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LEE, SUZAN SAFRIS. A Critical Study of Synge's Early Writings,  
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This thesis is a discussion of the three autobiographical works of John Millington Synge, 1871-1909. They are The Autobiography of J. M. Synge, published in 1965, "Vita Vecchia" and "Étude Morbide", published in 1966 in the Oxford edition of J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume II, Prose. Although revised many times throughout his brief life, these works were all written mainly while he was abroad, and they were started before any of the plays. These pieces, being recent additions to the works of Synge, offer unexplored areas for insights into the writer as a man and as an artist.

The most important force in Synge's art has been recognized as his imagination. To undertake a study of his work it has therefore been necessary to examine the basic influences on and elements that formed his imaginative power. This paper examines his personality, introverted and hypersensitive, and his highly developed perception of the link between man and nature and the inevitable death, decay and mutability of all life. The external forces presented as influencing Synge are religion, women, literature, art and music. In the discussion of this background material references have been made to Synge's literary works, with some emphasis on his lately published critical writings.

The three works critically discussed here are examined to show the early influences on Synge and his individual development as shaped by his environment and eager imagination. Some of the major themes found in his more mature works are shown to be present in these pieces,

and the gradual formation of these themes is touched on. The evolving of his artistic attitude and opinions is commented upon, and special attention is paid to the relation of these three early writings to his major literary contribution, the plays. In addition to his six well-known plays, an early drama entitled When the Moon Has Set, first published in 1968, is considered.

The overall usefulness in interpreting the plays and the literary quality and value of the Autobiography, "Vita Vecchia" and "Étude Morbide" are discussed and evaluated. It is concluded that these works are of some worth in themselves but are of greater importance when seen as a record of Synge's early literary efforts.

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## CHAPTER ONE

## THE NEED OF IMAGINATION

"Every life is a symphony, and the translation of this life into music, and from music back into literature or sculpture or painting is the real effort of the artist."<sup>1</sup> Thus begins the Autobiography of John Millington Synge. As can be seen from this statement, he felt that the artist is the individual who contemplates his own life and then interprets it in a work of art for the enlightenment of all men. John Synge was such an artist.

Born in 1871 in the country just outside of Dublin, Synge was the youngest child of a prominent Protestant Anglo-Irish family. Many of his ancestors on his father's side were outstanding churchmen, and his maternal grandfather was an Evangelical Protestant rector. His boyhood was spent in pleasantly enjoying life, although he suffered from ill health. This caused him to be tutored at home much of the time. He attended Trinity College, Dublin University and received a degree in 1892. At that time he was deeply involved with music, planning to be a professional violinist. A cousin arranged for him to study music in Germany in 1893. He became familiar with the Continent after this and traveled a great deal, becoming proficient in French, German, Italian, and Gaelic. Eventually abandoning music for literature, he lived much

<sup>1</sup>The Autobiography of J. M. Synge, ed. Alan Price (Dublin, 1965), p. 13.

of the time in Paris for several years.

The turning point in Synge's life came in 1898 when he took the perceptive advice of W. B. Yeats to return to Ireland and to write of the life on the Aran Islands. Synge enjoyed his summers on Aran. Inishmaan was the most primitive of the three islands, and here he spent most of his time. Although the life there was quite rugged and the weather often bad, Synge managed physically to keep his health while his imagination thrived on the kind of life he found there. The five trips made to these islands resulted in a book and in giving him the kind of folk material that he was to deal with most successfully in his plays.

With Lady Gregory and Yeats, Synge worked for the Irish National Theatre Society from 1902 until his death. Although he received some fame abroad, many nationalists at home objected strongly to his plays. This animosity culminated in the Playboy riots of 1907.

Synge never married, but he had many women friends. Although not a great deal is known about these relationships, some of his frustrated affairs figure prominently in his writings. One of his strongest attachments was for Cherry Matheson, whom he wooed unsuccessfully for a number of years. While abroad, he became acquainted with several women, among them a Polish woman and an American. His last and greatest love was for the young Abbey actress Molly Allgood, or Maire O'Neill, to whom he was engaged at the time of his death. Synge succumbed to Hodgkin's disease in 1909, after undergoing several operations.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The standard biography from which the above is abstracted is David Herbert Greene and Edward M. Stephens, J. M. Synge, 1871-1909. (New York, 1959).

Dying at an early age, Synge did not leave a large collection of works. A thin volume of poems and translations was first published in 1909. The Aran Islands, though finished earlier, was not published till 1907. A group of articles in Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara, were published at various times during and after his lifetime. Synge's various reviews and articles on literature, as well as autobiographical efforts, have appeared collected in print only recently. In the Shadow of the Glen, Riders to the Sea, The Well of the Saints, and The Playboy of the Western World were first performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin between 1903 and 1907. The Tinker's Wedding and When the Moon Has Set were never performed during his life there, but Deirdre of the Sorrows, though unfinished, was put together by Yeats, Lady Gregory and Molly Allgood and played after his death.

