to prove themselves." 39 But while admitting that violence is a *sine qua non* of the folkloristic maturation process, she makes it clear that the violence displayed in Irish folktales always has a "factitious" quality about it:

One is always aware that those who are turned to stone will become flesh and blood again at the end; that the frog, once its head is cut off, will turn into a prince; that however many anonymous warriors are slaughtered along the way, the true hero will accomplish the impossible and not be slaughtered himself. 40

In *Playboy*, Mrs. Spachs continues, the violence which frames the story is "unreal." The "murders" are all symbolic and as in the fairy tales of old the dead invariably come back to life. Moreover, what emerges, in terms of the hero's experience at least, is the central discovery that real triumphs are accomplished without violence: Christy ultimately frees himself from his father's and the group's domination by asserting his independence. 41

In Professor Spachs' essay many of the essential

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problems involving the phenomenon of violence as expressed in the play are directly or indirectly raised: what is the relationship between crime and violence in a country which is systematically deprived of social and political justice? to what extent does the use of barbarous language reflect the cultural and psychological situation of a nation? what is the role of violence in the sexual relationships of primitive peoples? With Mrs. Spachs the problem of violence is placed in the folklore context. As a result she tends to view violence as something which will disappear when "the child becomes the man" and the "non-entity the hero." Synge, it would appear, takes just the opposite position: though a man raise his level of consciousness significantly, he can never get away from the primitive that is in him. Christy can survive only when he learns to accept and channel his violent tendencies.

Mrs. Spachs does touch on one point which has intrigued other Synge commentators, viz., the relevance of the protagonist's name. In the highly volatile third act, writes Mrs. Spachs, when Christy and his father come face to face on the stage for the first time, the younger Mahon becomes the passive non-violent hero of the New Testament, "the eternal victim, the scapegoat." Once more he is the shy and foolish orphan "with old and young making game of him, and

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42 Ibid., p. 80.
they swearing, raging, kicking at him like a mangy cur.”

But the image of docility quickly fades as he suffers a moment of truth which shocks him back to reality. Realizing that his whole life has been built on "the power of a lie," he abandons the posture of non-violence and like the rival bull stakes his claim for leadership of the herd. The second "murder," then, is not—as was the previous one—a spontaneous reaction to a stress situation; it is consciously willed, and takes the form of a fight to the death for tribal supremacy.

At least four other critics in recent years have concurred with Mrs. Spachs on the question of Synge's use of the Christ myth. All four appreciate the fact that the analogues to Christ's life, expressly the formulaic "God save all here," the visit of the three gift-laden villagers, the hero's public triumph on a winkerred mule, and his subsequent betrayal by once devoted disciples, are more than coincidental and contribute substantially to the meaning of

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43 Ibid., p. 71.
44 Ibid., p. 81.
the play. But they go one step further than Mrs. Spachs in insisting that Synge reverses the Christ myth and uses it for ironic purposes. Speaking for those critics who have interpreted the play satirically, Robin Skelton says: "Christy is a parody of Christ rather than a reflection of Him; he gives the society he enters the exact leader they wish for."

Whether one views Christy as a scapegoat or savior, the fact remains that his career follows the pattern of many archetypal heroes who sought to advance civilization by denigrating the old system and introducing new ideas and new life-styles. The myths of Oedipus, Prometheus, and "Playboy" vary enormously in detail, but if we examine them closely we will discover how structurally similar they are. In each case we hear a tale describing a hero's unusual childhood, his meteoric rise to fame and power, his splendid but brief victory over his antagonists, and his sudden demise through sacrifice or betrayal. At a certain nodal point in his development he successfully meets a trial of strength which entails one or more battles of deliverance from those who


47 See especially Pearce, pp. 303-310.

48 Skelton, p. 130.

49 Mary Rose Sullivan suggests that "Christy's victory is of the same kind, if not degree, as that of Sophocles' hero." See "Synge, Sophocles and the Un-making of Myth," Modern Drama, XII (1969), 242-253.
seek to maintain the status quo, be they devils, supernatural forces, or the mob. Typically, in the process of vanquishing his enemy, he comes to terms with his own capacity for violence, knowing full well that before he can liberate or transform the group, he must conquer himself.

III.

Underlying *Playboy* and the kind of heroic cycle it recreates is the universally recognized archetypal pattern of initiation. According to Mircea Eliade in *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, initiation in the anthropological sense of an elaborate ceremonial by which the youth is introduced into the adult tribal society is a thing of the past, but as a psychological process involving both social and sexual drives it survives in the dreams and products of the active imagination of modern men. If modern initiation rites are conducted primarily in the inner world of the psyche, and the scars left by them are largely symbolic, they are no less important for human development than the more violent and dramatic rituals of preliterate peoples. In every instance—ancient or modern—the initiation process is designed to radically alter the personality of the initiate and to inculcate in him the collective spiritual and cultural

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values which will make him a responsible member of society. 51

The initiation ceremony itself consists of a type of ritual death whereby the novice is symbolically cut off from his past (he dies to it) and reborn into an entirely new existential situation with rights and duties. Frequently, the candidates, like Christy, "pretend to have forgotten their past lives, their family relations, their names and their language and must learn everything again." 52 This symbolic loss of memory signals the death of the "natural man" and the birth of the "real man." That the initiatory rites are often long and frightening, involving circumcision, subincision, the breaking of bones or the inflicting of other painful injuries, would seem to suggest that authenticity is not the result of a natural process. In short, the candidate must be "made" in the image and likeness of his ancestral heroes. 53

Any age-grading initiation involved in the transition from childhood to maturity requires the adolescent to cross several psychological thresholds which will insure the development of a strong, personal identity. According to psychiatrist Joseph L. Henderson, three stages must be traversed before full maturity can be attained: 1) separation from the family; 2) acceptance by and integration into the group; 3) a symbolic death and rebirth. 54

51 Ibid., pp. 112-113.
52 Ibid., p. 114.
53 Ibid., p. 115.
and 3) assertion of the Self. "Only when all three stages have been adequately realized, Henderson observes, "together with a partial resolution of the conflict necessarily felt to exist between the claims of the group and the needs of the individual, can one speak of individuation."54

With respect to the youthful "rites of passage," ego-identity is synonymous with a capacity for physical intimacy, decisive choice, and individual response. Of course, before the young man can successfully relate to the opposite sex or correctly choose his vocation in life, he must achieve a measure of autonomy.55 Thus the first step in this process of self-definition is a rite of separation: the adolescent must separate himself from his real parents and/or any surrogate parents.

Christy Mahon's mother died in childbirth and for six weeks after he came into the world he was suckled by Widow Casey, a Connaught "hag...with a tongue on her has the crows and seabirds scattered, the way they wouldn't cast a shadow on her garden with the dread of her curse."56 Weighing two hundred pounds, with a "blinded eye," a "limping leg," and a county-wide reputation for being a "woman of noted misbehavior with the old and young," Widow Casey had all the

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55Ibid., p. 182.
56Works, IV, 103.
earmarks of a fairy-tale witch and none of those traits we generally associate with kindly, unselfish foster mothers. Widow Casey's beauty did not increase with age, but by the time Christy had reached puberty, his father had determined that he should marry this "walking terror from beyond the hills." Frustrated and horrified by the thought of such a despicable union, Christy raised his loy and split Old Mahon's skull "to the knob of the gullet."

The motive for this "father-murder" was certainly not sexual rivalry, and while retaining the crime but eliminating the physical desirability of the woman, Synge seems to be satirizing the classical Oedipal situation. Still all the fundamental elements of the prototype experience are present here, and in every essential respect, the first act duplicates the "primal scene." In fact, our condonation of Christy's behavior is only justified on the grounds that he is acting out primitive, aggressive tendencies which we all recognize as instinctual.

We do not have to look very far to learn that aggression between parents and children is inevitable. Freud tells us in *Totem and Taboo* and elsewhere that parricide is "the chief and primitive crime of humanity as well as of the

individual.  

Every young man, he explains, must actually or symbolically free himself from the domination of his father. All the same, under normal circumstances, through a gradual exploration and mastery of the environment, the adolescent inconspicuously and unwittingly asserts his independence. If, however, his father is tyrannical and mean, like Old Mahon, then the break with parental authority will probably be accompanied by some form of violence. From a humanistic standpoint, Freud might deplore Christy's dastardly act, but as a trained psychologist he would be forced to admit that Christy acted "in the interest of preserving his virility."  

Shortly after Christy has "killed his da," a new psychic force begins to operate in his life. From the moment he enters Michael Flaherty's shebeen, Christy's values are supplied by the Mayo community. Too weak to cope with the world alone, he joins forces with Pegeen and her ilk in order to gain the added strength necessary to withstand the repressive pull of childhood. 

Though the Mayoites are impressed by Christy's "grand story," they do not permit him to assume the mantle of pre-eminence and authority until he has successfully undergone a

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59 Ibid.
rite of initiation which proves his allegations to be based on fact. In contrast to many primitive initiation ceremonies which include a painful physical ordeal, this rite d'entree takes the form of a trial of strength. Christy is plunged into a highly competitive athletic contest demanding extraordinary skill and resourcefulness, but having been cast from the same metal as the heroic Greeks and Trojans, he rises to the occasion and triumphantly tastes the joys of victory. Like wily Odysseus, whom he rivals as a prevaricator, talker, and opportunist, Christy out-rides, out-leaps, out-races, out-pitches, even out-dances the young Mayoite suitors, and by the end of the day he has become to all intents and purposes sovereign of the Congested Districts.

In all probability we might correctly deduce that these "games" are natural psychic outlets for overcoming violent impulses. Notwithstanding this psychoanalytic explanation, the investigations of Henderson show that foot-races, wrestling matches, and other feats of strength are closely tied to fertility rituals insofar as the winner of the athletic event earns "the spiritual blessing of the Sky Father and the fruitful co-operation of the Earth Mother."60 We should not be surprised, then, to find Michael Flaherty joining the hands of Christy and Pegeen at the beginning of Act III:

60Henderson, p. 106.
It's the will of God, I'm thinking, that all should win an easy or a cruel end, and it's the will of God that all should rear up lengthy families for the nurture of the earth. It's many would be in dread to bring your like into their house for to end them maybe with a sudden end; but I'm a decent man of Ireland, and I liefer face the grave untimely and I seeing a score of grandsons growing up little gallant swearers by the name of God, than go peopling my bedside with puny weeds the like of what you'd breed, I'm thinking, out of Shaneen Keogh. A daring fellow is the jewel of the world...so may God and Mary and St. Patrick bless you, and increase you from this mortal day.

To be sure, Christy's initial experience with the Mayoites had a salutary effect on his personality. Deprived of the pleasures of friendship in childhood, this would-be play-boy spent his youth narcissistically "making mugs of his own self in the bit of glass" that hung on the wall. As a consequence of his self-imposed isolation, Christy never learned to relate on the affective level or to divert his aggressive drives into socially constructive channels. The sense of belonging which he experienced at Flaherty's pub provided him with the first opportunity to open himself up to the outside world. The villagers, in turn, accepted the squatter's son because he voiced their unconscious feelings and said frankly what they had not dared to admit privately.

What "the psychic state of the locality" was Synge made clear in numerous references to the Mayoites' unique
capacity for cruelty: Jimmy Farrell hanging his dog, Marcus Quin "maiming ewes," Sara Tansey driving ten miles to see "the man bit the yellow lady's nostril on the northern shore." Rumors swept the countryside that Widow Quin "destroyed" her husband with a "worn pick" shortly after she had served the Lord Bishop of Connaught a black lamb reared at her own breast. And who could forget that ignominious occasion when the whole town had silently watched a group of young thugs catch a "maniac" and pelt "the poor creature till he ran out raving and foaming and was drowned in the sea."62

The pattern of collective frustration and rage is also established in the speeches of the minor characters, especially those of Jimmy Farrell, Philly Cullen, and the village lasses. Farrell, a symbol of the sexually inhibited Irish Catholic male, presumes that Christy is wanted by the police for following "after a young woman on a lonesome night." Philly Cullen, on the other hand, speaks for the thousands of impoverished tenant farmers when he suggests that "maybe the land was grabbed from him, and he did what any decent young man would do."63 As for the three young country girls who "drink a health" to the "pirates, preachers, poteen makers... and the juries fill their stomachs selling judgments of the English law,"64 they act as "a chorus and initially help to

62Works, IV, 145.
63Works, IV, 69. 64Works, IV, 105.
build up the picture of the mores of the society in which Christy finds himself. 

For his boldness and savagery Christy becomes the new uncrowned King of the Mayoites. "And I'm thinking you should have been living the like of a king of Norway or the Eastern world," Pegeen declares as she places the bread on Christy's plate. "The like of a king, is it," replies Christy, "and I after toiling, moiling, digging, dodging from the dawn till dusk with never a sight of joy or sport" before I "cleft" my father "with one blow to the breeches belt." But as soon as Old Mahon "rises" from the dead and Christy shows signs of being mortal, his short, uneventful reign comes quickly to an end. The Mayoites decree their leader must be slain. Armed with ropes and lighted sod they act out the "fearful end" that awaits this persona non grata: after "swaying and swigging at the butt of a rope," a "half an hour in great anguish," getting his death, they will "put him in a narrow grave, with cheap sacking wrapping him round, and pour down

65Skelton, pp. 125-127.

66Works, IV, 83. This "splitting" tactic was not original with Synge. Frank O'Connor tells us in A Short History of Irish Literature (New York, 1967), p. 17, that in 1213 a professional poet named Murrough O'Daly had a fight with a Donegal tax-collector and "like Christy Mahon of later times, split him with a great blow to the breeches belt."

67We are reminded here of the primitive custom of putting the king to death if he suffers from any personal defects or loss of power. See Sir James Frazer, The New Golden Bough, ed. Theodor Gaster (New York, 1959), pp. 273-293.
quicklime on his head, the way you'd see a woman pouring frish-frash from a cup."

The final catastrophe is, of course, averted by the arrival of Old Mahon, but the incident itself has important psychological consequences for the emerging playboy in that it forces him to cross the final threshold to manhood. Only now does Christy realize how close he came to bartering his freedom and individuality for a fiery lass who'd send him off "to have a horny-fingered hangman hitching his bloody slip-knots" on the "butt of his ear." I'd rather live "like the madmen of Keel, eating muck and green weeds, on the face of the cliffs," than spend my life in Mayo, Christy tells the villagers:

Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day.

