

PART I
The Synge Texts

I

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Re-thinking Synge

John Millington Synge, widely regarded as the most influential Irish dramatist of the twentieth century, burst on to the scene in 1903 when his first play, *The Shadow of the Glen*, caused a stir among audiences and critics alike during its opening run in Dublin. Over the next two years Synge produced another two plays: *Riders to the Sea* (1904), which is considered to be one of the greatest one-act plays in the history of modern drama; and *The Well of the Saints* (1905) which celebrates the imagination and heroism of the dissident who refuses to be coerced into conformity at the behest of the moral majority. Synge may well have drawn on the lessons of the latter play when, in 1907, he became notorious as the author of *The Playboy of the Western World*, which caused riots in the Abbey Theatre and brought his work to the attention of the wider world for the first time. Two other plays, *The Tinker's Wedding* written in 1907 and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* staged posthumously in 1910, complete the canon of Synge's plays. Yet before his early death in 1909 he also left a small body of prose of considerable significance which includes *The Aran Islands* (1907) and an extraordinarily rich compendium of travel essays, now collected under the title *In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara* (CW II, 187–343), as well as a robust collection of poetry (1909).

Despite the relatively small corpus of work he left behind, Synge's stature has continued to grow steadily among audiences, readers and critics since his early death over a century ago. From that time onwards his plays have been performed frequently and consistently on stages in Ireland and abroad, with much of his work being paid the compliment of translation into many other languages. His major prose work, *The Aran Islands*, has taken its place as the acknowledged progenitor of the sub-genre of Irish island memoirs and, accordingly, has had a seminal influence on visual representations of the west of Ireland – from the paintings of Paul Henry to Robert Flaherty's film, *Man of Aran* (1934). His travel essays also endure as superb, if somewhat neglected, reflections on the lesser-documented social and cultural dynamics of rural Ireland at the close of the nineteenth century. One of the

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most palpable measures of his enduring appeal is Synge's obvious and lasting imprint on the work of succeeding generations of Irish playwrights. This is widely acknowledged and readily apparent in every decade since his death, but is particularly noteworthy in the work of major contemporary writers such as Brian Friel, Tom Murphy and Frank McGuinness, and acutely obvious among an emerging cohort of playwrights which includes Marina Carr, Conor McPherson and Martin McDonagh.

Synge's stature as a dramatist of international importance was assured early on and continues to grow. As many of the essays in this volume attest, his global influence extends far and wide to the work of Eugene O'Neill, Djuna Barnes and James Weldon Johnson in America; to Louis Esson in Australia; to Bertolt Brecht and Federico García Lorca in Europe; and to Derek Walcott and Mustapha Matura in the West Indies. In terms of academic scrutiny his texts have borne the weight and survived the vagaries of successive waves of critical inquiry. Over the course of a century, Synge's works have been mobilised in the pursuit of nationalist, liberal humanist, formalist, feminist, Marxist, historical revisionist and postcolonial critical agendas. Yet in all of this, inevitably, certain patterns of response and orthodoxies of approach to his texts have become entrenched in the theatre and in the criticism.

Not surprisingly, *The Playboy of the Western World* is regarded as his crowning achievement: in most cases it is the one text by Synge that those coming to him for the first time will have heard of before. Although it is hard to argue against the iconic status that the play has earned, arising out of its infamous first production and as a work of dramatic excellence in its own right, the disproportionate attention that it routinely receives often forecloses deeper and more engaged considerations of Synge's 'minor' works – many of which remain lesser known and under-analysed. The pecking order of acclaimed texts is now well established: *The Playboy* is Synge's pinnacle achievement, *The Shadow* and *Rider's* are exceptional trial pieces, *The Well of the Saints* is a lesser *Playboy*, *The Tinker's Wedding* and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* are incidental curiosities. Extending this prescribed hierarchy of merit to the non-dramatic work: *The Aran Islands* becomes a useful source-book for the play's scenarios, the travel essays are off-cuts from *The Aran Islands*, and the poetry of minor significance only.