Synge's life was not a very happy one. He was plagued throughout his life by illness, alienated from his family and abused by his countrymen for his ideas and writings, unsuccessful in romantic affairs, and his early death seems strangely in keeping with the sad strain of his life. Perhaps the yearning for what Yeats has described in his work as "...all that has edge, all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest..."<sup>3</sup> is what led the educated and sophisticated Synge to seek out primitive places where he could find the kind of reality he sought for artistic expression. He says in the Preface to The Playboy of the Western World, "On the stage

<sup>3</sup>W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time, (1916), in Essays (New York, 1924), p. 405.

one must have reality, and one must have joy...the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality." In Aran, in Wicklow, and in the Great Blaskets Synge found the reality he sought in vain at home in Dublin and in Paris. The grave sadness and melancholy humour of the pieces he wrote while in the latter two places reflect the need he had for the proper locality to enable him to write at his best. The life of the itinerants of Ireland appealed to Synge, and he says: "...it often happens that in moments when one is most aware of this ceaseless fading of beauty, some incident of tramp life gives a local human intensity to the shadow of one's own mood."<sup>4</sup> "No personal originality is enough to make a rich work unique, unless it has also the characteristics of a particular time and locality and the life that is in it."<sup>5</sup> The three pieces, autobiographical in nature, that Synge attempted while living mainly in Paris show the man as a struggling artist, before his discovery of the areas of Ireland that would serve as his creative source of material. The Autobiography, "Vita Vecchia", and "Etude Morbide" are all subjective in content and, although not of the quality of the plays and some of the topographical prose, they exhibit many important themes that exist in Synge's finest work.

In Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama Alan Price draws a comparison between Synge's outlook on life and that of Keats. Their view of life was basically tragic. They were among those few poets, perceptive and sensitive to the world about them, who realized the transience of all

<sup>4</sup>"Wicklow," Emerald Apex: A selection from J. M. Synge's studies of Irish people and places, ed. Alan Price (London, 1966), p. 81.

<sup>5</sup>"Various Notes," J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume II, Prose, ed. Alan Price (London, 1966) p. 350 - hereafter cited as Prose.

the beauty, joy and love that men seek after. They saw that all hope was meaningless in the face of death and endless time. Because of their unusually clear vision, they were able to see the horror of each day of life, a horror few ever notice. The problem for the artist with this knowledge is complex. He must find the motivation that will permit him to seek a meaningful existence, and at the same time keep his acute vision of tragic reality while creating art. Mr. Price feels that imagination was the vital element which solved this conflict between two forces in the minds of Synge and Keats.<sup>6</sup> If one wishes to examine the salient elements of Synge's most subjective work and their relation to his plays, it seems necessary from Mr. Price's discussion to explore in depth the elements that made up and the influences which shaped the imagination, therefore the man behind the works, of J. M. Synge.

<sup>6</sup>(Great Britain, 1961), p. 138.

CHAPTER TWO  
PERSONALITY TRAITS AND IDEAS

There were two aspects of Synge's personality which directly affected his writing -- his loneliness and his hypersensitivity. Each of these can be seen as working through the characters he created in various ways. Two of the thoughts Synge had about life, that man is linked with nature and that in the midst of life there is always death, decay, and mutability, can also be found pervading all his work. These two ideas caused him to hold his particularly melancholy view of life, and led him to his main literary theme: dream versus actuality.

In D. H. Greene and Edward Stephens's biography of Synge, the great loneliness he felt is explained as stemming from his falling-out with his family. He was an agnostic, and this caused him to be looked upon as the lost sheep of the devout family flock. His brothers all met the expectations set by their mother, but John yearned to be a musician and then a writer, highly unsuitable professions in the eyes of his religious family. Greene believes this familial alienation caused the sensitive artist to be driven into himself and also to seek his fulfillment outside of his familiar confines.<sup>7</sup> Synge himself realized the position in which he had placed himself and saw that this problem was not limited to the Anglo-Irish in Ireland. "In the middle classes

<sup>7</sup>J. M. Synge, 1871-1909, p. 92.

the gifted son of a family is always the poorest -- usually a writer or artist with no sense for speculation -- and in a family of peasants, where the average comfort is just over penury, the gifted son sinks also, and is soon a tramp on the roadside."<sup>8</sup>

Another cause for Synge's lonely nature is suggested by Hugh I' A. Fausset. He sees in Synge traces of what he calls "the Celt's fear of loneliness".<sup>9</sup> This linking of Synge to his native land has some relevance, for he discovered his truest inspiration only among these people who had retained some of their ancient Celtic traditions.

W. B. Yeats described the solitary Synge as "...a drifting silent man full of hidden passion, and (one who) loved wild islands because there, set out in the light of day, he saw what lay hidden in himself."<sup>10</sup> The proof of this statement can be found in all of Synge's topographical prose, especially in In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara, where he deeply felt the loneliness of the glens. In clip-binder 22 of Synge's work we find, "We hear everyday of the horrors of over-crowding, yet these desolate dwellings on the hill with here an old widow dying far away from her friends and there a single woman with all the whims of over-wrought virginity have perhaps a more utter, if higher sort of misery."<sup>11</sup>

In Synge's plays the loneliness of the playwright is transposed to his characters and their environment. In Shadow of the Glen, the loneliness of the Wicklow glen is a major factor in the play. The

<sup>8</sup>"The Vagrants of Wicklow," Prose, p. 202.

<sup>9</sup>"Synge and Tragedy," The Fortnightly Review, Feb. 1, 1924, p. 271.

<sup>10</sup>J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time (1916), in Essays (New York, 1924), p. 409.

<sup>11</sup>"The Oppression of the Hills," Prose, pp. 210-11.

sensitive Nora suffers because of the desolation of her spirit here, while Dan and Michael are oblivious to their environment. The isolation of the islanders in Riders to the Sea is part of their life and fate, one to which Maurya accedes. In Well of the Saints and The Tinker's Wedding isolation is seen in a different form. The protagonists in these plays find life better suited to them away from society than in it. The loneliness that comes from trying to escape from all that is vital and life-giving is seen in When the Moon Has Set. In the beautiful Deirdre the seclusion of the heroine from society figures not only in the plot but also in her personality. The isolation of the people of Mayo in Playboy accounts for the eager interest they take in "a lad would kill his father". The metamorphosis of the timid Christy Mahon into the Playboy of the Western World is the only example in Synge's plays of his protagonist conquering his loneliness and society.