Christy's liberation from the group is accompanied by a third "parricide," the end-result of which is a deflection of aggressive tendencies from his father and a re-direction of these same hostilities toward Pegeen. The time, the "murder" is symbolic and has no dramatic purpose but to point up the resolution of the original Oedipal complex:

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69 *Works*, IV, 169.
70 *Works*, IV, 173.
71 Spachs, p. 82.
Go with you, is it! I will then, like a gallant captain with his heathen slave. Go on now and I'll see you from this day stewing my oatmeal and washing my spuds, for I'm master of all fights from now. (Pushing Mahon), Go on, I'm saying.\footnote{Works, IV, 173.}

No longer is Christy concerned with asserting and protecting his manhood. It is as if having fallen out of love with Pegeen and his heroic self-image, he is about to confidently reestablish contact with his real self and begin the slow, torturous evolution from manhood to Selfhood. He may not do anything of the sort, but in promising to undertake a journey with his father, he is at least not succumbing to the pressure to conform. Given a little time and experience, Christy may become the hero that found expression in his daydreams.

IV.

In addition to undergoing physical rites of passage which foster ego-development, a young man may experience a second more "spiritual" form of initiation. In this latter type of initiation, the period of pre-adolescent submission to parental authority is followed by a period of psychological containment in which the quest for love and power is paramount, and this second stage, in turn, is superseded by a third period in which the search for meaning becomes the
dominant drive. Brief moments of enlightenment when the young person experiences "a time of deliverance from burdensome pressures" mark the third stage. Though this period of renewal is short-lived, it always has a profound effect on later life. Henderson states:

The Quest hero fails...because one can sustain the consciousness necessary for initiation only for a short time. But the fact of having known, or of temporarily possessing, the object of the quest, as Gilgamesh possessed briefly the branch of the immortal plant, has in itself a partial initiatory effect. One knows...that the Quest hero will never forget his experience of being partially initiated and will therefore inevitably prepare himself to complete the quest at some future time.\(^7^4\)

But even from his failure, Henderson insists, the young man can acquire great wisdom:

If the initiate had no further doubt about his status as an initiated man, he would either become an unbearable prig or else subtly return to the role of the hero. The feeling that he has partially failed insures his humility and his human group identity....\(^7^5\)

If we reflect on Playboy in the context of the total initiatory process, three points immediately come to mind: 1) that Christy Mahon's initiation is "spiritual" or psychological as well as socio-biological; 2) that on both levels of development the liberating rites are attended by painful

\(^{73}\)Henderson, p. 181.
\(^{74}\)Ibid., p. 178.
\(^{75}\)Ibid., p. 179.
"symbolic wounds;" 76 and 3) that Christy is not adverse to meeting violence with violence. With respect to the last point, nowhere are Christy's violent impulses more poignantly displayed than in his relationships with Shawn Keogh and Pegeen Mike.

Synge has drawn a very neat parallel between Shawn and Christy. Dissimilar as they are in temperament and aspiration, the two rivals for Pegeen's hand have much in common. Underlying everything else, they are both orphans: Shawn is a real orphan who wistfully says he would murder if it would make him a hero, and Christy is a make-believe orphan who thinks he has murdered and gets the acclaim that Shawn so passionately desires. Furthermore, each of them is intimidated by a strong, authoritarian father-figure. The only significant difference between Old Mahon and Father Reilly is that the latter wears a black cassock. "I'm afeard of Father Reilly," Shawn confesses when Pegeen asks him to stay with her the night of Kate Cassidy's wake, what "would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard I did the like of that?" 77 Lastly, there are the physical similarities between Shawn and Christy. When Christy tries on Shawn's "tweeds and hat," the gesture is full of symbolic import. Shawn is Christy's alter-ego, his

76 Bruno Bettelheim's term.

77 Works, IV, 63.
psychological double or shadow self. He is the personifi-
cation of what Christy was before he "killed his da" and
what he would become if he remained for long in the Mayo
community--weak, petty, beholden to women and priests. In-
deed it is not by coincidence that both young men describe
themselves in stress situations as "slow at learning, a mid-
dling scholar only." 78

If Shawn is the other side of Christy, his "mirror-
image," as it were, he is also his chief adversary. The
sexual rivalry between these two implacable foes is clearly
set forth early in the play as Christy strives to undermine
Shawn's relationship with Pegeen. What with Christy ner-
vously twittering in the presence of Pegeen and Shawn hastily
retreating when the pubkeeper's daughter jeeringly tells him
to seek out Father Reilly and "let him put you in the holy
brotherhood," the two suitors are evenly matched for the
first few scenes. By Act II Christy has firmly established
his territorial rights, and in an effort to defend his re-
gion Shawn tries to bribe Christy. "Trembling with anxiety,"
he offers Christy "the half of a ticket to the Western
States," his "breeches with the double seat," and his new
coat if the latter will "quit from this (Mayo) and leave us
in the peace we had till last night at the fall of dark." 79

78 See Works, IV, 69 and 115.
79 Works, IV, 113-115.
Christy, of course, refuses to accept any of these propitiatory gestures, and like the dominant animal in the jungle he wanders off leaving his subdued rival to lick his wounds.

Christy's violent impulses serve him well during his stay in Mayo until the villagers discover that "there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed."\(^{80}\)

Shawn welcomes the new opportunity to discharge his aggressive feelings toward Christy, and while the pack of Mayoites desperately struggle to "put a twist" on the Playboy's neck, Shawn urges Pegeen to "scorch his leg." Once the onslaught comes, Christy, reacting "like a mad dog," bares his teeth and bites Shawn's calf. As the yong farmer limps away beaten and humiliated we are reminded of Desmond Morris's curious exclamation: "How little, how very little, the naked ape has changed since his early primitive days."\(^{81}\)

In the matter of romantic love, Christy's quest is grounded largely in the absence of any strong parental bond which would foster a healthy, stable person-to-person relationship, and in place of the courtly knight-errant we are given the picture of an Edwardian Don Juan who unconsciously seeks his mother in every woman he meets. Christy is the weak man-child who falls in love with forceful, masculine viragos. Initially he allows himself to be dominated by a

\(^{80}\)Works, IV, 169.

"black" widow and a tyrannical publican's daughter who threatens to inform the peelers as to his whereabouts if he does not accede to her excessive demands. But as Christy's self-confidence grows, so does his command of the romantic situation, and after the customary display of ambivalent behavior involving fear, aggression, and sexual attraction, he manages to transform his volatile landlady into a sweet and submissive colleen. Pegeen responds with real tenderness to Christy's comparison of her to the Lady Helen of Troy:

And what is it I have Christy Mahon, to make me fitting entertainment for the like of you, that has such poet's talking, and such savagery of heart.82

Radiantly she continues:

And to think it's me is talking sweetly, Christy Mahon, and I the fright of seven townlands for my biting tongue. Well, the heart's a wonder; and I'm thinking, there won't be our like in Mayo, for gallant lovers, from this hour, today.83

The gallantry does not last for long. After the "second murder" the language exudes bitterness and frustration. Pegeen calls Christy an "ugly liar," and he accuses her of arranging his death. Then, looking around in desperation, he says:

You're blowing for to torture me...That's your kind, is it? Then let the lot of you be wary,

82 Works, IV, 149. 83 Works, IV, 151.
for, if I've to face the gallows, I'll have a
gay march down, I tell you, and shed the blood
of some of you before I die. 84

With the third appearance of Old Mahon, a state of tem-
porary equilibrium sets in. Pegeen achieves a kind of ele-
giac perspective as she sees her one chance for happiness
slip through her fingers: "I've lost the only Playboy of the
Western World," she sighs. The impact of her statement seems
all the greater for its being delivered in the presence of
the effeminate Shawn Keogh and Philly Cullen. 85

V.

If Synge has been more fortunate than other playwrights
in finding viable dramatic correlatives for unconscious or
semiconscious aggressive impulses, his predilection for ver-
tical significance is invariably mitigated by a desire to fit
these negative drives into a bigger, more inclusive scheme.
"I wrote Playboy directly," he said when critics labored to
classify the work with respect to genre

as a piece of life without thinking, or caring to
think, whether it was a comedy, tragedy, or extra-
vaganza, or whether it would be held to have, or
not to have, a purpose. 86

84 Works, IV, 169-171.

English Literature in Transition, 10 (1967), 127-128, for a
discussion of the changing rhetoric in Playboy.

86 Cited in Ann Saddlemeyer, "A Share in the Dignity of
the World: J. M. Synge's Aesthetic Theory," The World of
Stylistically, it is perhaps unnecessary to mention the curious mixture of Rabelaisian humor and representational naturalism which pervades the play, but we do deem it important to emphasize the fact that this interpenetration of romantic, realistic, and ironic elements duplicates the primitive situation. The primitive man, anthropologist Stanley Diamond writes,

moves within his system as an integrated man. His society is neither compartmentalized nor fragmented, and none of its parts is in fatal conflict with the others. Thus the primitive does not perceive himself as divided into "Homo economicus," "Homo religiosus," "Homo politicus," and so forth. He stands at the center of a synthetic, holistic universe of concrete activities, disinterested in the causal nexus between them, for only consistent crises stimulate interest in the causal analysis of society.

The high integration among the various major modalities of primitive culture has produced a unique fusion of art and life. Nowadays it is hard to imagine a "burlesque of the sacred" taking place at a patriotic ceremony, but in primitive rituals, the fundamental paradoxes of human life--love and hate, the comic and the tragic, dedication and denial, and their derivatives--are given free, sometimes, uninhibited, even murderous "play" in quite the sense that Huizinga uses that word.


89Ibid., pp. 100-101.
The play-impulse which Diamond submits is a recognizable constant in primitive society can be linked to that instinct for violence which is the focal point of this chapter. Philosopher Roger Callois insists that elementary impulses such as the instinct for competition are "frantic and ruinous" and lead to "disastrous consequences" save when they are "satisfied positively and creatively" by actions and rites which come under the heading of play.\textsuperscript{90} And Johan Huizinga himself suggests that "the play attitude must have been present before human culture or a linguistic faculty of expression existed."\textsuperscript{91} In fact, Huizinga adds, a wholesome attitude toward play is one of the principal differences between primitivism and civilization:

...religion, science, law, war and politics seem to lose little by little in more advanced forms of society, the abundant contact which they seem to have had with play in these remote periods of culture.\textsuperscript{92}

Poetry, Huizinga continues, is the connecting bridge between primitive and civilized modes of thought inasmuch as it is a "play function" which lies beyond seriousness in the primordial domain peculiar to the child, the animal, the savage,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[92]Ibid., p. 49.
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the visionary, in the domain of dreams, of ecstatic, of intoxication, of laughter. 93

Synge, it would seem, subscribes to the same conception of play, and it appears evident from The Playboy that he believes play to be just as essential to culture as love and aggression. In the best recent study of Synge's fifth work, Thomas R. Whitaker proceeds to analyze the elements in Playboy which might justly be termed aspects of play, namely the play atmosphere, based on the title, of course, the play situation, and the rhetoric of play. Whitaker is of the opinion that each of the major characters engages in "an alert and sympathetic playing of roles which are themselves constituted by a more defensive role-playing." 94 Christy plays the most roles--poet, father-murderer, savior, lord of misrule, scapegoat--but his peculiarly histrionic approach to life is shared by the entire Mayo community: 95

The gamut of comic play runs from killing to wedding--from the romantic murder and sadistic farce in which an anxiously repressive and frustrated society finds release, through subtler kinds of "playing upon" others (to tease, entrap, expose, or woo), to the more genuine "playing with" that arises from the mutual discovery of loneliness and reciprocal identity: "We're alike, so." 96

93 Ibid.
94 Whitaker, p. 7.
95 Ibid., p. 2.
96 Ibid., p. 16.
Each role-playing gesture and action is clarified by a language which reverberates with what Synge once called "the thin relish of delightful sympathy with the wildness of evil which all feel but few acknowledge even to themselves." 97 The end-result of all this juggling of emotions, Whitaker concludes, is "an aggressive but luminously therapeutic playfulness." 98

Once the violence in and surrounding Playboy had subsided, we might expect the Irish nation as a whole to admit that aggression is an inherent trait in the Celtic personality. But fifteen years after the Abbey riots Yeats was forced to chastize the Dublin electorate for "kicking up a row" over Sean O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars:

I thought you had got tired of this. It commenced fifteen years ago. You have disgraced yourselves again. Is this to be an ever-recurring celebration of the arrival of Irish genius?

Still the Irish would not listen, and in the wake of the latest wave of terror in Belfast, poet James Carroll has admonished his war-torn nation to fight with every ounce of their being "the violence we Irish carry in our genes." 100

97 Ibid., p. 17.
98 Ibid., p. 8.
100 From a lecture given by James Carroll in Boston, Massachusetts, July 16, 1972.
If nothing else, Carroll's plea is an additional proof of the continued relevance of Synge's plays.
CHAPTER VI

IN THE GREEN GAP OF A WOOD

Despondent over the reception of *Playboy*, in ill health, and frustrated by his unsuccessful attempts to marry Molly Allgood, Synge decided to shift his attention from the harsh realities of the Irish countryside to the ancient mythical kingdom of Ulster. In the Fall of 1907 he told his nephew Edward Stephens that he intended to write a play about Deirdre and the sons of Usna. Stephens pointed out that both Yeats and George Russell had written dramas about Deirdre and that Synge would be "accused of copying" them. Synge treated the objection lightly:

Oh, no--there isn't any danger of that. People are entitled to use those old stories in any way they wish. My treatment of the story wouldn't be like any of theirs.¹

For the next thirteen months Synge wrote and rewrote his *Deirdre*--twenty drafts in all. At the time of his death in March, 1909 the work was still unfinished. But Yeats was anxious to produce it anyway. With the help of Molly and Lady Gregory he assembled the script for its first Abbey performance on January 13, 1910.²

²Ibid., p. 300, note.
The Deirdre myth proved to be a fortunate choice for the none-too-popular Synge. Not only did the play dispel some of the bitterness which followed the Playboy riots, but more importantly, it enhanced Synge's reputation abroad. More than one critic hailed it "a great tragedy which is as entirely his own as if all the characters and plot were original with him." ³

As Synge had predicted, his treatment of the Deirdre legend bore little resemblance to the adaptations of his friends. To begin with, Yeats and Russell relied principally on Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne for their source material. Synge, on the other hand, extracted most of his "plot" from a modern Irish version by Andrew MacCurtin which he had translated into English during his first trip to Aran. ⁴ MacCurtin's version, unlike Lady Gregory's or Dr. Hyde's Literary History of Ireland which also contained the Deirdre ur-myth, "was full of folklore colour" and those "rough Elizabethan features" which Synge had praised in the Preface to the first published edition of his Poems. ⁵ Then again, the plays of Russell and Yeats were closer to the content and


⁴Harold Orel, "Synge's Last Play: 'And a Story Will Be Told For Ever'," Modern Drama, IV (1961), 308.

tone of the ancient story than Synge's. At the expense of verisimilitude they preserved the heroic tone, rarified atmosphere and odium fati motif of the original accounts. Russell's Deirdre is a semi-divine being symbolizing "an aspect of the beauty which inspires men to high deeds and noble endeavors," and while Yeats' queen fulfills the requirements of the aristocratic ideal, she never emerges from "the land of mystical visions" into the "world of flesh-and-blood reality." She is still a part of that "breezy-springdayish Cuchullainoid" "drama of swords" Synge found so objectionable. "Few of us," he remarked in an essay shortly after he had reviewed A. H. Leahy's Heroic Romances of Ireland for the Manchester Guardian in March, 1906

except soldiers have seen swords in use; to drag them out on the stage is babyish. They are so rusted for us with associations of pseudo-antique fiction and drama. For the present the only possible beauty in drama is peasant drama, for the future we must await the making of life beautiful again before we can have beautiful drama. You cannot gather grapes of chimney pots.