The publication of this *Companion* offers a timely opportunity to reflect on some of the established critical thinking that has cohered around the Synge oeuvre. With the staging of the ambitious and highly acclaimed DruidSynge initiative by Galway's Druid Theatre Company in 2005, the corpus of Synge's dramatic works was performed in one impressive production which played to packed houses all over Ireland and around the

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world. Plays not normally seen were given their debut in many cities, and the more familiar works were viewed in a new light. Apart from providing an obvious demonstration of the enduring international appeal of Synge's drama, the DruidSynge project was an important catalyst in prompting critical discussion to move beyond the select number of plays that readily spring to mind whenever Synge's name is mentioned. Arising out of this, Part I of this volume is given over to discrete critiques of Synge's texts. The intention is to cater to readers coming to the work for the first time by laying out key issues and backgrounds that will enable more informed engagements with individual texts. However, the contributors to the opening section also open up new avenues of interpretation and new modes of theorisation in relation to the greater- and lesser-known texts. These essays challenge the limits of inherited critical categorisations and make compelling claims in relation to individual works by Synge that command further critical and theatrical treatment.

The essays in Part II of this volume represent a more broadly thematic engagement with Synge's work from a range of critical and disciplinary perspectives. As W. J. Mc Cormack's illuminating biography¹ has demonstrated, Synge's intellect was remarkably agile. He was an omnivorous reader whose intellectual curiosity extended across an extraordinarily rich spectrum of subjects including literature, folklore, philology, natural science, anthropology, music, philosophy and social theory; and over an impressive range of languages that included English, Irish, French, German and Italian. The essays in Part II of the *Companion* reflect the fact that Synge's work has attracted the scrutiny of a more diverse academic community with the passage of time. Now that more than a century has passed since all of Synge's texts were originally published or first performed, it is possible to reflect anew, with some historical distance and new theoretical insights, on the significance and critical treatment of one of Ireland's most important literary figures. The essays in the second section, therefore, map the contours of the major theoretical debates surrounding Synge and suggest potential lines of inquiry for the future.

Much intellectual energy has been invested since Synge's own time in recording and analysing the details of his plays in production. Indeed, the original staging of *The Playboy of the Western World* and the controversy which surrounded it must rank as one of the best-documented events in theatre history. Synge's plays provide fertile ground for those keen to investigate the dynamics of audience response and the function of theatre at particular historical moments. Yet the range of productions that Synge's work has inspired also demands critical attention. It is appropriate, therefore, that Part III of this volume should focus on Synge's plays in production, in

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Ireland and beyond, from original productions to more recent ones, including a consideration of his profound impact on contemporary Irish drama.

Given the range of Synge's intellectual, cultural and artistic pursuits and influences, and the variety of academic approaches that his work has inspired, the challenge of introducing him is a formidable one. It is prudent, therefore, in the remainder of this opening essay, to offer an overview of some of the key ideas and debates relevant to readers embarking on an early encounter with Synge, rather than a summary of the contents of this *Companion*. Since the commissioned essays that follow this introduction – written by a diverse team of distinguished international scholars – address specific texts and themes from unique and valued perspectives, the task of this introduction will be to consider some of the important ideas and issues that are relevant across the entire body of Synge's work.

J. M. Synge's life (1871–1909) coincided exactly with one of the most pivotal phases of Irish history which saw the agrarian unrest of Charles Stewart Parnell's era of the late nineteenth century give way to the revolutionary republicanism that led to the 1916 Rising. Born with firm roots in the landed aristocracy of County Wicklow and into a resolutely conservative Anglo-Irish family, Synge not only witnessed the decline of the ascendancy but, in his own maverick way, contributed to the demise of Anglo-Irish privilege. His involvement in the turbulent early years of Ireland's national theatre – the Abbey Theatre – was crucial to its success in securing a foothold at the centre of Irish cultural life and debate. Also, with his unique perspectives on both the decline of the ascendancy and the rising trajectory of nationalist cultural revival, Synge was well placed to diagnose the ills of Irish society and culture. To an almost eerie degree the major events in his life were to mirror those of his fellow Wicklowman, C. S. Parnell. Both were prominently unconventional Anglo-Irish gentlemen who became notorious for courting international controversy over matters of sexual morality – Parnell over the Katharine O'Shea affair, Synge over the *Playboy* riots. Having ignited the passions of national controversy, both men went to early graves shortly afterwards – Parnell at 45 and Synge at 38 years old. Although a generation apart, Parnell and Synge cast long shadows after their deaths and endured as potent spectral presences in Irish cultural memory, most prominently in the work of W. B. Yeats and James Joyce.