A corollary in Synge's personality to his loneliness was his nervousness and hypersensitivity. As Alan Price notes, "The impulses and fears of a child in an exclusive community,...the yearnings and frustrations of passionate adolescence cramped in an **obsolete** code, are exactly registered by Synge."<sup>12</sup> These points are verified in his early autobiographical works. He was plagued by anxiety when among a group of people all his life. Padraic Colum, remembering his friend, states that, "His nervousness was real and constitutional, and... (appearing before people was) an ordeal for him."<sup>13</sup> Instances of his

<sup>12</sup>"Synge's Prose Writings: A First View of the Whole," Modern Drama, II, (December 1969), p. 21.

<sup>13</sup>The Road Round Ireland (New York, 1926), p. 361.

extreme nervousness are cited by Herbert Howarth,<sup>14</sup> and Lady Gregory records, "He was always nervous at a first production and the unusual excitement attending this one (the Playboy) upset him."<sup>15</sup> Synge himself recalls an instance of nervousness when he was jeered by a crowd of women for being unmarried; he says, "For a moment I was in confusion. I tried to speak, but I could not make myself heard..."<sup>16</sup> In his plays Synge seems to connect anxiety with the restrictions society places on man and the roles he is made to play. Few nervous characters were created by Synge, and they are those impinged upon by the standards of society in various ways. Shawn has anxieties about Father Reilly, but his regard for authority is self-imposed. Nora's marriage keeps her in isolation, and she has fears about breaking away from society with the tramp and becoming ugly and old. Christy Mahon is worried at first that he will be arrested for his father's murder, but when he has become "a likely gaffer" his nervousness leaves him -- he is above the laws of man.

Turning away from society, Synge found a strong link between man and nature; as a child he avidly explored nature; as a young man his favorite poet was Wordsworth; as a writer he said, "In my plays and topographical books I have tried to give humanity and this mysterious external world."<sup>17</sup>

"Originality is not enough," writes Synge in one of his notebooks, "unless it has the characteristics of a particular time and locality, and the life that was in it".<sup>18</sup> This necessity of showing man in his

<sup>14</sup>The Irish Writers 1880-1940 (London, 1958), p. 232.

<sup>15</sup>Our Irish Theatre (New York, 1913), P. 134.

<sup>16</sup>"The Aran Islands," Prose, p. 138.

<sup>17</sup>"Various Notes," Prose, p. 351.

<sup>18</sup>Denis Johnston, John Millington Synge, in Columbia Essays on Modern Writers, No. 12 (New York, 1965), p. 6.

environment has led several critics to call him, and rightly so, a nature-mystic, for, as Una Ellis-Fermor points out, **nature** seems to be an actor in each of his plays.<sup>19</sup> Padraic Colum says Synge tried to "...bring a landscape before his audience through the speech of people in his plays..."<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps being as familiar as Synge was with such places as Dublin, Paris and Rome made him acutely aware of the beauty of the Irish country. After viewing a twilight in Wicklow, Synge says, "At such moments one regrets every hour that one has lived outside Ireland and every night that one has passed in cities."<sup>21</sup> Given Synge's particular kind of personality, it is not surprising to learn of his fear that commercialism would spoil the more primitive and lovely parts of Ireland.

Synge was drawn by the kinship between man and nature he found on Inishmaan. "I cannot say it too often, the supreme interest of the island lies in the strange concord that exists between the people and the impersonal limited but powerful impulses of the nature that is around them."<sup>22</sup> Here Synge realized what he was to witness in other isolated areas in Ireland, and what was to become a thread running throughout his plays; the Irish peasants were deeply affected by their environment, and, though often in dangerous conflict with it, they understood how to live with nature.

One of the people Synge felt had the closest link with nature was the tramp of Ireland. These vigorous men wandered about the

<sup>19</sup>The Irish Dramatic Movement (London, 1954), p. 165.

<sup>20</sup>Road Round Ireland, p. 352.

<sup>21</sup>"People and Places," Prose, p. 200.

<sup>22</sup>"The Aran Islands," Prose, p. 75.

countryside, being fed and sheltered often by the people they stayed with. They often were grand story-tellers. Synge identified with these men and often signed letters to Molly Allgood as "Your Old Tramp". In (People and Places), Synge states that his belief is that, "Man is naturally a nomad...and all wanderers have finer intellectual and physical perceptions than men who are condemned to local habitations."<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the healthiest acceptance of environment and the clearest example of union between man and nature in the plays is found in The Tinker's Wedding. Here Mary Byrne is seen in all her pagan glory as being content with and joyful in her primitive existence. The contrast between the healthy and vital tinkers and the hypocritical and discontented priest is superb. In Well of the Saints Martin and Mary Doul are appreciative of nature. They are seen as happiest in their natural environment, unable to live with the Saint's glories of God and the routine pleasures of ordinary mankind.

The harsher aspects of nature were also quite evident to Synge, and these figure in his work. Hugh I' A. Fausset believes that in much of Synge's work there is present "...the simplest form of conflict, that of the poetic imagination and the cruel processes of nature..."<sup>24</sup> If by simple he means basic, one must agree with this conclusion. In Riders to the Sea, Maurya and the islanders have hope that their existence will improve, yet all the time they know this is only

<sup>23</sup>Prose, p. 195.