What Synge's play loses on the allegorical level, it gains on the level of human experience. Yeats' languishing

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queen and warrior are replaced by unsophisticated rustics who enjoy their "freedom on the edge of the hills." Neither victims of an overriding fate, nor betrayed by what is within, they are subject to a Life-Force which is outside them but to which they belong by virtue of their very existence in time. From the moment the curtain rises on Gen Masain we know that the struggle of Deirdre and Naisi will be unsuccessful, that however right-minded they may be, they are no match for the extrahuman political and social forces working against them. But as Deirdre says, "death is a poor, untidy thing" whether it be "earned with riches" or in rags. "It's for this life" we were born, surely, and what matters is not the "ruin of ourselves" but life itself—an exciting, happy, frightful adventure at the end of which lies "the filth of the grave."  

The words are Deirdre's, but the sentiments, of course, are Synge's. The fact of death, Synge would lead us to believe, does not diminish or negate life. On the contrary, death's inevitability makes life's joys more precious. Instead of concentrating on the tragic aspects of human existence, Synge declared in a 1904 diary, the playwright should emphasize "the wonder of life." Then he adds:


\[10\]*Works*, IV, 211.
Contrast gives wonder of life. It is found in
(a) Misery of earth consciously set against Hea-
ven, see pious writing. Happy other World,
Hearn, etc.
(b) Wonder of world set against the misery of age
and death (see Villon).11

The world of Deirdre of the Sorrows is a world of con-
trasts. It is a place where man can experience deluge and
conflagration along with the comfort and peace of a forest
bower. More than that, it is an imaginary "time" and "space"
where for one brief moment Synge can fully realize his primiti-
tive vision.

The plot of Synge's Deirdre contains the main ingre-
dients of the original myth. According to legend, Deirdre
was the lovely daughter of Fedlimid, the bard of Conchubor,
Chief of the Red Branch. Before her birth Cathbad the Druid
foretold that she would bring death and a catastrophic civil
war to Ulster.

Let Deirdre be her name; harm will come through
her. She will be fair, comely, bright-haired;
heroes will fight for her, and kings go seeking
for her.12

For her sake, "heroes shall go into exile" and "deeds of an-
ger shall be done in Emain." Banishment and death shall come

11Cited in Ann Saddlemeyer, "'A Share in the Dignity of
the World': J. M. Synge's Aesthetic Theory," The World of
W. B. Yeats: Essays in Perspective, ed. Robin Skelton and

12Lady Augusta Gregory, Cuchulain of Muirtheime: The
Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster (5th ed.; Ger-
to the sons of kings. 13

In order to avoid these calamities, Conchubor’s council, against the wishes of the king who demanded that Deirdre be slain, ordered her to be taken to a secluded tower and placed in the care of a wise old woman named Lavarcham. Lavarcham allowed Deirdre to wander through the hills and dales near the tower, and on one of her forest walks Deirdre met Naisi, a young warrior "with hair like the raven," "skin like the snow," and "lips like blood spilt on it." 14 Naisi was overwhelmed by Deirdre’s beauty, and with the assistance of his two brothers he carried her off to Alban.

In the meantime it was learned that Conchubor had secretly planned to make Deirdre his wife. When the High King heard of Naisi’s action he began to plot his revenge. After seven years he induced the couple to return to Ulster by promising that they would not be harmed. As might be expected, the King broke his promise: Naisi and his brothers were treacherously murdered when they arrived in Emain. Conchubor’s warriors were so outraged by their leader’s open violation of a sacred trust that they set fire to the palace and made war on the remaining Red Branch clan. Deirdre, destitute and alone, plunged a knife into her heart.

We have already observed that, on the most mechanical level, the structure of Deirdre of the Sorrows is built upon

13 Ibid. 14 Works, IV, 191.
a series of contrasts which provide rhythmical balance in
much the same manner as crescendoes and decrescendoes create
"currents of tension" in a musical composition. Moreover, a threefold movement can be clearly marked in the three "epi-
sodes" of the play, focusing respectively on love, betrayal and death, and in each the heroine is the center of gravity as she moves from "a determination for love" in spite of fate to an "inevitable sweeping" into the stream of life to a final realization of self in death. Further, in each epi-
sode the ascending values are emblematized by the setting.

In Act I the dominant impression is an overpowering sense of confinement and restraint. This is really Conchubor's sec-
tion, and so the action appropriately takes place in a house owned by the High King. Act II, which dramatizes the unin-
hibited life-style of the lovers, is saturated with nature imagin
imagery reminiscent of the "green world" of Renaissance com-
edy. The instability of both world-views is effectively represented by the weightless, unsubstantial tent which crowds the stage in Act III.

The rich unity of Deirdre of the Sorrows is achieved not only by this skeletal pattern of structural organization but also by two archetypal motifs that knit the play together.

15 Musical analogy suggested by Saddlemeyer in The World of W. B. Yeats, p. 245.
16 See Ms. draft, Works, IV, Appendix C, 359-370; also David H. Greene, "Synge's Unfinished Deirdre," PMLA, LXIII (1948), 1320.
Frequent references to time and nature are interwoven throughout the play to give us a sense of the essential oneness of the animate and inanimate worlds. At critical nodal points in the action temporal and spatial orders intersect to form a kind of surrealistic universe from which all the exigencies of daily life are excluded. The end result is an ideal world, a primordial world beyond history and the burden of time. But this is to anticipate. Here we must pause to consider each motif individually. Let us begin with time.

Time is an important component of the spectator's reaction to Deirdre. The whole of the action takes place in the timeless time of gods and heroes, and if this were not enough, Deirdre's entire life is telescoped into three short crises. In this mythical *in illud tempore*, time seems to obey different laws: past, present and future are dynamically fused as the three separate "cycles" of Deirdre's life mix and dissolve, as it were, before our eyes. We know what was as well as what will be even before Lavarcham speaks of the strange portents surrounding Deirdre's birth. Because everything is so absolutely certain, Act I contains the whole legend no less that Act III. Cathbad's prophecy is woven into Deirdre's tapestry to seal the fate of the sons of Usna. On the one hand, we can say that the tapestry reminds us that a destiny is being spun out on stage. On the other, we can see that the tapestry is a symbol of what Deirdre and Naisi become at the end of the play. Deirdre elevates
nature to the level of art in "figuring" the three young hunters "chasing in the green gap of a wood," in giving the scene permanence and immortality. But she and Naisi are also immortalized. By the end of the play they have become myth. They will be, as Deirdre says in her final speech, "a joy and a triumph to (the) ends of life and time." 17

We can appreciate the archetype of time initially in Deirdre's manner of speaking. Her speeches to Conchubor, particularly when he informs her that one day she will be Queen of Ulster, are abrupt, blunt, clipped, and we cannot help feeling Deirdre has no time to waste on this offensive old man and wants to terminate the conversation as quickly as possible.

CONCHUBOR. The gods save you, Deirdre. I have come up bringing you rings and jewels from Emain Macha.

DEIRDRE. The gods save you.

CONCHUBOR. What have you brought from the hills?

DEIRDRE (quite self-possessed). A bag of nuts, and twigs for our fire at the dawn of day.

CONCHUBOR (showing annoyance in spite of himself). And it's that way you're picking up the manners will fit you to be Queen of Ulster?

DEIRDRE (made a little defiant by the tone). I have no wish to be queen.

CONCHUBOR (almost sneeringly). You'd wish to be dressing in your duns and grey, and you herding your geese or driving your calves to their shed--

17 Works, IV, 269.
like the common lot scattered in the glens.

DEIRDRE (very defiant). I would not, Conchubor. (She goes to tapestry and begins to work). A girl born the way I'm born is more likely to wish for a mate who'd be her likeness....18

Conversely, Deirdre's speeches to Naisi are slow, languorous, and full of rich imagery. Each moment is treasured and relished for its own sake.19

NAISI. It's a long while men have been talking of Deirdre, the child who had all gifts, and the beauty that has no equal; there are many know it, and there are kings would give a great price to be in my place this night and you grown to a queen.

DEIRDRE. It isn't many I'd call, Naisi...and I was in the woods at the full moon and I heard a voice singing. Then I gathered up my skirts, and I ran on a little path I have to the verge of a rock, and I saw you pass by underneath, in your crimson cloak, singing a song, and you standing out beyond your brothers are called the flower of Ireland.

NAISI. It's for that you called us in the dusk?

DEIRDRE (in a low voice). Since that, Naisi, I have been one time the likes of a ewe looking for a lamb that has been taken from her...and all times dreading Emain.

NAISI (pulling himself together and beginning to draw back a little). Yet it should be a lonesome thing to be in this place and you born for great company.

DEIRDRE (softly). This night I have the best company in the whole world.

18 Works, IV, 189-191.

NAISI (still a little formally). It's yourself is the best company, for when you're queen in Emain you will have none to be your match or fellow.

DEIRDRE. I will not be queen in Emain.

NAISI. Conchubor has made an oath you will, surely.

DEIRDRE. It's for that maybe I'm called Deirdre, the girl of many sorrows...for it's a sweet life you and I could have Naisi....

The archetype of time can be appreciated also in the content of the speeches of the major characters in the play. From the outset Conchubor's attitude toward time bespeaks a quantitative orientation; in his opinion, for example, longevity is the ideal no matter what the terms. For twenty years the High King roamed the empty halls of Emain bewailing his state and dreaming of the day when Deirdre would become his bride. During this interim time was "reduced to an extension of space that must be filled up." Ironically, though Conchubor's actions were directed toward thwarting fate, fate actually ran his life. The knowledge of Cathbad's prophecy paralyzed his natural inclinations and brought about a "wildness and confusion" in his own mind.

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20 Works, IV, 209.


stresses the psychological effects of Conchubor's obsession with time early in Act II:

Stiff and lonesome on the throne, and he raging out at all who go against him. And when he hears any person saying a word of the woods of Alban, and the life on them you'll see his eyes growing wicked and drawing back into his head.  

The more Conchubor struggles to resist the pressure of destiny, the greater his loss of freedom and the more certain we become that the "infernal machine" will emerge the winner in this cosmic struggle between nature and civilization. Time, Conchubor painfully realizes after Deirdre's death, destroys those who refuse to accept the natural order of things. Death is timelessness; it completes the "arc of life."  

Lavarcham's position is much the same as the High King's. Though her lot has been miserable, and though she stands on the threshold of old age with its new forms of mental and physical isolation, she heroically continues to strive. She even goes so far as to maintain that life can be pleasurable without youth or love. "There's little hurt getting old, though young girls and poets do be storming at the shape of things," Lavarcham tells Deirdre in a last minute effort to persuade her to stay in Alban:

Take my word...the day'll come you'll have more joy having the sense of an old woman and you with

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23 From a speech deleted from the last draft of the play. See Works, IV, 216.
24 Diamond, p. ix.
your little grandsons shrieking round you, then
I'd have this night putting on the red mouth and
the white arms you have, to go walking lonesome
byways with a gamey king.25

With each successive tragedy Lavarcham becomes more and more
the embodiment of what Shaw called the Life-Force. After
Naisi has been struck down, the old nurse pleads with Deirdre
to retire to a "sunny place" and begin life anew. And when
Deirdre is dead, her will to live is focused on the ageing
High King. In the final tableau she is shown leading the
disconsolate Conchubor to a quiet hut in the forest.26

Deirdre's idea of time changes within the course of the
play, but it always involves qualitative values: she would
live a brief life intensely. At the start of the play her
conception of time is much like a child's in that her response
to the passage of time is limited to the sensory-motor level.
In other words, she cannot perceive time apart from the events
and activities which fill her day.27 This egocentric "child"
who "takes her will" and gives "little heed for what she was
born" has no thought but to be "straying around picking

25Works, IV, 219-221.
26Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama (London,
27For any analysis of the relationship between the
primitive conception of time and the "lived duration" of
childhood, see Jean Piaget, The Child's Conception of Time,
flowers or nuts or sticks itself. "28 Though time has no meaning for her, several kinds of experiences have temporal connotations: she recognizes the rhythms of nature as well as those governing her own daily existence—meals, play, sleep, the presence or absence of Conchubor—as she goes about "gathering new life." Still time is not charged with value; it has no objective significance. It is only when Conchubor announces that her stay on Slieve Fuadh will be terminated within a fortnight that she becomes aware of time as a life-value. Then she realizes how unconsciously she has been "watching the days getting a great speed passing one by." "Terrified with the reality that is before her," she begs Naisi to take her north: "It should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest if it's a short space only."29

Grasping time is not tantamount to accepting time. An increase in the pressure of destiny does not move Deirdre at first to reconcile herself to the fate foretold by the Druid mantic. Her initial reaction is to deny the existence of linear time by fleeing to Alban. For seven idyllic years

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28 Works, IV, 185.

29 Works, IV, 209. Perhaps Sartre is right when he asserts that a consciousness of time flowing is restricted to those who are willing to see it. For a discussion of this point, see Margaret Church, Time and Reality: Studies in Contemporary Fiction (Chapel Hill, 1963), p. 254.
she and Naisi seem to stop time. Then one morning "in a shower of dawn" the sound of Conchubor's messenger destroys "the quiet of the woods" and the illusion of stability which these two young lovers had so carefully constructed. The event is one of those pregnant moments when time is fulfilled.

Deirdre would prefer to remain in Alban "having happiness like ours" evermore, but she intuits that something has changed. She wonders "is it a game worth playing, living on till you're dried and old, and our joy is gone forever."³⁰

If Deirdre is inwardly convinced of the futility of fleeing time, her real acceptance of time does not occur until she overhears Naisi's conversation with Fergus and learns that their happy love will eventually lose its ardor. She "stops with stony wonder" as she catches Naisi's portentous speech to Conchubor's friend:

I'll not tell you a lie. There have been days a while past when...I've a dread upon me a day'd come I'd weary of her (Deirdre's) voice, (very slowly) and Deirdre'd see I'd wearied.³¹

Deirdre's epiphany is existential in character. Intensely aware that the "spell" of love is wearing off, and unwilling to watch their love "waste" away, she resolves to return to Emain Macha. Her speeches to Naisi at this point are suffused with emotion as she clearly and gravely faces the fact

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³⁰Works, IV, 219.