Given the highly dramatic nature of the times that he lived through, it is hardly surprising that the narrative of Synge's life is often condensed into a simplified and manageable version of a complicated set of events and contexts. Students of Synge need to be somewhat wary of the standard account which has informed much of the critical response to his work since his death in 1909. The conventional narrative usually follows a familiar pattern: an

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ascendancy dilettante dabbles in the bohemian fads of *fin-de-siècle* Europe before coming to his senses during his famous sojourns on the Aran Islands, where he becomes a willing convert to Irish Revivalism on discovering the richness of Irish folk culture and the power of the Irish language; having bravely faced down both the inherited prejudices of his Anglo-Irish background and the chauvinistic extremes of Irish nationalism, Synge becomes a martyr to ‘art’, brought down by the philistinism and intransigence of those consumed by the ‘narrow’ concerns of Irish politics.

This version of the J. M. Synge story was largely created by W. B. Yeats in the years and decades immediately after the writer’s death. Yeats’s famous essay, ‘J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time’² (1910) is particularly important for its role in the distillation of Synge’s achievements along the lines favoured by the influential poet. In this essay he effectively removes Synge from the material domain of quotidian concerns and elevates him to the status of ‘a pure artist’ (323) who – in that oft-quoted line – ‘seemed by nature unfitted to think a political thought’ (319). Despite the fact that critics increasingly have questioned the self-serving distortions of Yeats’s assessment, the portrayal of Synge by the elder poet has been stubbornly enduring, not to mention restrictive of the interpretative potentials within Synge’s work. Tellingly, in one of his later poems, ‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’, Yeats, as he surveys the portraits in what is now the Hugh Lane Gallery, frames Synge as an icon of Irish Revivalism.

Perhaps unfairly, then, Synge became a stable signifier for classic Irish Revivalism early on and did not live long enough to challenge attempts to cast him in that role. His innovative use of dialect informed by the rhythms of Irish language syntax and his vivid renderings of rural customs and landscapes, particularly in the west of Ireland, were easily co-opted to the nation-building agendas of the new Irish State. Because of Synge’s willingness to go ‘into the cabins of the poor’, ardent nationalist critics such as Daniel Corkery could forgive his Anglo-Irish roots and enlist him to the cultural programme of independent Ireland.³ Meanwhile, almost simultaneously, a younger generation of writers coming of age in the early years of Irish independence were eager to overthrow the certainties of Yeatsian Revivalism. Not surprisingly it was Yeats’s great exemplar, Synge, who often bore the brunt of their critique.

In his iconoclastic expressionist play, *The Old Lady Says ‘No!’* (1929), playwright Denis Johnston called time on the Irish Revival by mercilessly parodying Synge’s ‘peasant-speak’.⁴ Some years later Patrick Kavanagh, one of Synge’s greatest posthumous antagonists chimed in with his rejection of the Revival as ‘a thoroughgoing English-bred lie’.⁵ The meteoric rise of the reputation of James Joyce in the twentieth century and the gargantuan body

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of critical commentary that accompanied it, further pigeonholed Synge and routinely placed him at the opposite end of the spectrum from that inhabited by Joyce. Invariably Joyce was cast as an open-minded cosmopolitan, happy to leave the parochialism of his native place behind, while Synge was sequestered to illustrate the kind of narrow-focused nativism that the author of *Ulysses* (1922) was trying to escape.

From this vantage point it is increasingly clear that counter-Revivalist disavowals of Synge as the embodiment of a regressive nativism were strategically motivated by a youthful intolerance of the overbearing dominance of Yeats rather than by any deep engagement with Synge's work. If anything, writers such as Johnston and Kavanagh were more properly the great inheritors of Synge rather than his antagonists. Synge was much more deeply informed by the traditions of European avant-garde theatre than Johnston ever was, notwithstanding the latter's fondness for German expressionism. And the notion, advanced by Kavanagh and others, that Synge was the purveyor of twee Revivalist pastoral was disingenuous indeed.⁶ Synge, after all, repeatedly drew attention to the psychic, material and cultural impoverishment of life in remote rural Ireland, not only in essays like 'The Oppression of the Hills' (CW II, 210–12) but also in plays such as *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Playboy of the Western World*. Ironically, Kavanagh in his epic poem 'The Great Hunger' would himself explore psychic territory similar to that already traversed by Synge decades earlier.