<sup>24</sup>"Synge and Tragedy," p. 266.

imaginative dreaming. Nora and her environment are in conflict till the Tramp gives her an alternative solution in Shadow of the Glen. The maddening effect of the Wicklow glens on the healthy person is related in the same play by the story of Patch Darcy's madness.

Perhaps most interesting is Synge's ability to combine both of nature's aspects and their relation to man in one play. The brighter aspect in When the Moon Has Set appears in the triumph of Colm Sweeny in his efforts to show sister Eileen that man is meant to live with the earth and obey his natural instincts. This can be seen in the powerful closing line, "In the name of the Summer, and the Sun, and the Whole World, I wed you as my wife."<sup>25</sup> Set beside this couple is Mary Costello, a symbol of what nature can do to a woman who denies her natural womanhood. A darker note also appears in Deirdre. Here one sees the way in which living with nature teaches of the mutability of life. Although Deirdre is happiest when in the woods and is almost completely a child of nature, she ultimately learns in Alban that even "Queens get old". Christy's association with nature in the Playboy is shown as having stirred and nourished to some extent the poetic qualities in his character which are eventually developed. Yet the same nature has also caused a serious problem which adversely effects the possibility of there ever being another Playboy in Mayo. Earning a living is so difficult here that all the hearty men have emigrated. The only men left for fine girls like Pegeen are Shawn Keoghs.

<sup>25</sup>When the Moon Has Set, J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume III, Plays, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (London, 1967), p. 177. I wish here to express my thanks to Mr. Alan Price for supplying me with the page proof copy of this play.

The coexistence of the two aspects of nature can be seen in what is left of a poetic drama of unspecified length that Synge finished, then almost completely destroyed. The remaining fragments which have a kind of unity were published recently. At the end of The Vernal Play Boinn says:

Oh, Man, I would live ever lone with you  
Where every bough and hill turn breathes with joy.

(They go out, when they are gone for a little time two  
carrion crows come down and perch on  
the rock above the old man.)<sup>26</sup>

Here Synge dramatically captures the dissonance and the harmony of nature, alive and healthy and yet filled with death and decay.

Synge's awareness of death and morbidity, with his related perception of the mutability of life, is not believed by D. H. Greene to have come from his ill health. He sets forth the premise that this aspect of his personality is rather a family type, traceable back to the seventeenth century.<sup>27</sup> Synge's fear of death is also commonly attributed to his mother's orthodox religious instruction and lectures on Hell in his youth. Alan Price makes the point that being of the Ascendency class at the turn of the century, Synge would be familiar with the process of decay.<sup>28</sup> The decline in their power and the Ascendency's subsequent wasting away of their finer qualities were quite noticeable at the turn of the century.

In Synge's poetry one finds the strong influence the thought

<sup>26</sup> J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume I, Poems, ed. Robin Skelton (London, 1962), p. 73 - hereafter cited as Poems.

<sup>27</sup> J. M. Synge, 1871-1909, p. 85

<sup>28</sup> Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, p. 92.

of death had on him. Perhaps of all his poems touched by this subject, "A Question", written not long before his own death, illustrates this best. In this poem we see how much he hated death. His love's savage answer, that if he were dead, she would "rave and rend" his mourners with her teeth show passion and an awareness of the completeness of death. Another good example of his perception of death as an end of all mental and spiritual processes is seen in "To the Oaks of Glencree". The poet is seen embracing a tree and delighting in its "golden lights and green/Shadows". His appreciation of the tree and of nature suddenly brings to his mind the inevitable mutability of life. He realizes that at some time in the future this tree, symbolic of all trees, will be made into "black boards" for his coffin and will embrace him. This cognizance of the brevity of life and the joys it holds was acute in Synge. Works such as "Danny" and "The 'Mergency Man" show Synge's fascination with violence, while "In Kerry" and "Queens" are representative of his poems concerned with morbidity and mutability.

Of all the places Synge visited, Aran exhibited the closest relation between man and nature, hence between man and death. Synge writes: "I could not help feeling that I was talking with men who were under a judgment of death. I knew every one of them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks, or would die in his own cottage and be buried with another fearful scene in the graveyard I had come from."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Prose, p. 162.

Synge's awareness of death can be found in his plays in Maurya's final confrontation with death, in Christy's new life being built on a supposed death, in Deirdre's preference in the end for death, and in Colm's plea to Eileen to defy death by their love. The idea of the mutability of life also pervades the plays. Deirdre centers on this problem, the heroine's answer being that death is preferable to life without love or youth. Nora's fear of becoming old and ugly like Peggy Cavanagh reveals her awareness of what can happen to a woman who is alone in the world without protection. In Well of the Saints the horrible change in the Douls' conception of themselves is the source of the action. The change in the people of Mayo's opinion of Christy is ironically to the benefit of the hero.

Synge's perception of actuality, or of the world around him, caused his artistic vision to be basically dark. Yet he achieves this effect through contrast. In the "Prefaces to the First Edition" of Synge's poetry, Yeats says that "...the strength that made him delight in setting the hard virtues by the soft, the bitter by the sweet, salt by mercury, the stone by the elixir, gave him a hunger for harsh facts, for ugly surprising things, for all that defies our hope."<sup>30</sup> He goes on to add that "...the benign images ever present to his soul must have beside them malignant reality, and the greater the brightness the greater must the darkness be."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup>"Prefaces to the First Edition," Poems, p. xxxiv.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