³¹Works, IV, 227.
that the "tide" of their lives is turning:

It's this hour we're between the daytime and a night where there is sleep forever, and isn't it a better thing to be following on to a near death than to be bending the head down, and dragging with the feet, and seeing one day a blight showing upon love where it is sweet and tender?32

One of the results of Deirdre's acceptance of time is her tacit admission of the reality of death.33 Griefladen she adjusts to the tremendous brute fact that she and Naisi cannot freeze this paradisiacal situation. Should they attempt to do so, they would be like leaves frostbitten before the season for their natural decay. Even the woods of Alban are not thick enough or dark enough to shield a queen from the horrors of death and time:

Woods of Cuan, woods of Cuan...It's seven years we've had a life was joy only and this day we're going west, this day we're facing death maybe, and (goes and looks toward Owen) death should be a poor untidy thing, though it's a queen that dies.34

Deirdre, who has for a few years found an acre of eternity in the midst of time, is forced after Naisi's revelation to separate the temporal from the everlasting. She begins now to develop a concept of time which relates to her own

32 Works, IV, 231-233.

33 In Acceptance of Time (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1950), no. 12, George Boas convincingly argues that a refusal to accept death is equivalent to a denial of time.

34 Works, IV, 239.
special being. She realizes that her name "Deirdre of the Sorrows" carried numinous significance. It is at once a legend and a prophecy; it is a means of uniting the past and the future in the present:

I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn and muddy, for it is I have had a life that will be envied by great companies. It was not by a low birth I made kings uneasy, and they sitting in the halls of Emain. It was not a low thing to be chosen by Conchubor, who was wise, and Naisi had no match for bravery...It is not a small thing to be rid of grey hairs and the loosening of teeth.35

The nightmarish existence of Conchubor and Lavarcham is the best testimony to the wisdom of Deirdre's death-oriented conduct.36 In this regard Synge probably expected his audience to draw parallels between his work and the ancient Celtic myth of Tristan and Iseult.37 Like Tristan and Iseult, Deirdre and Naisi enjoy their idyllic existence for several years at the end of which they deliver themselves up the King. Then, too, in both tales, the lovers' motives are difficult, if not impossible, to determine. In the prototypic model, after shamelessly deceiving King Mark for thirty-six months, Tristan suddenly complies with the rule of suzerain fealty and restores Iseult to the monarch. The reasons

35 Works, IV, 267-269.
advanced for this enigmatic gesture range from sincere repentance to a wearing off of the love potion, but none of them are convincing, and the point is well taken that the couple are strongly motivated by a "desire for death" which will "redeem their destiny." Similarly, the motives that impel Deirdre to return home are decidedly nebulous. There is her fear of growing old in a foreign land; there is her longing to embrace a fate which will guarantee immortality; there is her awful presentiment that once her beauty has faded, Naisi will find her wearisome, but none of these is completely satisfactory. Behind all of them is a gnawing awareness that primordial time—the time of fairy tales—is short-lived. Just before their deaths, Deirdre and Naisi argue, and Deirdre sees that time already threatens their perfect joy:

We've a dream, but this night waked us surely.
In a little while we've lived too long, Naisi,
and isn't it a poor thing we should miss the safety of the grave, and we trampling its edge?

38Denis de Rougemont, Love in the Western World, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Greenwich, 1966), p. 47.


40Works, IV, 255.
The safety of the grave refers, of course, to the ability of the grave to preserve and protect their love in its pristine state. Yet even the greatest loves are subject to tarnish. This quarrel is a precursor of others which might follow if they choose to live until their time is "worn out."

Temporal considerations are not limited to the plot and theme of Deirdre of the Sorrows. Time is also an essential part of the metaphoric structure of the play. On one level, the history of the world is contained in this brief story of fatal love. In Act I are numerous references to a great flood—an obvious analogue to the Old Testament deluge and the catastrophic destruction of the world by water. When Lavarcham sees Deirdre and Naisi clinging to each other, she cries out, "Are you choosing this night to destroy the world?" And the Old Woman looking out the window predicts that the High King will rue this day:

There's a mountain of blackness in the sky, and the greatest rain falling has been these long years on the earth. The gods help Conchubor. He'll be a sorry man this night reaching his Dun, and he with all his spirits, thinking to himself he'll be putting his arms around her in two days or three. 41

Deirdre and Naisi find sanctuary from the coming deluge on their golden isle across the sea. But this happy state does not last. The "peace" branch which Conchubor sends signals the end rather than the beginning of a new covenant

41 Works, IV, 201.
and a new cycle of life. For a second time Deirdre's world is threatened with annihilation. Again, as in the Biblical account, the destruction of this mythical kingdom comes through fire, through conflagration. Emain is ablaze, the Old Woman announces, the moment that Conchubor returns with news of Naisi's murder: "Conchubor is coming, surely. I see the glare of flames throwing a light upon his cloak."42 Naisi's death "has left the whole world scorched and desolate." By the time Fergus arrives to rescue Deirdre from Conchubor's men "the flames of Emain have gone out;" all that remains of a once glorious realm is "charred timber," the smell of burning, and "a heap of rubbish in the storehouse of many crowns."43

Finally, we are reminded of the time motif in the many allusions to natural time-reckonings. Here it is necessary to point out that primitive time is "enacted time, a celebration of a change in the position of the sun, the moon, the stars, of the change of the seasons."44 It is "qualitative and concrete," and as such is "experienced and thought of in terms of cosmic correspondences between man, earth, and heaven."45

42Works, IV, 263.
43Works, IV, 265.
44Plessner, p. 239.
45Ibid.
Most primitives measure time cyclically according to "the apparent motion of the heavenly bodies about the earth, which is caused by the rotation of the earth on its axis."46 The day rather than the year is the most common unit of time-reckoning because the year is "a very long period, and it is only with difficulty and at a later stage that it can be conceived and surveyed as a whole."47 Thus we are not surprised to hear Lavarcham refer to premature death as "the shortening of the day of life" or Deirdre describe her stay in Alban as a short rest "between the daytime and the long night."48 On Slieve Fuadh there was little need for sophisticated time-pieces or calendars. Twilight set the time with sufficient accuracy for rendezvous with Naisi or evening meals. There were no pressing appointments, and when one wished to determine the hour, one simply observed the length of the shadows.

Longer time divisions in the play are indicated by natural phenomena such as heat and cold, rainfall and drought, vegetation and snow, growing and withering. Here Synge adheres to the ancient custom of subdividing the year into "seasonal points" (brief periods allotted for certain

47Ibid., p. 11.
48This phrase appears in the Abbey Theatre version of the play but not in Saddlemeyer’s edition. See Works, IV, 232.
occupations, e.g., sowing) and seasons. Deirdre's allusions to the apple trees budding by the post of the door and "the smell of June in the tops of the grasses" fall into the former category, while Lavarcham's homely distinction between human and non-human sexuality is a good example of the latter:

Birds go mating in the spring of the year, and ewes at the leaves falling, but a young girl must have her lover in all courses of the sun and moon.

The various conceptions of time illustrated in the play illumine Synge's own attitude toward temporaeity. On the one hand, Synge suggests that to be liberated from time one must accept not only time but also death and change. On the other, he implies that time is a neutral factor in our lives. It can be a destructive source of pain and suffering as well as a beneficient means of creating and transmitting myth. More to the point, he would have us believe that time is a bete noire only when we ascribe to the eschatalogical theory of the universe. If we look at our lives cyclically as part of one, unchanging, immutable law of history, the pattern of birth, growth, and decline seems less tragic. The quest then becomes a quest for "an identification with mankind in

49 Nilsson, p. 46.
50 Works, IV, 213.
general" instead of an insane search for personal glory. Synge gained his own identity by comparing and contrasting his own life-style with the modi vivendi of simple peasants and certain legendary figures from Irish history. In this way, he acquired simultaneously a sense of his own uniqueness as a person and a feeling of oneness with men in all ages and all climes.

This dialectic interaction between the primitive sensibility and modern civilization also has a spatial dimension which, au fond, cannot be separated from its temporality. Deirdre and Naisi habitually spatialize time. It is perhaps unnecessary to do more than refer briefly to Deirdre's characterization of Alban as "a great space" without "weariness or growing old or any sadness of mind," and thus to the implicit spatialization of time which, paradoxical as it may seem, results in a complex tissue of anthropocosmic values. This peculiar space-time relationship, we suggested in Chapter I, is an essential feature of the primitive milieu. Thorough investigation has shown that the primitive mentality differs from the civilized mind principally in its modus operandi: savages pay great attention to the "mystical connections" between phenomena and little heed to their

51 On the psychological implications of the notion of cyclic time, see Hans Meyerhoff, Time in Literature (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965), p. 82.
objective differences or significance. It goes without saying that the primitive finds no difficulty in speaking about what philosophers commonly refer to as the problems of "creation in time" and the "infinity of the world." But to argue in the nineteenth century manner that space and time are "separate abstract mathematical fields in which the results of calculations" are represented is to deny what sense experience reveals to be true. In the discussion which follows, then, it should be clear that the isolation of specific spatial images for further examination is simply a methodological means of getting at the underlying structural elements which comprise the subtext of the play. This exercise does not preclude the mutual participation of spatial and temporal orders in a larger, more universal plot-pattern.

To return to our original point. With each successive reading we become more and more aware of how poignantly the existential environment in which the various characters move conditions their individual needs. This should not surprise us, for from ancient times landscape or setting has served as an emotional extension of the personal or collective psyche. We need only think of "Odysseus in Wonderland."  

Yet not until recently has there been widespread agreement that the opposite is true: the psychic situation of the person is controlled by his environment, more particularly by the effects of that environment and his responses to it. Synge himself believed, as we indicated in Chapter I, that the environment was the single most important factor in forming the Irish personality—far more important than heredity, racial characteristics or personal experience. Modern psychology would seem to suggest that he was correct in that belief.

Those who point to the environment as the prime factor in determining human behavior, attitudes, ideals, and institutions have posited what might be called a "politics of space." According to Kurt Lewin, the leading proponent of topological psychology, each one of us exists in a "life-space" which is "experienced subjectively." This "life-space" consists of the person plus the total "psycho-biological" world as it exists for him at any given moment in time. From the relations of the particular individual to the historical "field" behavior is derived.

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56 Marrow, p. 35.
Emphasis here, as in primitive modes of apprehending the world, is on the "here-and-now." Behavior depends neither on the past nor on the future but on the "psychological present," and thus any change in the life-space will effect a corresponding change in behavior. 57 Normally, as the individual grows and develops, the "boundaries" of the life-space are extended until it becomes necessary for him to move into adjacent new "regions" where his present emotional needs can be met. A serious crisis, however, may force him to hastily abandon one region and take refuge in a "foreign" zone. Because each region has a sharply-defined shape or form, tensions are built up within and between the regions which operate in shifting patterns of conflict and reinforcement to produce radical structural changes within the person which will, in turn, alter his goals and needs. 58

From the standpoint of dynamic psychology, "the life-space of each individual is a totality which is equivalent to the totality of the whole physical world." 59 Dramatically speaking, life-space refers to the fixed setting and decor which mould the dramatis personae and maintain them in their principal roles. In Act I of Synge's play Lavarcham's

57Ibid.


59Lewin, Principles, p. 68.
house is the dominant life-space. Houses are psychological indicators of intimate values, and in this case, though the house belongs ostensibly to Deirdre's guardian, the whole body of images attendant to it bespeaks the High King's absolute control over its contents and inhabitants. Conchubor, no more than Dan Burke in The Shadow of the Glen and Timmy the Smith in Well of the Saints, has no existence apart from his property—in essence, a type of closed space. Both the country house and his Ulster palace are monuments to his power and wealth, but they provide none of the emotional security needed to foster the development of Deirdre's cultural and personal potentialities. Though structurally sound, convenient, and comfortable, they have a distinct aura of death about them: for two decades Deirdre has been "walled up" on Slieve Fuadh while the High King buried himself alive in Emain Macha.

In light of the theme of containment which pervades the first act, the furnishings of this atypical life-space take on a highly symbolic import. Conchubor's house is a motionless house. Near the back wall stands a "heavy oak chest" and a "large press" in which are kept the mats and hangings sent up from Ulster. Everything from the skins of the rams of Connaught to the skillets and mugs with the "mark" of

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Ulster on the rim is locked up. We need not stretch our imagination too far to realize that in the domain of values "a key closes more often than it opens." Even the flasks of wine are numbered lest the "faithful" servants be inclined to pour a drop or two every now and then. Outside the house the natural world is unrestrained, vital. It is a "non-house" in the same way that the "other" is a "not-I," and as we might expect, between the house and the "non-house" all sorts of contradictions are established. Inside the house every item is counted and padlocked; outside our senses are bombarded by every shade and form of motion: birds twitter in the treetops, rivers flow into shimmering blue pools, and hunters race merrily through the woods. The end-result of all this motion is that we feel a natural revulsion toward Conchubor's stifling existence.

Synge uses the arrival of Naisi and his brothers to foreshadow the freedom of movement which awaits Deirdre in Alban. The three hunters are a collective symbol of the "forbidden" regions outside the parameters of Deirdre's present life-space. They represent the first temptation to move beyond the boundaries of Slieve Fuadh to a new zone. Lavarcham knows that she cannot stop Ainnele and Ardan from entering Conchubor's house any more than she can prevent thrushes from coming from the north or young birds from

61 Ibid., p. 73.
flying out to sea. Once Deirdre has experienced the effects of freedom all of her actions are directed toward leaving the restraining world of Slieve Fuadh and satisfying the new emotional desires which Naisi has awakened in her.

Naisi and his brothers possess that Dionysian vitality which civilized men associate with the primitive state and which they, regardless of their more sophisticated methods of coercion, are powerless to control. All three virtually assault Conchubor's house, and when Lavarcham accuses Naisi of being a "tippler" and a "stealer" he impudently replies:

At your age you should know there are nights when a king like Conchubor will spit upon his arm ring, and queens will stick their tongues out at the rising moon. We're that way this night, and it's not wine we're asking only. At that moment Deirdre emerges from the inner room dressed "like Emer in Dundealgan or Maeve in her house in Connaught." Overawed by Naisi's tone and seeing that Deirdre can no longer be swayed to remain in her charge, Lavarcham quietly withdraws to Brandon, leaving Ainnele to marry them "by the sun and the moon and the whole earth." Free of the artificial trappings of civilization, Deirdre and Naisi begin their common life in union with and submission to the

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62See Works, IV, 231.
63Works, IV, 205.
64Works, IV, 199.
65Works, IV, 215.
ordre naturel.