It is not the intention here to downplay Synge's involvement in the Irish Revival – that is an indisputable fact demonstrated by his profound contribution to the early Abbey Theatre. But caution does need to be exercised against simplistic and reductive formulations of that broad movement which all too readily associate it with regressive, reactionary and backward-looking traditionalism. As I have argued elsewhere, the Revival 'was characterised by a rich and complex ferment of political and cultural thinking and no small amount of liberational energy'.⁷ There is, however, a clear need to differentiate between the brand of Revivalism espoused by Yeats and that articulated by Synge: all too often they are lumped together as if they pursued the same agendas.⁸ In actuality, Synge's work provides a systematic critique of Yeatsian methods: from *The Shadow of the Glen*, which offers a counter-version of female agency to that presented in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) by Yeats and Lady Gregory, to *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, which attacks Yeats's conservative, antiquarian approach to the past in plays like *On Baile's Strand* (1904). If anyone embodies the spirit of progressive Revivalism, therefore, it is J. M. Synge. In his hands tradition is best deployed as a springboard for innovation, liberation and progress, not as a straitjacket to conserve older ways purely to keep the modern world at bay.

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Notwithstanding his deep commitment and personal investment in the Irish language, a preparedness to critique and supersede what he perceived to be a persistent attitude of tokenism in Gaelic League circles earned Synge a good deal of suspicion among Irish-language enthusiasts. Although he had been schooled in the Irish language at Trinity College Dublin and had first-hand knowledge of Gaeltacht life he made a deliberate choice not to write in the ancient tongue but, instead, to infuse English with the idioms, rhythms and syntax of Irish. That strategic decision may have undermined attempts to create a modern literature in the Irish language but it also produced a new literary approach. This tactic allowed Synge to transcend both the uncertainties and squabbling over the standardisation of the Irish language, and the provincialism of Anglo-Irish literary practices. Such a pivotal decision to rest his literary reputation on a risky experiment with dialect was due in no short measure to his belief that ‘the linguistic atmosphere of Ireland has become definitely English enough, for the first time, to allow work to be done in English that is perfectly Irish in its essence, yet has sureness and purity of form’ (CW II, 384).

His very fashioning of a modern, experimental Irish national theatre out of the fragments of a folk tradition further makes the case for Synge’s progressive Revivalism. Although much of his work can be read as an elegy for the disappearance of a distinct Gaelic peasant culture, especially *The Aran Islands*, there are many carefully inserted critiques of the passing of the old order which are far from sentimental. *Riders to the Sea*, for example, can easily be read as an exposé of the cloying and atrophying influence of tradition, where youthful ambition is discouraged out of a pathological need to preserve the old ways. Maurya’s refusal to give her blessing to Bartley’s enterprising journey over sea to Galway explains why life on the island has sunk below subsistence with ‘only a bit of wet flour’ and ‘maybe a fish that would be stinking’ (CW III, 24) to look forward to.

A similar diagnosis combining elegy and critique is levelled against his own class in his essay ‘A Landlord’s Garden in County Wicklow’. As he surveys a crumbling big house with its ‘broken green-houses and mouse-eaten libraries’, Synge ponders a cultural fate remarkably similar to that encountered in *Riders*. Here, too, he is struck by the fact that ‘one or two delicate girls ... are left so often to represent a dozen hearty men who were alive a generation or two ago’ (CW II, 231). In this case it is effete aristocratic decadence rather than Gaelic inability to respond to adverse external conditions which leads to cultural liquidation. Yet Synge is very careful to differentiate between the two scenarios: while the profound tragedy of *Riders* is intended to evoke pathos, he states categorically in ‘A Landlord’s Garden’ that ‘These owners of the land are not much pitied at the present day, or much

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deserving of pity' (231). Significantly though, the need to triumph over the cultural torpidity evident within Gaelic *and* Anglo-Ireland becomes a major feature of Synge's work. This is most obviously manifested in the wild, visceral and subversive acts of defiance perpetrated by so many of his heroes and heroines in response to cultural stagnation and fragmentation. As Synge wrote in the Preface to his collected poems: 'there is no timbre [of poetry] that has not strong roots among the clay and worms ... before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal' (CW I, xxxvi).