Yet it must be remembered that Synge was not without humour. His friend, Jack B. Yeats, attested to his good nature in "A Letter About J. M. Synge by Jack B. Yeats", published in the Evening Sun (New York) of 20 July, 1909. He says, "Synge was delighted with the narrow paths made of sods of grass alongside the newly metalled roads because he thought they had been put there to make soft going for the bare feet of little children. Children knew, I think, that he wished them well...Synge was always ready to go anywhere with one and when there, to enjoy what came."<sup>32</sup> Padraic Colum recalls, "He had a laugh that was half grim, half good-humoured."<sup>33</sup> Synge recognized the importance of humour in poetry, calling it "the essentially poetic quality in what I call vital verse."<sup>34</sup> When writing of Dion Boucicault's comedy, The Shaughraun, he notes "...how much the modern stage has lost in substituting impersonal wit for personal humour."<sup>35</sup> The laughter that is real and full of life, whatever its source, always held Synge's admiration. He declares:

Humour is the test of morals, as no vice is humorous. Bestial is in its very essence opposed to the **idea** of humour....All decadence is opposed to true **humour**. The heartiness of **real and frank** laughter is a sign that cannot be mistaken that what we laugh (at) is **not** out of harmony with that instinct of sanity that we call so many names.<sup>36</sup>

In his Preface to The Tinker's Wedding Synge states his belief in the need for humour; "Of the things which nourish the imagination, humour is one of the most needful, and it is dangerous to limit or

<sup>32</sup>Prose, pp. 401-402.

<sup>33</sup>Colum, p. 363

<sup>34</sup>In a letter to W. B. Yeats, 1908, "Introduction," Poems, p. xvi.

<sup>35</sup>"(A note on Boucicault and Irish Drama)," Prose, p. 398.

<sup>36</sup>"Various Notes," Prose, p. 349.

destroy it. Baudelaire calls laughter the greatest sign of the Satanic element in man; and where a country loses its humour, as some towns in Ireland are doing, there will be morbidity of mind, as Baudelaire's mind was morbid." Hence Synge believed humour could help ward off some of the most evil effects of his melancholy vision.

From examining the dichotomy of forces at work in Synge, his main theme comes to light. He sees the hope in the dream of life, while at the same time witnessing the horrors of actuality around him. In Alan Price's excellent book centered on this theme of the dream versus actuality, one finds the basic tension concisely stated as, "Existence, then is a dream which will be dissolved by the ultimate actuality, death, and the finer the dream the harsher the actuality...."<sup>37</sup> Synge not only used this idea of richness in life versus reality in his plays, but also based some of his literary notions on this, for "...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."<sup>38</sup> This idea that there must be joy, reality, and yet a dream of beauty in poetry is important to Synge. Although he himself could not achieve this in poetry, he was able to do so in drama. This thought is similar to that expressed by Yeats in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited". We find that both men sought after

<sup>37</sup>Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, p. 85.

<sup>38</sup>"Various Notes", Prose, p. 347.

creating the "Dream of the noble and the beggar-man". This concept of all the forces of life, working through a poetic vision, is what gives depth and breadth to their works.

In his plays one finds the protagonists facing the problem of dream opposed by reality. In Riders to the Sea Maurya and the islanders dream of a better life and strong men, only to have the reality of the sea and death brought in to them "in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it". Nora's dream of security in Shadow of the Glen turns into a nightmare of reality with Dan; though her second dream of life with the Tramp is presented, no assurance of happiness is given. The dream of Martin Doul in Well of the Saints is also shattered by the sight of reality, but he is allowed to return to the bliss of his imagination with his blindness. Sarah Casey's foolish dream to be respectably married is corrected by the grand reality represented by Mary Byrne and the tinker's life. For Deirdre and Naisi the dream of a beautiful life and love is made a reality, but only for a short while. Only in two of the plays does the vision become reality. In When the Moon Has Set the love of Colm and Eileen becomes a reality, and in Playboy the cultivation by the Mayoites of Christy turns him into a real hero.

Mr. Price states that "...life on Inishmaan was, for Synge, the dream; the rest of the world, by contrast, harsh reality."<sup>39</sup> The truth of this statement is recognizable on every page of The Aran Islands. He relates: "It seemed like a dream that I should be sitting

<sup>39</sup>Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, p. 87.

here among these men and women listening to this rude and beautiful poetry that is filled with the oldest passions of the world."<sup>40</sup> It is also reflected in an essay from "In West Kerry". "The whole sight of wild islands and sea was as clear and cold and brilliant as what one sees in a dream, and alive with the singularly severe glory that is in the character of this place."<sup>41</sup> It is interesting that Synge, after being unfulfilled in Paris, was able to find in this primitive place his dream as an actuality. Yet more unusual and to his credit is the fact that he felt the need to return to Dublin and Ireland and produce from his experiences works of art for all the world.

<sup>40</sup>Emerald Apex, ed. Alan Price, p. 54.  
<sup>41</sup>Prose, p. 248.

## CHAPTER THREE

## OTHER INFLUENCES

There were several influences on Synge which may be seen as having an effect on his imagination and his art. These affected him during either his youth or youngmanhood and therefore can be found in his early writings as well as in his more mature works.

No matter how great an individualist a man is, he is always formed at least in part by his environment. Although Synge was not a politically active man at a time when this type seemed to predominate the Irish scene, he was influenced by a particularly Irish concern -- religion. The influence this had on his art may have been minor, but it is worthy of notice.

Synge's family was extremely religious Evangelical Protestants. Although Synge was an agnostic from an early age, the teachings of his mother about Hell when he was a child never left him, as can be seen in his poetry. He found the Wordsworthian concept of God much more suited to his personality, and he felt a reverence for nature. In the Tinker's Wedding the pagan tinkers who live with nature are seen as much more reverential and wholesome than the hypocritical priest. In Playboy, the religious Shawn Keogh is certainly not half the man that the nature-loving Christy Mahon is.