Act II moves from the concentrated space of Slieve Fuadh to the open space of Alban. Once again the life-space is wedded to the temporal dimension, but here the temporal-spatial relationship is reversed. Whereas in Act I time was spatialized in terms of "house" and "non-house," in this act space is temporalized; that is to say, Deirdre and Naisi look upon their new environment as a Utopian world, a perfect world reminiscent of an age "when man and beast were on the same level." 66

The vision of life expressed here is essentially primitive in that it includes the idea of a "happy, primordial past." 67 Primitive conceptions of the world tend to assume that "the world is at its best at the beginning of each cycle and grows progressively worse until the cycle reaches its term;" in time, it is believed, "the Golden Age (like all others) will return." 68

For chronological and cultural primitivists alike this Golden Age represents a time when "struggle and injustice do not exist." 69 Whether it be the Biblical Eden or the

69 van der Leeuw, p. 336.
Classical Hesperides, the location of this "place of perfect repose and inner harmony" is always a garden—an Arcadian paradise

somewhere or sometime outside normal human experience, whether 'off the map' in some remote quarter of the world, or in Elysium after death, or in the dim future or distant past.70

Designed primarily as a "mental hideout from one or another set of earthly imperfections," this "green world" purports to help man "move beyond" or "escape from" the unresolved problems and tensions of real life.71 It signals a beginning, a return to magical days when the laws of time and history do not apply.72

As a place of retreat or withdrawal, writes Professor Harry Berger in an excellent discussion of the Renaissance imagination, the "green world" possesses two essential qualities. Its first reason for being is to "lure us away from the evil or confusion of everyday life." But as soon as it has fulfilled its particular psychological or social function in the life of the individual it becomes "deficient." Hence


a second characteristic of the *locus amoneus* is ambiguity:

In its positive aspects it provides a temporary haven for recreation or clarification, experiment or relief; in its negative aspects it projects the urge of the paralyzed will to give up, escape, work magic, abolish time and flux and the intense reality of other minds. 73

Pertinently, "the artist, philosopher, and scientist conceive of their second worlds as only temporarily self-sufficient, and ultimately as interpretations which (they hope) will revise the first world." 74

The concept of the green world includes no presuppositions about the quality of experience encountered there, 75 but as an ideal configuration or *Gestalt*, this paradisiacal state has certain common features. These Barbara Kiefer Lewalski has compiled for us in a very perceptive essay on Milton's Eden. According to Mrs. Lewalski, the perennial Garden of Paradise is "sensuous, pastoral, inaccessible"; its climate is perfect and

the flora grow in vast but ordered profusion,

the trees bear golden fruit, and there are no noxious plants or savage animals. 76

In this Edenic life-space "man is in complete harmony with

73Berger, pp. 73-74.
74Ibid., p. 75.
75Ibid., p. 50.
Nature, which supplies all his wants without any need for his labor." Any task he undertakes is "merely a provision for pleasant exercise" or "a deterrent to idleness." In the last analysis,

Life in the mythic garden state, though doomed ultimately to deterioration and destruction, is felt as 'timeless' and complete, consisting of ...repeated ritual gestures rather than of change and development in historical time.77

The list of "earthly paradises" after which Synge might have modeled his own Eden is vast—as a quick glance at Giammetti's The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic (1966) will clearly testify. Besides the Biblical gardens (Garden of Paradise and hortus conclusus of the Song of Songs), there are classical groves, medieval orchards, Christian Latin Paradises and Renaissance loci amoeni. From Giametti's fine survey of the forms and functions of Edenic sites, we may justly conclude that the garden is at once a quasi-historical place, an archetypal symbol, and a mythological construct around which the more nebulous aspects of cultural primitivism might revolve. In as much as the garden trope stands for and concretely embodies the whole way of life we have recently defined as primitive, it is the literary pars pro toto par excellence.

Synge's interest in Hebrew literature, Renaissance

77Ibid., p. 89.
drama, and Wordsworthian poetry no doubt contributed greatly to his conception of the Irish "land of Youth." Perhaps his greatest debt, however, was to early Celtic nature poetry which teemed with descriptions of green glades and woodland retreats where men weary of civilization sought a securia quies et nescia fallere vita. Assuming that ninth-century Celtic nature poetry can be categorized at all, it is, in the main, the outgrowth of a pastoral vision. Writes Professor E. Sieper:

Die keltische Poesie konnen wir vielleicht am besten mit einen einzige Worten charakterisieren; sie ist unendlich primitiv.

The key phrase is, of course, "infinitely primitive." What principally attracted Synge was the ancient bards' emphasis

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78Corkery, p. 20, stresses the influence of Elizabethan drama on the "tough" style of Deirdre of the Sorrows.

79Una Ellis-Fermor agrees substantially with this position. In her Irish Dramatic Movement (2nd ed.; London, 1954), p. 164, she suggests that Synge's plays have much in common with ancient Celtic poetry. Then she goes on to say: In that poetry a distinctive quality is the sense of intimacy between man and nature about him; animals, birds, trees and flowers are not only a source of delight but almost a part of man himself. And it is...in the descriptive imagery of Synge...that the happy, gay and friendly relations with nature are to be found (as in the ancient poets) as clearly revealed as those fiercer or sterner moods which contemporaries converted more often to pathetic or romantic pathetic symbolism.


81Cited in ibid., p. 79.
on objectivity. After a century of "feeling flowers" and "leafy facts" the discovery of a poetic movement not concerned with disclosing how Nature harmonizes or clashes with the individual's particular mood was a cause for rejoicing. Here was an entire school of nature poetry "interested in the poetic aspects of nature for their own sake," an entire school of poetry which did not seek in nature "for anything more than a utilitarian bearing on human affairs." If ancient Gaelic verse was "simple" and "sincere," it was also tough. In contrast to certain nineteenth-century poets who while mouthing a desire to flee urban civilization never got beyond the edge of the forest, ninth-century Celtic lyricists, especially the Hermetic variety, experienced what they wrote about. They were the original "Simple Lifers, who really did live the simple life." None of them possessed that "weak" turn of mind which Ruskin claimed "admits" the "pathetic fallacy":

The temperament which admits the pathetic fallacy is...that of a mind and body in some sort too weak to deal fully with what is before them or upon them; borne away, or over-clouded, or over-dazzled by emotion....

Returning to Nature was for them more than a temporary

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82Ibid., pp. 79-80.

83Ibid., p. 108.

"emotional regeneration"; it had momentous spiritual and psychological significance. 85

If we look carefully at the garden imagery in Deirdre, we will immediately notice that the content of Synge's "green world" is straight out of the ancient book of Celtic verse. In the Spring "cuckoos are making a stir" and "larks are cocking their crests on the edge of the clouds" much as they were in tenth century lyric poetry:

The loud hardy cuckoo calls, welcome noble summer!
The bitterness of bad weather subsides, the branching wood is a + + hedge.

A timid persistent frail creature sings at the top of his voice, The lark chants clear tidings; excellent May Day of quiet colors. 86

Summers in Alban are no different from summers described by the ancient bards: Deirdre and Naisi spend their days chasing otters, throwing lines for salmon, and running hares. 87 On fine June evenings they can be seen "watching the heifers walking to the haggard with long shadows in the

85Jackson, p. 108.
86From "Boyish Exploits of Finn"; Cited in ibid., pp. 23-24.
87Compare a fourteenth century poem: Glen of the sleek brown round-faced otters that are pleasant and active in fishing, many are the white-winged stately swans, and salmon breeding along the rocky brink. (Cited in ibid., p. 34.)
Winter is the season of berries, and in a simple analogy drawn from a seventh century nature poem, Deirdre declares "the berries on the thorns are a red wall." Note how closely Synge imitates the tone as well as the rhetoric of his source:

The concealing tresses of a green-trunked yew which upholds the sky;
fair is the place; the green wall of an oak against the storm.

Synge's garden, then, is a troubadour's paradise, a life-space where microcosm and macrocosm join in a rapturous paean to Venus and Psyche.

Deirdre and Naisi manage to live happily in the garden-paradise of Alban for seven years. At first their life-space seems to be infinite, to stretch endlessly on all sides without direction: all the exuberant phenomena of the vegetable kingdom are theirs to explore and enjoy, and like "unspoiled children of nature" they consort with all the denizens of this enchanted forest. Eventually, however, the

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88 Works, IV, 219. The lowing of heifers is a constant in Pre-Renaissance "garden" literature. See "The Song of Man-chin of Liath," in Jackson, p. 4.

89 Works, IV, 231.

90 Underlining mine; Cited in Jackson, p. 6.

91 Term used by Ernest A. Boyd in Ireland's Literary Renaissance (Dublin, 1916), p. 322.

landscape appears to take on boundaries, and in the context of this new situation, it becomes constricting. The new constellation simply points the direction and intensity of the need for change.

If we agree with those scholars who maintain that the "green world" is a "static place" in which "life holds its breath" and "nothing happens," we need not search widely for explanations of Deirdre's abrupt homecoming. As Lionel Trilling tells us, "peace" and "bliss" are anathema to the active person:

The two words propose to us a state of virtually infantile passivity which is the negation of the 'more life' that we crave, the 'more life' of spiritual militancy.

Men "dread Eden" because it is narcissistic and sterile, because it eschews conflict, and without conflict the human personality cannot flower.

The collapse of the "green world" is presaged by Owen's "splitting his gut" in a fit of rage. The "ill-luck" reflected in this wise-fool's eyes is soon transferred to the landscape, and by the time the curtain rises on Act III we are in a Sartrean hell in which inscrutable fate reigns and from which there is no possible exit. Emain Macha is the ironic reversal of the garden-paradise of Alban. Whereas the indefinite vast landscape of Alban suggested expansion and security, the unsuitable lodgings in which Conchubor houses

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93 Hofmann, p. 363. 94 Cited in Giametti, p. 358.
the returning exiles connote a toppling world in which hidden demonic forces hold sway. Synge establishes the mood of the following scene in his opening stage directions: "Tent below Emain, with shabby skins and benches. There is an opening at each side and at back, the latter closed." 95

Similarly, Lavarcham's choice of images in the first few minutes of the scene sets the tone for what is to transpire. When Conchubor commands her to tell him why Owen has not returned as instructed, Lavarcham answers: "He went spying on Naisi, and now the worms is spying on his own inside." 96 A little later, the old servant being convinced that the High King intends to force the hand of fate, characterizes Owen as "the first corpse in the game you'll play this night in Emain." 97

The use of words and images associated with death occurs elsewhere. Deirdre's last speeches are saturated with references to opened graves that are "wide and deep." In one of the most poignant she says:

I'll say so near that grave we seem three lonesome people, and by a new made grave there's no man will keep brooding on a woman's lips, or on the man he hates. 98

95Works, IV, 241.
96Works, IV, 243.
97Works, IV, 245.
98Works, IV, 253.
More often than not, the ubiquitous grave images are reinforced a la Jacobean drama by metaphors of disease and disfigurement. Angrily aroused by Deirdre's demand that he abandon his brothers and flee with her into the neighboring hills, Naisi cruelly rebuffs his wife by saying "that mockery is in your eyes this night will spot the face of Emain with a plague of pitted graves." And when the High King savagely informs Lavarcham that because he has reared Deirdre from childhood he has a right to see her whenever he pleases, the latter questions this prerogative in language charged with tragic knowledge:

A good right is it? Haven't the blind a good right to be seeing and the lame to be dancing, and the dummies singing lines? It's that right you have to be looking for gaiety on Deirdre's lips.

If the king continues to "go rampaging" he can expect "nothing but death for many, and a sloppy face of trouble" for himself.

The feeling of hopelessness is increased by the many animal images, nearly all of which are fierce or repellent: "goats scratching," "sheep coughing," "weasels and wild cats crying on a lonely wall." Add to these the sinister flora

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99Works, IV, 257.
100Works, IV, 243.
101Works, IV, 267.
of the post-apocalyptic world and we cannot help feeling that we are about to witness the end of a civilization, of the heroic civilization at least. In her famous lament in which she contrasts her former happiness with her present misery, Deirdre recalls the simple things which moved her: gone are the flowers and ferns and "beech-trees were silver and copper and ash-trees were fine gold"\(^\text{102}\) and in their place are "nettles and thistles and docks."\(^\text{103}\) Indeed, the enchanted garden has become a veritable wasteland and man is reduced to formless clay.

All of the imagery of destruction and annihilation is centralized in the motif of conflagration. Fire, writes Gaston Bachelard in a very important study of the mythic implications of spontaneous combustion, is "a privileged phenomenon which can explain anything." He goes on:

If all that changes slowly may be explained by life, all that changes quickly is explained by fire. Fire is the ultra-living element. It is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substance... Or it can go down into the substance and hide there, latent and pent-up, like hate and vengeance. Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil... It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of

\(^{102}\text{Works, IV, 247.}\)

\(^{103}\text{Works, IV, 259.}\)
universal explanation. 104

In contrast to the cleansing or gentle fires on the hilltops of Alban, the fire depicted at the end of the play is a violent, tumultuous, unnatural heat which threatens to reduce everything to the state of nothingness. The flames of Emain start upward suddenly in the dark night, and as they spread throughout the kingdom they emblematize Deirdre's desire to "speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion to its hereafter." Love, death and fire are united in the final sequence. Deirdre approaches the grave as she would a funeral pyre. Separated from Naisi, consumed with a burning desire to be reunited to him, she contemplates the "great joys were her share always" as she presses the knife into her breast. But despite her utter loneliness, her death is not a private act; it is a cosmic experience in which the whole Celtic universe participates.

The two great motifs of time and space converge dramatically in the final moment of the play. Lavarcham and Conchubor, the last surviving members of an ancient and noble race, mournfully watch Emain Macha catch fire and blacken the skies of the four kingdoms of Ireland. This cataclysmic reduction of the High King's court to ashes painfully reminds the Abbey audience that they are

concurrently witnessing the fall of a great house and the
death of the heroic ideal. Yet even at this bleakest hour
in human history the primitive vision shines through to give
new hope and new inspiration to the future generations of
Celts. There is "a great dew falling" when the old monarch
and his faithful servant grope off into the distance. Here
dew, the traditional harbinger of the fulfillment of a "pre-
determined cycle" after dissolution has taken place, \(^{105}\) sig-
nals the dawn of a new age. True to the primitive cosmology,
the end of mythic time and mythic place in *Deirdre of the
Sorrows* represents a new beginning, a new opportunity for
man to conquer himself and his environment. Future Irishmen
would still wrestle with the problems of time and space, but
their struggles would be waged on the plane of the psyche
rather than on the lonely battlefields of Ulster. For Yeats
and Joyce the "cycle of the seasons" and the "green world"
would become points of embarkation for a psychological ex-
ploration of deep time and deep space.