Synge's revolutionary impulses, however, are rarely expressed in conventional political terms. Despite his close proximity to cult personalities such as John O'Leary, Charles Stewart Parnell and Maud Gonne, major political figures are surprisingly, if deliberately, absent from his work. Nor is he concerned with the major events and significant dates in Irish history. 'I do not much believe', he wrote to Frank Fay, 'in trying to entice in people by a sort of political atmosphere that has nothing to do with our real dramatic movement' (CL I, 81–2). The suggestion here is not that Synge is the apolitical writer that Yeats claimed but rather that he is a supremely democratic one. The grand narrative of Irish nationalism in and of itself may be of little interest to him, but the outworking of power relations at individual and local level is what consumes him most. His concern is to break down and devolve abstract ideological issues into micro-contexts where questions of power, personal motivations, psychodynamics, group relations and determinisms of environment and culture can be laid bare. Both in his plays and prose works, Synge rarely engages with macro-political issues like the Land War or the fortunes of Irish nationalism. Instead, his method is to concentrate on the details of the material and cultural impoverishment of life among the most marginalised of people in remote rural Ireland. The politics of agrarian unrest are not the focus – they are a given. It is the exhaustion and trauma left in their wake at an individual level that is of most concern.

The extreme subtlety of political analysis which characterises most of Synge's creative work, however, gives way to a more overt statement of opinion in a series of articles that he wrote for the *Manchester Guardian* in 1905. These compelling essays owe as much to Synge's serious engagement with the left-wing ideas of Karl Marx and Paul Lafargue as they do to his first-hand knowledge of Irish poverty. Readers of these essays are left in no doubt about his contempt for the dubious practices of the publican-grocers or 'gombeen men', who wielded disproportionate power in the poorest regions of the country. Having visited the congested districts of the west of Ireland he was all too aware that the cosy alliance between business, parliamentary politics, religion and the professions was as culpable in visiting unspeakable

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misery on the most marginalised of the Irish peasantry as was the colonial administration.

In his famous essay on Synge, Yeats astutely observed that ‘low vitality helped him to be observant and contemplative’ (321). Synge was indeed dogged by ill-health for most of his life and, consequently, was curious about the source of individual and cultural vigour and vitality. As recorded in ‘Autobiography’, he anxiously internalised Darwinian notions of the survival of the fittest: ‘I am unhealthy’, he wrote, ‘and if I marry I will have unhealthy children. But I will never create beings to suffer as I am suffering’ (CW II, 9). This dark realisation may explain his personal preference for the company of tramps, vagrants and wanderers of various kinds. It is no coincidence that the people of the roads populate the entire spectrum of his writing and stand out as the most heroic and admirable characters in his plays. Christy Mahon, Nora Burke, the Douls, Deirdre and Sarah Casey – wanderers all – are presented as welcome antidotes to the small-minded, repressive, dull consensus of sedentary middle-class life.

In the travel essays, too, Synge repeatedly displays an interest in and empathy with tramps and vagrants, beyond a mere nostalgia for their quaintness. Crucially, his admiration is for their vitality, ingenuity, wit and dogged unconformity. Unlike Yeats’s tramps, Synge’s (particularly those documented in the reportage of his travel essays) are not idealisations of the collective folk imagination which can be invoked to stem the relentless march of modernity, but rather supreme and diverse embodiments of the power of individual fortitude and imagination to resist assimilation and repressive conformity at particularised moments in Irish history. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Samuel Beckett should count Synge’s tramps among his most important influences.⁹

Synge’s wanderers are alternative *flâneurs* – not jaded and effete like the metropolitan variety that he had encountered in Paris but muscular, autonomous and vital. In Gustave Caillebotte’s classic painting ‘Paris Street: Rainy Day’ (1877) the alienation and ennui of the umbrella-carrying *flâneur* is unmistakable. This contrasts very interestingly with Jack B. Yeats’s illustration of ‘A Wicklow Vagrant’ (CW II, 205) which accompanied an essay by Synge on the travellers of Wicklow.¹⁰ Clearly in dialogue with Caillebotte’s painting, Yeats’s drawing highlights a congruent dandyism which attaches to the Wicklow tramp but unmistakably contrasts the tramp’s robust physicality with the effeteness of the Parisians by emphasising his nonchalant imperviousness to the teeming rain. Synge performs an analogous manoeuvre in the essay itself by offering his literary renderings of the full-blooded tramp life he had encountered, as an alternative to decadent *fin-de-siècle* tastes exemplified by Joris-Karl Huysmans’ novel, *Against Nature* (1884). Significantly in that