Some of the restraints that religion puts on men Synge saw as stultifying the Irish people in many ways. In his own life he saw

strict Protestantism trying to suppress his artistic desires. Throughout Ireland he saw the most gifted and imaginative individuals, tramps and poets, as outcasts from their society. This type of situation exists in Playboy, Shadow of the Glen, Tinker's Wedding, and Well of the Saints. The protagonists are all sensitive and imaginatively endowed people who are shunned by the dull and self-satisfied society about them.

Synge viewed women as one of the sources that feed men's imaginations, and the wholesome joy that comes from relations with the opposite sex he saw as being opposed to the rigid morality of Ireland. In The Aran Islands Synge wrote: "I am so much a stranger I cannot dare under the attention I excite to gaze as I would wish at a beautiful oval face that looks from a brown shawl near me...."<sup>42</sup> The kind of restrictions existing can be inferred from Molly's retort to Martin's fine speeches, "I've heard the priests say it isn't looking on a young girl would teach many to be saying their prayers."<sup>43</sup> Synge felt this kind of suppression was unnatural, and in When the Moon Has Set Colm emphasizes this point to Sister Eileen. Shawn Keogh's Father Reilly has made him so inhibited about sex that he cannot appreciate Pegeen as a wonder of nature as Christy is able to.

Synge recognized in the Aran Islands and in some of the other isolated sections of Ireland not only the great religiosity of the Catholic peasant, but also the pagan strain that co-exists with it. He

<sup>42</sup>Prose, p. 54.

<sup>43</sup>The Well of the Saints, in The Complete Plays of J. M. Synge (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 148 -- hereafter cited as Plays.

noted also that this did not cause conflict in the people. During the first burial Synge observed on Inishmaan, he noted the extreme passion and intensity of the keening which led to "the young women...raising themselves every few moments to beat with magnificent gestures on the boards of the coffin."<sup>44</sup> This primitive gesture contrasts with the sprinkling of holy water on the people. They could go to mass and discuss fairies on the way home. He saw that this antithesis existed only in those people far from the sophisticated centers of Ireland, in those who lived with a nature that was often inexplicably cruel. The prime example of this in his plays is in the keening at the end of Riders to the Sea.

Synge was aware of the strong religious strain in all the Irish people, Protestant and Catholic, and he saw in this a relationship with the theatre. The ritual of Catholicism and the passion of the Evangelicals can both be found as elements of the drama. The prime example again is Riders to the Sea. Here the rituals of life for the islanders are set beside the unleashed passion of the keening.

Synge was accused by the nationalists of his day of not showing the strong influence of religion on the peasants in his plays. From the above comments it can be seen that this is untrue; the religiosity of the people in his plays may be inverted or half hidden, but it is there. In Shadow of the Glen, although religion is not mentioned, it can be seen as part of the thwarting society which has held Nora in her hated environment. In When the Moon Has Set Synge's

<sup>44</sup>"The Aran Islands," Prose, p. 161.

view of what a limiting religious attitude can do to vital people is best set forth. When people place religion above the natural life-giving forces in man, only madness, death and sorrow can result. This is what Sister Eileen eventually learns from Mary Costello and Colm. In Synge's plays he set forth the truth of the Irish situation so clearly and so rightly that his guilt ridden audiences tried to smother his brilliant flame of truth.

Women were an important source of inspiration for John Synge. His father died the year after he was born, and, since he never married, his ties with his mother were unusually strong. Although they disagreed on almost all subjects, she was always concerned for his health and happiness. Unfortunately, her motherly concern centered on John Synge's soul, while this was the area of least concern to him. This can be seen in part of a daydream Synge records in a notebook. He refers to his mother: "...a form kneeling at my side is sending prayers to Heaven that have hampered my career."<sup>45</sup>

Synge had several infatuations in his youth, the devout Cherry Matheson being his greatest. In Germany, Italy, and France he became friendly with several women, but still thought of the girl who could not tolerate his agnosticism. The parallel between this hopeless love affair and the situation in When the Moon Has Set is striking. Cherry refused him in 1896, and the play was begun in 1897. Although it was drafted many times and not completed until 1903, it is interesting to note that there is no evidence to indicate Synge

<sup>45</sup>"The Aran Islands," Prose, p. 110.

felt any less regret about their affair at the latter date. The main difference between the two predicaments is the acquiescence of the woman at the end of the play. The play affirms the position Synge took in his courtship, and perhaps because of the definite link with his personal life the play was not published during his lifetime.

By 1906 Synge was very much in love with Molly Allgood, almost fifteen years younger than he. She was a temperamental, changeable Catholic girl from the working class. Despite the fact that her background was quite different from that of the reserved and well-educated Synge, his passion for her was great. The inspiration she gave him helped to produce *Pegeen in the Playboy* and especially the tragic *Deirdre*. Perhaps the aging Conchubar's longings for the beautiful young *Deirdre* he could never possess are parallel to those of the dying Synge for Molly.

Throughout Synge's topographical work he mentions the attraction he felt towards some of the peasant girls. He found these unpretentious women very appealing, but the strict moral code of Ireland often prevented his having any associations with them. It can be seen that they inspired his imagination and represented a healthy ideal of womanhood to him.