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\(^{105}\) Harry Berger, Jr., "Andrew Marvell: The Poem as
299.
CHAPTER VII

THE RHETORIC OF PRIMITIVISM

A CONCLUDING STATEMENT

In a recent article entitled "The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism," Northrop Frye suggests that the task of the literary critic is two-fold: 1) to provide a "linear" reading of the text; and 2) to study the structural elements which connect it with other works in its class and with the body of literature as a whole.¹ In the preceding chapters we have attempted to fulfill these two requirements by attaching a deductive framework to the rhetorical analysis of each play. Now we must move on to more difficult and hazardous work. Instead of looking at each play separately in the context of specific cultural and literary phenomena, we must view Synge's entire output as an organic whole designed to clarify and strengthen his primitive vision.

Much of our difficulty as this point stems from a distinct blurring of the lines between existential and cultural primitivism. When Yeats advised Synge to "go to the Aran

Islands" and "express a life that has never found expression," was he talking about the "literal representation" of a personal experience? Or did Synge equate the "expression" of a life-style with the "dramatic imitation" of it? Indeed, in many ways, "literal representation" and "dramatic imitation" are poles apart—a point which becomes increasingly evident whenever we try to apply modern perspectives to Synge's plays. Take, for example, the problem of myth. Anthropologists tell us that we should view myth as "living reality," while aestheticians see it as simply a principle for organizing literary data having little or nothing to do with the original insights affixed to the primordial elements. On the other hand, who can say that those modern art-works which inspire men to implement the values of pre-literate societies in their own lives are not genuinely primitive? Hence before we can try to assess the full impact of Synge's primitivism, we must ask several pertinent

2Bronislaw Malinowski takes this position in Myth in Primitive Psychology (New York, 1926), p. 18.

questions: should Synge's plays be read as historical ac-
counts of life in rural Ireland? Or should they be looked
upon as independent objets d'art only incidentally based on
Synge's personal experiences in Aran? Finally, is there any-
thing peculiarly primitive about Synge's rhetoric, or can it
be totally explained in terms of its "primitive flavour" and
the environment which engendered it?

One inroad to Synge's stylistics might be through his
interest in photography. Synge purchased a hand camera from
a tourist on Inishmore during his first visit to Aran, and
thus became a member of that unique group of nineteenth-cen-
tury amateur photographer-writers which included such nota-
bles as Theophile Gautier, Lewis Carroll, Emile Zola, Oliver
Wendell Holmes, Charles Kingsley, Samuel Butler and George
Bernard Shaw. Though only approximately twenty-five of
Synge's photographs have survived, the few that do remain
indicate the direction of Synge's life's work. All of them
underscore the primitiveness of life in the Western isles:
"women carrying kelp, men in hookers, old people at their
doors, a crowd at the landing-place, men loading horses, peo-
ple of vivid character, pigs and children playing together."

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5John Masefield, John M. Synge: A Few Personal Recol-
Each photo treats its subject honestly, and in the best of them Synge manages to capture "the faceless, anonymous, and solitary nature of...the life of rural labour in many parts of Ireland." 6

Synge's photographs came at a time when the ends and purposes of the photographic medium were being hotly debated. In the leading journals of the day art historians and philosophers clashed again and again over the issue of realism versus idealism. The more popular realistic position, growing out of an antithesis to Romanticism and its adjuncts, was summarized by Hippolyte Taine: "I want to reproduce the objects as they are, or as they would be even if I did not exist." 7 The realists argued that the photographer's role ought to be that of recorder: the photographer should reproduce as precisely as possible the objects before his camera; he should give an exact, factual image of the workings of nature. Unlike the painter who transforms reality, the photographer merely duplicates the external universe: his primary concern is truth, not vision, and when most successfully employing the properties of his art he produces pictures which document the time and place in which he lives. 8

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6 Pocock, pp. 43-44.
The opponents of the documentarist position insisted that photography was an art form, and as such was committed to the creation of a supernormal world in which reality was imbued with imaginative qualities. The goal of photography, asserted one of the leaders of this school, is "not the achievement of the highest possible 'likeness' of the depicted subject, but the creation of an abstract work of art, featuring composition instead of documentation."\(^9\) The camera-eye is an instrument of inner projection in the tradition of the finest painting and sculpture; it is emphatic rather than spontaneous. If the photographer respects the object before his lens, he reserves the right to retouch his representation of that object in the interest of a more visually satisfying product.\(^10\)

The battle continued for the better part of twenty years, and in light of our most recent scientific discoveries we realize that both sides were mistaken. The most knowledgeable spokesmen on photography and the photographic image say that camera-perception does not involve registering an impartial image of reality; nor does it supplement or metamorphose reality as it exists. Camera-perception is a distinct type of imitation, a separate order of reality, which reveals "not the reality in itself, but a new appearance

\(^9\)Kracauer, p. 10.

\(^{10}\)Ibid.
correlated to the world of things." The camera-eye "restructures the real" so that it can no longer be considered "objective and immediate." 11

Synge, of course, was not familiar with this ontological perspective, but his own pictures do allow us to draw some interesting conclusions about his idea of "imitation." None of the photos could be classified as either "pure art" or "pure imitation." Instead they lie somewhere in between in that transpersonal world of archetypes and primary symbolic images where individual and type merge to produce a representative pattern distinguished by what Henry James called "solidity of specification." Originally, no doubt, they served as an appendix to *The Aran Islands*, but in time they lost their function as illustrations and became independent entities in which "being" and "meaning" coincide.

If we apply this same concept of imitation to Synge's dramatic productions, we arrive at a notion of primitivism which encompasses two interrelated *Weltanschauungen*: the one, a healthy interest in past civilizations in order to show modern man what of human nature has been sacrificed through technological progress, and the other, a mode of being which emphasizes "primary human nature." 12 The end-result is a


fusion of past and present which acknowledges cultural differences and historical incompatibilities. Each situation, character, and event in Synge's plays is a model or "likeness" with all the flaws and perfectives which any verbal or pictorial construct necessarily implies.

In a sense, Synge's rhetoric is also paradigmatic in that it is chiefly shaped by the thought-patterns and modes of expression he discovered in the hinterlands of his own country. Until recently when the spread of literacy and electricity made possible the development of a writing culture, Ireland was a verbal society. "The first and most important thing to remember about Irish literature," writes critic Frank O'Connor, "is that...the Irish never relied on books, always on oral tradition, on 'what the Old Man said'."\(^{13}\) Ireland was the last country in Europe to establish a national theatre, and at least one literary critic, Andrew Malone by name, ascribes the lack of interest in the drama to a "cultural system" which was rooted in the bardic poetry of ancient Gael:

In Ireland recitation took the place taken by representation in other European countries. The nobles and the aristocracy maintained the bards, and the ordinary folk maintained the shanachies, or story-tellers, to provide recreation and instruction. The spoken word was of the greatest importance, and the imagination of the listener

supplied all the dramatic action that was needed. The epic poem when recited by the bard in the halls of the nobility, or the story when told by the cottage fireside, brought to all sections of the people that dramatic excitement which their natures desired. 14

Not until the Edwardian Age when the recitations had degenerated to "a public reading of the weekly newspapers" were these hearthstone meetings disbanded. 15

Though the custom of nightly story-telling has largely disappeared on the mainland, in the Aran Islands it is still the principal form of recreation owing, in all probability, to the fact that "except for a few privately owned generators, there is no electricity." 16 During the long winter evenings the fisherfolk gather around a turf fire at some friendly cottage or in a stark, musty pub to listen to the songs and stories of the local bard. The repertoire of the bard of Inishmaan is somewhat limited nowadays, but in Synge's time "an ideal story teller could entertain his listeners every night for 4½ months without repeating a single story." 17 Many could relate 350 separate stories, and the


15 Ibid., p. 3.


most popular of the lot were capable of reciting from memory "the equivalent of half a dozen average-length novels." 18

If an oral culture values memory, it values manner of delivery perhaps even more. As late as 1929 Andrew Malone could say with certainty that as far as Irish audiences are concerned "the wording and form" in which the story or song is delivered "is of much greater importance than the idea or the thought that it may contain." 19 Synge himself was so conscious of the integral part played by sound in the total artistic effect that before settling on a prose style for Deirdre of the Sorrows he translated Villon, Petrarch, Vogelweide, and Musset into folk dialect. 20 Moreover, he frequently acknowledged borrowing phrases and constructions from Anglo-Irish writers who imitated the primitive language of the coast in their work. Lady Gregory was particularly proud of the fact that Synge had assured her that her translation of Cuchulain was "part" of his "daily bread." 21

Shortly after Synge's death, German philologist A. G. van Hamel set out to prove that the language of Synge's plays displays all the essential elements which make

18 Ibid.
19 Malone, p. 6.
Anglo-Irish a unique, peasant dialect. Confining his attention to diction and syntax, van Hamel pointed to numerous instances where the vocabulary and sentence structure depend upon an intimate knowledge of the grammatical peculiarities of Anglo-Irish. On every page of the collected works, van Hamel observes, Synge radically departs from the syntactical rules which govern contemporary English: infinitive constructions are substituted for subordinate clauses, verbal nouns are used in place of conjunctions, and result clauses are introduced with the expression "the way." Before any substantive containing the notion of action or any verbal construction indicating something that has just happened, Synge inserts the word "after." Thus Dan Burke is "after death" (he has just died), and the young priest in Riders to the Sea is "after bringing" Michael's shirt and stocking to the door of Maurya's cottage. Again, "and" clauses serve for time clauses, adjective clauses, causal clauses, and other subordinate constructions. Lavarcham's urgent speech to Conchubor in the closing act of Deirdre of the Sorrows is marked by a series of "brisk and breathless" sentence elements connected by "and":

22 van Hamel knew only the Maunsel edition published in 1910.


24 Ibid., p. 284.
He's (Conchubor's friend) stopped, surely, and that's a trick has me thinking you have it in mind to bring trouble this night on Emain and Ireland and the big world's east beyond them. And yet you'd do well to be going to your dun, and not putting shame on her meeting the High King, and she seamed and sweaty and in great disorder from the dust of many roads. Ah, Conchubor, my lad, beauty goes quickly in the woods, and you'd let a great gasp, I tell you, if you set your eyes this night on Deirdre. 25

Besides using native constructions, Synge saturates his dialogue with local expressions: e.g., "that length" (=as far as), "west" (=back), "a share of" (=some), "shut of" (=apart from), "the year that's gone" (=last year), "the time" (=when). Even his vocabulary is replete with Anglo-Irish words carrying special connotations. Van Hamel cites scores of examples, but two will suffice. "Destroyed" usually means "exhausted," though it can signify "death," and "black" is a synonym for "fatal," "accursed," "dark," "gloomy," "morose," "sad," and "severe." 26

If the Anglo-Irish dialect which Synge successfully imitated is a language in its own right, its syntax has much in common with Elizabethan English. 27 Even today


philologists are fond of pointing out that Shakespeare's "he is afeard to come" is generally employed in the agrarian districts. Odd constructions such as this, linguist van Hamel explains, owe their existence to certain socio-economic conditions which prevailed during the Jacobean era and after:

In the seventeenth century English was introduced by a large number of English settlers, but after that time no immigration of importance took place. Therefore English was not exposed to the same influences in Ireland as in England and, being more secluded in the former country than in the latter, it preserved many features that remind us of the seventeenth century. On the other hand, English did not spread among the common people in Ireland until recently, and even now it still has to force back the old Celtic speech.

The Irish peasants, van Hamel goes on to say, experienced "great difficulties in trying to pronounce sounds very different from their own" and "in adopting English idioms and constructions." Indeed, most of the differences which separate Anglo-Irish from standard English can be related to the way in which the common folk of seventeenth-century Ireland adjusted to the new foreign tongue.

It is not difficult to isolate the stylistic peculiarities of Synge's language, but it is well-nigh impossible

29van Hamel, p. 273.
30Ibid.
to determine how much of his style is derived from the folk speech of the West and how much of it hinges on his extensive knowledge of Renaissance drama. Synge himself frequently alluded to the similarities between the "rough, crude speech" of the Irish peasants and the "early vigour" of Jonson and Shakespeare. Of course, the literary language of the Renaissance playwrights is more varied from the standpoint of vocabulary and nuance, but if we close our eyes and concentrate on the rhythmic flow of the words it is easy to discern an essential relationship between the two idioms.

The exact nature of this prose rhythm and its role in the formation of Synge's unique style has evoked considerable scholarly comment. In her fine article, "The Nature of Synge's Dialogue," Pat Barnett notes two levels of rhythm in Synge's prose, one arising from his use of plain folk speech, and the other from his musical background and training, but unfortunately Ms. Barnett fails to distinguish the two types, except to say that Synge personally "trained the Abbey actors to recite his plays with just the right lilt and intonation." More to the point, T. R. Henn insists that Synge's prose rhythm is based on cadence; that is to say, it is denoted "by counting the stresses backward from the end

31 See especially his article in The Freedman's Journal for March 22, 1900; cited in Works, II, 357.

of the sentence." Then, furnishing us with a splendid example from *Riders to the Sea*, Henn clarifies his position by showing that Synge uses cadence as a contrapuntal device in a manner reminiscent of Biblical and medieval literature:

> for the tide's turning on the green head, and the hooker's tacking from the east.\(^3^4\)

Here the balanced clauses, the repetition of the "t" and "h" sounds to give the effect of alliteration, and the introduction of a series of nouns (tide, hooker) and verbs (turning, tacking), weighted with connotation put the audience in an emotional frame of mind which, in turn, fosters reflection and meditation.

The rising and falling rhythms which underlie Synge's dialogue perfectly suit his primitive subject matter. Since the middle of the eighteenth century the relationship between literary rhythms and the primitive oral tradition has been periodically recognized. Vico was the first to suggest that the rhythmic quality inherent in primitive language is functional as well as expressive, and that certain special rhythms such as those used in chants, spells, and incantations were thought by primitive man to have magical power.\(^3^5\)

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\(^3^4\) Ibid.

Andrew Lang was thinking along the same lines in 1899 when he wrote:

We find among savages the belief in the power of songs of incantation. This is a feature of magic which specially deserves our attention. In myths, and still more in marchen or household tales, we shall constantly find the most miraculous effects are caused when the hero pronounces a few lines of rhyme. In Rome...it was thought that incantation could draw down the moon...The song that salved wounds occurs in the Kalewala, the epic poem of the Finns. In many of Grimm's marchen, miracles are wrought by the repetition of snatches of rhyme.36

That Vico and Lang were correct in attributing psychic import to rhythm has been clearly indicated by Wayne Shumaker in Literature and the Irrational:

Besides having a power to awaken emotion in quiescent minds, rhythm has a concomitant and synchronous ability to allay already-aroused feeling, to reduce its scope and limit its intensity. In rhythmic structures, "one part always determines another," so that "the second always points toward the first. Accordingly, rhythm is a closed circle within which the inner concatenation of an A with a B appears perceptually to the ear." The capacity of rhythm to arouse--since the A demands the B, and the B, reciprocally, the A--is therefore balanced by a self-sufficiency in the rhythmic structure itself...In proportion as repetition is frequent, the song's power to soothe (or conversely, if the occasion has a different emotional tilt, to arouse) is increased.37

Synge uses rhythm in both ways. In Riders to the Sea, for example, the rhythmical rocking and intonation of an

36Andrew Lang, Myth, Ritual and Religion, I (New York, 1899), 102.
"inarticulate chant" exert a therapeutic effect on the wrinkled old Aran women, while simultaneously arousing the Dublin audience from their bourgeois complacency and compelling them to reconcile their rational Catholic beliefs with these "cries of pagan desperation."