Synge enjoyed the company of women, and it seems that many enjoyed his company. In Notebook 17 Synge says, "In friendship a man approves of the conception that his friend forms of him and tries to become it...which is the reason why many friendships with women especially develop a man."<sup>46</sup> This view of women as necessary to the

<sup>46</sup>"The Aran Islands," Prose, p. 113.

growth of man can be found in several of Synge's plays, especially Playboy. Through the encouragement of Pegeen, Widow Quinn and the other country girls, Christy is able to achieve his manhood. The inspiration women are able to give does not always lead to fulfillment. In Deirdre, Conchubar and the Sons of Usna are inspired by Deirdre's beauty although they know she is to bring sorrow and death to Emain Macha. In Well of the Saints Martin Doul is inspired to dream because of Molly Byrne's beautiful voice; he is then aroused by her physical beauty. But when he discovers his dream of Molly will never be fulfilled, the dream and his romantic impulses turn to cynicism, and all that it represented to Martin becomes a nightmare.

The women in Synge's plays are unusually well-rounded characters. This is the case in Riders to the Sea. Maurya and her daughters are universal representatives of man in a hostile universe, and at the same time believable and vitally alive Irish peasants. In Shadow of the Glen Nora is the protagonist, and the play is centered around her conflict with her environment. Mary Byrne is the most gifted person in Tinker's Wedding, and is one of Synge's grand and wild creations. Two important characters, Pegeen and Deirdre, through their personalities inspire men to live life to the fullest, but Pegeen fails at the crucial moment and is left heartsick, while Deirdre succeeds in dying a death that will inspire all men ever after.

Although all the books a writer has read can hardly be discovered, and only a few perhaps would be of much relevance, those works which a man has made note of in his work are worthy of consideration as possible influences. Synge read in many fields other than literature,

and he was particularly interested in science and history early in his life. His favorite poet, Wordsworth, can be seen to have had an effect on Synge's poetry, as seen in "Glencullen", "A Mountain Creed", and "Prelude". The only evidence we have that a particular piece of literature directly influenced him to compose a poem is the title, "Epitaph"; "After reading Ronsard's lines from Rabelais". The translations he made into his Anglo-Irish dialect were mainly written as exercises, but they do have some lovely notes in them, especially in "Sonnets from 'Laura in Death'". Villon, Leopardi, Walter Von der Vogelwiede and especially Petrarch received Synge's attention. It is notable that the works he chose to translate frequently contain the theme of death and decay.

Synge was interested in Irish antiquities and patriotic literature while in college, but in Paris he turned to the study of European writers also. After he met W. B. Yeats and Maud Gonne he again became greatly interested in the literature of Ireland. While in Paris, between 1893 and 1898, he tried to write several reviews of books, but as Yeats said, Arthur Symons would always be a better critic. Although he read the symbolists and naturalists, he eventually turned away from their more sophisticated art. After he began visiting the Aran Islands in 1898, he started to form his own critical opinion on art. He found the Art for Art's sake school of thought as unpalatable and removed from life as he found the naturalist school obsessed with the mundane aspects of life. He did not like the kind of drama that was being written by "Ibsen and Zola, dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words", as he says in his

Preface to the Playboy. Language became of paramount importance to Synge's critical thinking, and he believed "every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple". This idea that language must have richness is counterbalanced by his desire to create reality on the stage as well. He found that to write such drama he had to turn back to his homeland, "where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living".

From an examination of Synge's critical writings some of the great writers he read can be discovered.<sup>47</sup> He approved of the work of Dante, Chaucer, Goethe and Shakespeare because they combined imagination with reality. Synge believed that literature must "make the impossible seem inevitable or...make the inevitable seem impossible". The richness and beauty of the poet must be combined with the healthy virility and awareness of all the elements in life of the man. In the Preface to the first edition of his poems Synge says: "Even if we grant that exalted poetry can be kept successful by itself, the strong things of life are needed in poetry also, to show that what is exalted or tender, is not made by feeble blood."<sup>48</sup> It can be seen that the two qualities, richness and reality, Synge required for lasting literature.

Synge became interested in the Celtic Revival in Brittany through Anatole Le Braz, whom he heard lecture in Paris. He saw the parallel between what the Irish Literary Theatre was trying to do and

<sup>47</sup>See "Various Notes," Prose, pp. 347-351.

<sup>48</sup>Poems, p. xxxvi.

that of the Breton-speaking movement, for "both (were) produced by the Celtic imagination, and give expression to a limited but puissant nationality".<sup>49</sup> He felt a kinship with Le Braz, for as he says, "All who really achieve come seeking in quiet places a sphere for half-tangible fulfillment,"<sup>50</sup> and they were both such men. Each tried to fill a void in their countries' theatres with the spirit of the people.

The work of Pierre Loti influenced Synge's work primarily on the Aran Islands. Although Synge originally fashioned The Aran Islands after Loti's Le Pecheur d'Islande, as Synge matured he saw the faults in the work and molded his book more to his own tastes. He thought Loti gave a "feeling of unreality" which marred his whole work. Synge says: "...neither the sensibility of Pierre Loti nor the fantastic erudition of Huysmans can quite make up for the lack of a mind definitely trained to measure the newer thoughts which come together near the real activities of life, for, usually, such minds, and such minds alone, are influenced by the wider sympathies which reinforce and justify the more serious ~~claims~~<sup>51</sup> of literature...." From this statement we can see that Synge believed that discrimination and intellectualism could not compensate for the absence of a deeply felt awareness of the human condition.

One of Synge's favorite writers was Anatole France. He admired his style and his "half-cynical optimism...(which) is simply the frank philosophy of large classes among the French, who are kept healthy by

<sup>49</sup>"A Celtic Theatre," Prose, p. 393.

<sup>50</sup>"Anatole Le Braz," Prose, p. 394.