In addition to its expressive rhythms and extensive use of parataxis, Synge's language has other primitive characteristics, among the more important being that it is essentially concrete, specific, and sensory. Instead of classifying persons or objects, his folk prefer to describe their individual traits, indeed even to the extent that enumerated objects preserve their specific nature and qualitative attributes. To illustrate, in Synge's last play, Deirdre and Naisi seldom speak about trees in general, but they frequently mention specific trees such as the apple, the beech, the ash, the oak, and the birch. Likewise the Western seafolk, having availed themselves of numerous kinds of fishing vessels, cram their speeches and stories with specific references to "hookers," "trawlers," "curaghs," and "schooners." Much more remarkable is the comprehensive list of birds which fill Synge's pages and provide him with images and symbols. Within the six major dramatic works it is possible to identify nineteen species of birds and several varieties of

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38 On the primitive "urge toward specificity," see ibid., p. 45.
flying insects.

The tendency toward concreteness is not limited to the lower orders of being. In the human realm talking becomes "making a clack," "crowning," "screeching," "blabbing," "roaring," or "stringing gabble," and the notion expressed in modern English by the general designation "walking" is invariably made more specific. In The Well of the Saints Mary Doul denounces those young girls who "do be gadding about around with their gaping eyes and their secret words, and they with no sense in them at all."39 Deirdre, another young lady with no precise occupation, spends most of her day "straying around picking flowers or nuts," while the nosey Widow Quin can be seen "racing the hills beyond" to look on every newcomer's face.

These three examples point up another aspect of the individualizing trend. Besides distinguishing movements and objects intrinsically related, the peasants of western Ireland absorb in their designations descriptive phrases which furnish information as to location, distance, posture, and response. In the area of motor activities these extrinsic determinations are particularly noteworthy. Christy Mahon does not simply say "I murdered my father." He says instead: "I just riz the loy and let fall the edge on it on the ridge of his skull, and he went down like an empty sack,

39Works, III, 75.
and never let a grunt or groan from him at all." Not quite as colorful but certainly no less involved is his account of his journey across the wilds of Mayo:

I've said it nowhere till this night, I'm telling you, for I've seen none the like of you the eleven long days I am walking the world, looking over a low ditch or a high ditch or my north or my south, into stony scattered fields, or scribes of bog, where you'd see young limber girls, and fine prancing women making laughter with the men.

Nora Burke's portrait of glen life falls into the same category:

What good is a bit of farm with cows on it, and sheep on the back hills, when you do be sitting looking out from a door, and seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, and the mists again, and they rolling up the bog, and hearing nothing but the winds crying out in the bits of broken trees were left after the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain.

Here all the accidental conditions under which Nora's observations were made are incorporated into her statement on marriage and married life.

The need to personalize feelings, anthropologist Stanley Diamond asserts, "is the most historically significant feature of primitive life," and "seems to underlie all other distinctive qualities of primitive thought and behavior." Primitive people live in "a world that tends to be a 'thou'
rather than an 'it'," and because they operate within a personalistic milieu they are not concerned with what is termed abstract thought. Boas writes:

Primitive man, when conversing with his fellow man, is not in the habit of discussing abstract ideas...Discourses on qualities without connection with the objects to which the qualities belong, or of activities or states disconnected from the idea of the actor or the subject being in a certain state, will hardly occur in primitive speech.

For the most part Synge's characters substantiate Boas' claim: rarely do they discuss virtues or states of being save in the context of particular people and particular events. In Synge's world even a simple headache is tied to a sensory background. Mary Byrne, that roguish doxy in The Tinker's Wedding, complains that she has a head "with a noise in it the like of what you'd hear in a stream and it running between two rocks and rain falling." On the more sublime level, the High King of Ulster, to no lesser extent than his humble subjects, must resort to homely figures of speech to explain his deepest feelings about life. Sorrow and joy, Conchubor tells Deirdre as she crouches over Naisi's dead body, "burn out like straw blazing in the east wind."

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43 Diamond, p. 93.

44 From The Mind of Primitive Man (New York, 1938), pp. 216-219; cited in ibid., p. 95.

45 Works, IV, 25.
And she responds: "It will be my share from this out to be making lamentation...for a love will be the like of a star shining on a little harbor by the sea." Then, realizing that the end has come, she adds triumphantly: "I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn and muddy, for it is I have had a life that will be envied by great companies."

More often than not, Synge's characters register their feelings and sense perceptions in total configurational complexes or Gestalten. So prevalent is this tendency among primitive peoples that philosopher Ernst Cassirer has come to the conclusion that the principle of juxta hoc, ergo proprius hoc is characteristic of savage thought. Cassirer took his basic premise from anthropologist Levy-Bruhl, who expressed the view that the primitive mind cannot "dissociate" objective cognition from subjective feeling: primitives record sense perceptions in "clusters" because they firmly believe that objects and beings "mystically participate" in one another:

For instance, neither disease nor a wound, nor poison nor old age, can ever be the actual cause of the death of a human being. These are seen only as intermediate phenomena, interposed between some supernatural actor and the death he causes, exactly as we disregard the tearing of tissues, the energy of the flying bullet, the explosive action of gunpowder ignited by the percussion-cap, the fall of the hammer, and a

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46 *Works, IV*, 261.

47 *Works, IV*, 267.
host of intermediate details, and hold the man
who fired the gun responsible for the murder.\textsuperscript{48}

That Cassirer follows Levy-Bruhl is clear from his own
abstruse comments on the principle:

Whereas scientific causal judgment dissects an
event into constant elements and seeks to under­
stand it through the complex mingling, interpene­
tration, and constant conjunction of these ele­
ments, mythical thinking clings to the total re­
presentation as such and contents itself with pic­
turing the simple course of what happens.\textsuperscript{49}

Perhaps Richard Thurnwald offers the most understandable
explanation of the principle when he says a la McLuhan na­
tives think "in full-page pictures."\textsuperscript{50}

The extent to which the principle of \textit{juxta hoc, ergo
propter hoc} operates in Synge's oeuvre has been adequately
demonstrated in the foregoing analyses of individual works.
We might reiterate here our earlier statement that one aspect
of primitive society dominates each work and that in at
least three plays—\textit{In the Shadow of the Glen}, \textit{Riders to the
Sea}, and \textit{The Tinker's Wedding}—events widely removed in
space though temporally contiguous are shown to mystically
affect one another. What is even more worthy of notice is
the fact that in each case in which the non-human world

\textsuperscript{48}Cited in Charles Roberts Aldrich, \textit{The Primitive Mind
and Modern Civilization} (Westport, Connecticut, 1970),
pp. 76-77.

\textsuperscript{49}Ernst Cassirer, \textit{The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms},

\textsuperscript{50}Cited in \textit{ibid.}, p. 46n.
participates in human affairs the non-human elements (moon, sea, wind) are primordial.

Closely linked to the general law of mystic causation is another principle which has been universally recognized as peculiar to primitive thought. This second principle, known as *pars pro toto*, has also been discussed at length by Cassirer:

For our empirical apprehension the whole consists of its parts; for the logic of natural science, for the logic of the analytical-scientific concept of causality, it results from them; for the mythical view neither of these propositions applies: here there prevails a true indifference, both in thought and practice, between the whole and its parts. The whole does not "have" parts and does not break down into them; the part is immediately the whole and functions as such. This relationship, this principle of the *pars pro toto* has also been designated as a basic principle of primitive logic. However, the part does not merely represent the whole, but "really" specifies it; the relationship is not symbolic and intellectual, but real and material. The part, in mythical terms, is the same thing as the whole, because it is a real vehicle of efficacy—because everything which it incurs or does is incurred or done by the whole at the same time.51

Literally speaking, the principle of *pars pro toto* is synonymous with metonymy and the allied figure of synecdoche or the equation of the part with the whole. We need not draw attention to the fact that in every one of Synge's works examples can be found of containers being used for the thing contained and vice versa ("after drinking his glass,"

51 Ibid., pp. 49-50.
"he's a drop taken"), but we do think it important to point out that some of Synge's most successful synecdoches are transmuted into symbols when the sharp demarcation between microcosm and macrocosm is erased. In Riders to the Sea and Deirdre of the Sorrows Aran and Alban stand synecdochically for hard and soft primitivism; at the same time they form a striking contrast to the civilized world which is implicitly condemned for its refusal to salvage a priori human values.

The same primitive vision obfuscating the logical distinction between parts and the whole is responsible for certain stylistic features of Synge's plays which for want of a better word we might term local color. Linguists commonly distinguish between "internal" and "external" color; "the former is psychological, bringing out the characteristic temperament and moral attitudes" of a group or period, while the latter is "picturesque, based on physical detail."52 A third type of local color which is linguistically oriented emphasizes "dialect, slang, the language of various trades and professions, the speech of women and children, etc."53

Synge deliberately attempted to evoke the background and atmosphere of the Congested Districts and to give an air of authenticity to his plays by peppering them with


53Ibid.
landscape, character-types, objects and institutions indigenous to the Gaeltacht. Memorable, to be sure, are his descriptions of the treeless headlands of Aran, the rock-bound shoreline of Mayo, and the quiet bowers of Alban. Still, the total experience of this primitive world involves more than rock and forest. The villagers themselves testify to the variety of life-styles in rural Ireland at the turn of the century: fishermen, vagrants, tinkers, farmers, ferrymen, boat-builders, kelp-makers, harvesters, cockshot-men, jobbing jockies, smiths, herdsmen, publicans, and pot-boys. In much the same way references to "bona fides" ("genuine travellers exempt from licensing hours"), "shebeens" ("unlicensed houses selling poteen"), and "keening" (lamenting for the dead) show that Synge was sensitive to the social situation and knew in what contexts to use local expressions.54

In the area of material civilization, no less than in the human sphere, Synge's knowledge of his subject matter continues to impress us. He makes mention of "cleeves," a type of basket or hamper, and "frish-frash," a special dish made from meal and raw cabbage, as well as "madder and stone-crop," vegetable dyes of red and orange. How well-informed he was on all the aspects of peasant life can be seen from

his allusion to "trick-o'-the-loop," a local fair game in which "the spectator must guess centre loops in a leather belt."^55

Rather different from these "documentary" folk elements are a second group which have a decidedly ornamental purpose; the primary reason for their existence is to provide humor which, in turn, heightens the effect of local color. The numerous references to wakes and all-night drinking bouts belong here. One case in point is extracted from The Playboy of the Western World. The morning after Kate Cassidy's wake, Michael Flaherty shakes Christy Mahon "drunkenly" by the hand and says:

I hear tell you're after winning all in the sports below, and wasn't it a shame I didn't bear you along with me to Kate Cassidy's wake, a fine, stout lad, the like of you, for you'd never see the match of it for flows of drink, the way when we sunk her bones at noonday in her narrow grave, there were five men, aye, and six men, stretched out retching speechless on the holy stones.^56

Far more significant than these "stage" Irishisms is a third group which takes us to the very heart of Synge's primitive world. Rooted in the psychology of the Celt, this layer functions as an index to those temperamental and racial qualities which in Synge's view expressed the national character. Like Brian Friel, a modern Irish playwright who defines Irish drama as "plays written in Irish or English on

^55 Works, IV, ibid.  
^56 Works, IV, 151.
Irish subjects and performed by Irishmen," Synge believed that despite its long history of civilization, Ireland was a peasant country with peasant attitudes and peasant habits of thought. Writes Friel:

Peasant is an emotive word. It evokes sympathy (saint dreamer, pure, individual, pastoral) or disgust (ignorant, vulgar, philistine, thick). But to understand anything about the history or present health of Irish drama, one must first acknowledge the peasant mind, then recognize its two dominant elements: one is a passion for the land; the other a paranoiac individualism. And these two elements have not only been the themes of dozens of Irish plays but have informed in a much wider sense the entire corpus of Irish dramatic work.58

For Synge, perhaps the most conspicuous feature of this peasant temperament was its imaginativeness. Bourgeois was the first critic to observe that Synge's characters seem to enjoy anticipating emotions or experiences more than participating in them:

Maurya feels more grief in her foreknowledge of Bartley's death than when his body is actually brought in; the two lovers in Playboy spend their time and passion not in making love, but in describing the delightful way in which they will make love in the future.59

P. P. Howe and Alan Price substantially agreed with Bourgeois. Taking his cue from Renan, who consistently

57Brian Friel, "Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant," The Critic, XXXI (1972), 90.
58Ibid., p. 91.
maintained that the Irish peasant has an "invincible need for illusion." Howe declared that it is this need for illusion which perpetually spurs Synge's characters to distinguish themselves as heroes and heroines. In the same spirit Price argued convincingly that all the sympathetic characters in Synge's plays--Nora Burke, Christy Mahon, Martin Doul, Sara Casey, Deirdre--are "driven by an impossible dream": each of them has a "single-minded, intense, almost childlike longing to become a 'wonder'." Not long ago, Ronald Gaskell voiced the opinion that this struggle for self-determination is the by-product of a dynamic, energetic temperament motivated more by passion than by will. "Character," writes Gaskell, "is commonly defined by intelligence, profession, habits, interests, tastes; more crudely, as in O'Casey, by tricks of speech," but with Synge none of these criteria are appropriate: he gives his characters "firmness" by opposing "energies rather than traits."


61Ibid., p. 190.


64Ibid.
Surprising as it might seem, the resolute individualism which compels a Deirdre or a Nora to pursue chimeras is balanced by a tolerance and respect for the rights of others which goes beyond freely speaking one’s mind. Notwithstanding the fact that in their striving for distinction Synge’s peasants have a tendency “to tell all out,” even the vituperative Mayoites sit quietly while a village lass gorily describes how a “laying pullet” was “destroyed” by a young curate’s “car.” As a student of Ibsen Synge was cognizant of the serious pitfalls involved in “telling all.” Yet at the same time he appreciated the Connaughtmen’s frankness and uncompromising honesty.65

Two other qualities of the peasant temperament aroused Synge’s curiosity and immediately spring to mind whenever we reflect on his works: an extraordinary admiration for physical beauty and an intense, if sometimes ambivalent, feeling toward nature. In five out of the six major dramatic productions one of the principal figures is designated a “wonder.” The term wonder is usually applied to handsome, proud women, like Sara Casey, Mary Doul (in her youth) and Deirdre, but it is also used to denote men who were known throughout the Congested Districts for their manliness and prowess. The Mayoites drink a toast to the “wonders of the western

65On this aspect of Synge’s primitivism, see Howe, pp. 183-186.
world," to "the pirates, preachers, poteen makers...and the juries fill their stomachs selling judgments of the English law." Elsewhere in *The Shadow of the Glen*, another wonder, Patch Darcy by name, achieved his status as a folk hero by running from Wicklow "to the city of Dublin and never catch(ing) for his breath." Correlatively, the loss of physical beauty is something that Synge's characters universally dread. Nora Burke fears that one day she will be like Peggy Cavanagh, "with no teeth in her mouth, and...no more hair than you'd see on a bit of a hill and they after burning the furze on it." Deirdre would prefer to die in the full bloom of youth than live to an age when her back hoops and her nose reaches down to scrape her chin. And when Mary Doul wishes to puncture her arch-rival's ego, she does so by predicting that one day Molly's beautiful blond hair will be "turning the like of a handful of thin grass you'd see rottling, where the wet lies, at the north of a sty." Though Synge's primitives have a strong appetite for

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66 *Works*, IV, 105.
67 *Works*, III, 47.
69 *Works*, IV, 225.
beauty, their actions often border on the grotesque. They are subject to frequent temper tantrums which reveal deeply submerged hatreds and a more than average streak of cruelty. With "the simple charm of the uncivilized," F. L. Lucas observes, they combine "the aggressiveness and the pugnacity of the savage." The Playboy of the Western World is, of course, crowded with references to violence and cruelty, but we tend to forget that those lovable trampers in The Tinker's Wedding give serious consideration to drowning the priest who refuses to marry them and dear, sweet Deirdre threatens to set her teeth in the heart of Conchubor if she ever gets the opportunity. To a man the inhabitants of Ballinatone vividly recall the night the young thugs "killed the old fellow going home with his gold"—an ignominious event which horrifies the security-minded city-dweller but, paradoxically enough, prompts Mary Doul to sigh, "I'm told it's a great sight to see a man hanging by his neck, but what joy would that be to ourselves and we not seeing it at all?"

Needless to say, Synge's primitives are chock-full of ambitendencies. In them simplicity coexists with brutishness, irony with mysticism, introversion with extravagance.

73Works, III, 77.
They see no problem in simultaneously mouthing Christian doctrine and counseling a newcomer to surreptitiously place a sharp needle under his coat collar to stave off the aweful power of the fairies. Nor does it ever cease to amaze us that the peasant folk of the Gaeltacht would stone the man who questioned the authority of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, all the while admitting that the priest's chief function is to say magic words to the Saints above. In truth, Christy Mahon summarized the essentially contradictory attitude of the Congested Districts toward life in general and religion in particular when he rapturously declared to P-geen Mike that

if the mitred bishops seen you that time, they'd be the like of the holy prophets, I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad pacing back and forward with a nosegay in her golden shawl.74

Whether it be fairies or sheep or the shadow that passes through the glen, Synge's characters are very closely linked to the world around them. As Alan Price put it, "they are truly children of Nature and the love and happiness and beauty of which they dream is in terms of this world, and particularly of the natural world, here and now."75 Mr. Price's statement has been echoed by every major Synge

74Works, IV, 149.
75Price, p. 217.
critic, even though each one has his own view about how Synge implemented that Weltanschauung in his plays. With P. P. Howe, it is nothing so much as a "sensibility to natural magic" which leaves Synge's diction "trembling and flushed with exultation." If Matthew Arnold's 'four modes of handling Nature'--the conventional, the faithful, the Greek, and the magical--are inclusive and satisfactory, then the last is Synge's mode; as Arnold found, it to be the mode and the chief grace of the Celt. Ronald Peacock is no less emphatic about the "natural power" of Synge's plays, but he tends to define this power more in terms of mood than diction: Synge's dramas, he writes, are "elemental, but also bare and excessively simple." Their great power lies in the "creation of atmosphere." With her usual perspicacity, Una Ellis-Fermor gives us the most precise and pregnant account of Synge's nature mysticism:

Nature is a protagonist in The Shadow of the Glen and Riders to the Sea, so filling the minds of the characters as to shape their actions, moods, and fates; it is the ever-present setting, genially familiar, of The Well of the Saints and The Tinker's Wedding; it remains as a continual and surprising source of imagery and incidental reference throughout the Playboy and becomes again a poetic protagonist in Deirdre.

76 Howe, p. 149.
77 Ibid.
Even if one dissents from these reductive views, the essential importance of nature imagery in Synge's plays can hardly be disputed. The most casual observer will be struck by the number of images directly involved with the forces of Nature. The sea, the wind, the mist, the stars, the moon and other natural phenomena such as plants, animals, light and darkness inspire the largest group of metaphors, only one of which need be mentioned here. In his study of Synge from which I have just quoted, P. P. Howe traces the development of moon imagery in the Dublin playwright's work:

The moon alone, see how it illumines not an invisible beauty behind the gates of death, but actual life and character. 'Lonesome as the moon of dawn'; 'grinning your ears off like the moon of May'; the sympathetic moon that shines above old tipsy Mary Byrne in her drought is a 'dry moon'; 'a little shiny new moon sinking on the hills' is fit accompaniment for Chirsty and Pegeen, the time love has his mastery. Pegeen herself is a girl 'any moon of midnight would take pride to meet.' Deirdre, since her young girls' eyes first fell on her lover, has been 'one time seeing new gold on the stars, and a new face on the moon, at all time dreading Emain.' The diplomat Fergus would 'talk the moon over to take a new path in the sky.' Deirdre, bowing to an end that's come is well pleased that they are going forward to Emain 'in the winter, the time the sun has a low place, and the moon has her mastery in a dark sky.' By the earth, and the sun over it, and the four quarters of the moon, Deirdre swears her Naisi; and Synge, one thinks, would swear by no less, and in that order....

Natural imagery is common to sophisticated Romantic poetry as well as Bardic poetry, but we do find two

80Howe, pp. 150-151.
characteristics of Synge's imagery not heretofore sufficiently emphasized: 1) a fondness for simile, and 2) a preference for sound images. Both of these characteristics have been shown to be essential attributes of primitive thought.\footnote{See Shumaker, p. 69ff.}

The one critic who recognized the frequency with which Synge's characters resort to similes to explain their attitudes or ideas was Grattan Freyer. In a little known essay in \textit{Politics and Letters} (1948), Freyer submitted that the simile more than any other literary device is responsible for the "earthy naturalistic qualities" of Synge's plays.\footnote{Grattan Freyer, "The Little World of J. M. Synge," \textit{Politics and Letters}, I (1948), 5-12.} In Freyer's view, it is the almost complete lack of metaphor which separates Synge's drama from all other forms of modern drama. Synge's similes are not only fresh and richly descriptive, Freyer went on to say, but they "occur with almost rhythmic frequency" and are capable of producing a "wide variety of imaginative responses in the spectator."\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}

Professor Freyer also distinguished between four kinds of similes which are germane to Synge's plays: similes inspired by natural phenomena such as plants, fruit, weather:

\begin{quote}
It's only letting on you are, holy father, for your nose is blowing back and forward as easy
\end{quote}
as an east wind on an April day; 84

How could I be dead, and I as dry as a baked bone, stranger; 85

similes dependent upon Christian and Pagan beliefs:

Aren't you a louty schemer to go burying your poor father unbeknownst when you'd a right to throw him on the crupper of a Kerry mule and drive him westward, like holy Joseph in the days gone by; 86

similes based on myth and folklore:

I will dress like Emer in Dundealgan, or Maeve in her house in Connaught...and maybe from this day I will turn the men of Ireland like a wind blowing on a heath; 87

and similes derived solely from a healthy use of the imagination:

Or a bad black day when I was roused up and found I was the like of the little children do be listening to the stories of an old woman, and do be dreaming after in the dark night that it's in grand houses of gold they are, with speckled horses to ride, and do be waking again, in a short while, and they destroyed with the cold, and the thatch dripping, maybe, and the starved ass braying in the yard. 88

With respect to the second tendency—a predominance of oral imagery—we can flatly declare that Synge's peasants live largely in a world of sound. McLuhan has noted that

84Examples are mine. See Works, IV, 47.
85Works, III, 43.
86Works, IV, 153.
87Works, IV, 199.
88Works, IV, 113.
the "sense-ratios" of primitive cultures are different from those of highly civilized ones in that the mouth and the ear are the dominant sense emitters and receptors in archaic communities, whereas the eye is the principal mode of communication in literate and post-industrial societies. McLuhan describes the primitive world as a "hot" world, a magical, dynamic world which cannot be tuned out easily or comfortably, for despite his unconscious or conscious desires primitive man cannot block out the screech of the owl, the roll of the thunder or the anguished cry of a sorrowing mother; he cannot close his ears as he can his eyes to the pain and suffering around him.

It was inevitable, then, that Synge should realize the potentialities of the oral tradition in his works. The crucial part played by this tradition in his conception of art was touched upon earlier, most strikingly perhaps in our discussion of The Well of the Saints. There we specifically catalogued the sounds which blind Martin heard—from "squealing pigs" to "grass moving" to "the little wind that turns the sticks." Now looking back as Synge's works as a whole, we can see that the oral tradition, in a very real sense, was the chief medium whereby the Dublin playwright expressed his primitive vision.

It follows from the last statement that by oral tradition we mean something more than riddles, ballads, and doggerel, though, to be sure, Synge's Aran notebooks are packed with these primitive genres. What we have in mind are larger structural elements, fundamental constructs of literature, if you will, which arise from the demands of the primitive experience but which also are revelatory to the structure and meaning of early Irish literature.

For the purposes of codification, Gaelic scholars generally classify all ancient folktales or legends whose patterns of form and perception are determined by primitive lore or primitive literary expression as either sean-sgeals, sean-chas, or dindshanchas. The first group of tales are long and adventuresome, and for the most part concern legendary heroes or miraculous events—what folklore specialists define as marchen. The shorter sean-chas spring from the common life of the folk, and if realistic in detail, frequently involve the antics of fairies, ghosts, and witches. As is to be expected, these tales are often anecdotal in character and contain a rollicking note. As for the dindshanchie, all that can be stated with confidence about this species is that the tales amassed under this aegis attempt to account for unusual place names.90

90See Mercier, p. 11.
Scholar Richard Bauman manifested great interest in these designations, and in an article recently published in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, he observes that Synge regarded the folktale as a dramatic form, as evidenced by the latter's comment that certain events seem to inherently possess the "dramatic emphasis of the folktale." Bauman makes a convincing argument as to the folktale character of Synge's plays: *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, he suggests, has all the essential features of the sean-sgeal; *The Playboy of the Western World*, *The Tinker's Wedding*, *Riders to the Sea* and *In the Shadow of the Glen* are readily recognizable as seanchas; and *The Well of the Saints*, owing to its associations with the Isle of the Four Beautiful Saints, is a typical dindshanchae.91

Engaging as Bauman's conclusions may be, in the final analysis, perhaps, it is only necessary to point out that drama is an oral art involving tone, voice, gesture, and movement. The dramatic process is, as Charles McDonald emphatically insists, "a process of spoken dialectic," and it is through the "spoken word," nay, even the bombardment of the senses by a host of disparate voices that drama produces its most profound effects.92 Barnett, we may recall,


stressed the fact that Synge trained his actors to speak their lines "with the right lilt and intonation,"\(^9^3\) and if we can believe Owen Quin, many of the Abbey players complained that Synge's dramas suffered from "too much tongue" and too little thought.\(^9^4\)

Naturally, most critics of Synge see the situation differently. They prefer to concentrate on the Dublin's playwright's "highly individualized accents" and "unforgettable turns of speech" rather than his long rhythmical sentences which, admittedly, are difficult for an actor to master.\(^9^5\)

In Synge's plays, De Selincourt writes

> you will notice just those qualities that make the essence of all good talk—the play of fancy in each speaker, and the manner in which each catches up with the words of the other, developing his points, and egging him on to still higher flights of eloquence.\(^9^6\)

In such an oral society, of course, ritual, archetype and myth thrive. Aided by folklorists (Thompson, Cross), anthropologists (Frazer, Boas, Malinowski, Levi-Strauss, Levy-Bruhl), and depth psychologists (Jung, Storr, Henderson), it is possible to adduce evidence of a scientific

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\(^9^3\)Barnett, p. 127.


\(^9^5\)Ibid., pp. 78-80.

nature to prove that certain mythico-ritualistic patterns, subtextual layers of meaning, as it were, inform the plot-situations of Synge's plays and define the personal relationships between the major character-types. Indeed, the main purpose of this study has been to show that the archetypal patterns of death and rebirth are clearly imaged in *Riders to the Sea* and *In the Shadow of the Glen*, respectively; that the seasonal symbolism of *The Tinker's Wedding* implies the essential interdependence of all orders of being in Nature's ongoing work of procreation and renewal; that there is a general affinity between *The Well of the Saints* and other works which address themselves to the problems and fate of the primitive artist-hero; that underlying Christy Mahon's transformation from boy to man in *The Playboy of the Western World* is the ancient tribal rite known as initiation; and finally that the "green world" syndrome represented in *Deirdre of the Sorrows* is part of the primitive "yearning for Paradise." In short, our researches have confirmed our initial hypothesis, namely that Synge's primitive vision involves not only the playwright's attitude toward his subject matter but also his method of transmuting that attitude into a suitable artistic form.

Yet when everything is taken into consideration, Synge's vision is not prophetic or iconoclastic: there is nothing of Plato's or Blake's radical departure from existing cultural norms. And though it may represent a new slant on Irish
life, it does not preach a new conception of man or nature. Like the efforts of his compatriots, Synge's artistic output was determined to a great extent by his restrictive cultural milieu and a psychic disposition which preferred moderation to immense emotional or intellectual fulfillment. If he claimed to be an agnostic, he excluded from his life any experience or any position which would contradict the Protestant ethic or embarrass the members of his family or social circle. In matters of sex, he was puritanical; in matters of social conduct, definitely on the side of propriety and taste; in matters of politics, sympathetic to the national cause, but totally uninvolved. He shared none of Yeats' interest in the occult, none of MacKenna's enthusiasm for current philosophical theories, none of Joyce's fascination with the unconscious life. Consequently, from many standpoints Synge's vision is fragmentary; it sheds light on only a small portion of reality. Still the one area which it chooses to illumine is perhaps the most important of all. Synge's vision is rooted in "primary human nature," and if nothing else it underscores how much of our basic humanity has been lost and how hard we must work to eliminate the many schizophrenic tendencies which characterize our contemporary wasteland.
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The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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