<sup>51</sup>"(Three French Writers)," Prose, p. 395.

an ironical attitude towards their own distress".<sup>52</sup> The similarity between what he found in France's work and his own writing is noticeable here. Synge tried to express the same vital kind of acceptance of the world and reality. In those isolated sections of Ireland he discovered the people who corresponded to those Anatole France wrote of. In the works of both men, we find the "fatalistic gaiety" which gives joy and reality in the same stroke.

One other aspect of Anatole France's work affected Synge's plays; this was his use of dialogue. Synge found his Paris dialect simple and delicate, with "the shades of spoken language" which Synge tried to achieve in his own work. This is not to say he gained his ability to write artistic yet real peasant speech from Anatole France. But he did find in him a man who captured the excitement and the authenticity of real language.

Synge did not admire the kind of dialogue used by Huysmans or Mallarmé. He felt that their "pitiful efforts to gain new effects by literary devices" were insincere and did not reflect reality. In 1903 he preferred the effective dialogue achieved by Maeterlinck, Oscar Wilde and Ibsen. It is interesting that he placed such diverse dramatists' dialogues in one category. He later came to dislike Ibsen's problem plays and "pallid words". Synge did prefer realism though to the ornate prose of Flaubert and Pater which was devoid of all reality.<sup>53</sup>

Something needs to be said as to the extent Synge was influenced

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>"(Three French Writers)," Prose, p. 396.

by his reading of French authors. He read widely, but he kept his critical judgment alert at all times. Whatever Synge read he judged by his own standards and his own view of what art should be. Maurice Bourgeois seems a bit severe when he says, "Other writers existed for him only as part of his own being -- only as they reinforced his personal tendencies, or made clearer the vision wherein he was absorbed."<sup>54</sup> Although an early critic, Bourgeois was able to see that the story of Shadow in the Glen, which caused a controversy as to its Irishness, was similar to those from other countries only in the way most folk stories are like those of other countries. He also notes the fact that Synge captures the very essence of Irish life in this brief play.<sup>55</sup> One critic claims Synge's "ironical detachment" is typically French,<sup>56</sup> and Mr. Price says his great skill in using dramatic contrast was learned to a large extent from French playwrights.<sup>57</sup> Mr. Bickley says, "...it may well be that...France taught him that clear, disillusioned view of life which gives his plays their lucid reality."<sup>58</sup> Whether this was innate in Synge or the result of his home environment, it is probably true this was reinforced by his reading. Perhaps the most important influence on Synge derived from his reading of French authors was a negative one. He gradually learned that he could best express his vision of life through his imagination and through

<sup>54</sup> John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre (New York, 1913), p. 52.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>56</sup> J. W. Cunliffe, English Literature during the Last Half Century, 4th ed. (New York, 1923), p. 108.

<sup>57</sup> Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, p. 177.

<sup>58</sup> J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement (Toronto, 1912), p. 13.

his own interpretation of a simple mode of life quite different from that in Paris. It may be that through the study of the sophisticated, elaborate and symbolist writers he realized that his kind of artistry needed an opposite approach.

One of the men who encouraged Synge's study of Celtic history while he was in France was M. d'Arbois de Jubainville. He is praised in a review Synge wrote while in Paris.<sup>59</sup> Synge appreciated his work as being a great contribution to the scholarship of Celtic studies, which Synge thought needed impetus if Ireland was to find a place for herself in the twentieth century. Synge did not believe the Gaelic League was using the proper instruments to bring about a Celtic revival in Ireland. He felt that since English had become the language of the country, it was wasteful and foolish to try to reinstitute Gaelic. The necessity of English for trade and commerce was apparent, and the poetic and vibrant Anglo-Irish dialect spoken by many in Ireland Synge thought sufficient proof of Ireland's individuality.<sup>60</sup>

In the publishing of the collected works of the sixteenth century Gaelic poet, Geoffrey Keating, Synge found a source of inspiration. Keating was one clergyman with whom Synge could identify. Keating's works indicate that while studying abroad he, like Synge, often thought of Ireland. Synge notes a parallel here which applies to himself; "A comparison of the general expression of Keating's work with that of the annalists of his time recalls, in a curiously remote

<sup>59</sup>See "Celtic Mythology," Prose, pp. 364-366.

<sup>60</sup>See "Can We Go Back in Our Mother's Womb? A Letter to the Gaelic League by A Hedge Schoolmaster," Prose, pp. 397-400.

way, the difference that can be felt between the work of Irish writers of the present day who have spent part of their life in London or Paris, and the work of men who have not left Ireland."<sup>61</sup> On his return Keating was abused by political foes for his outspoken views on morality. This situation is similar to the stir caused in Dublin because of the honest view of peasant life, and Irish life in general, Synge showed in his plays. During this period, Synge notes, Keating traveled about the country collecting the material he was to use for his history of Ireland; Synge also was an avid note-taker all his life. Keating's temperament Synge describes as "half-mediaeval, half-modern", a phrase which at times can be applied to Synge. He believes the desolation of Ireland had an effect on Keating's poetry, and he compares him to both Rabelais and Thomas à Kempis, two authors whose work affected Synge while in France. He also notes the poet's ability to express "the agony of his country with a sustained personal dignity and a freedom from exaggeration".<sup>62</sup> Perhaps Synge felt a kinship with Keating because of his work on the primitive Aran Islands. Whatever the reasons, it seems the glorious Celtic spirit Synge found in Keating affirmed his own beliefs about the worth of Irish literature.

Throughout his reviews of Irish books, language is a main concern to Synge. In Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne he objects to certain passages which have "the cadence of the palace, and

<sup>61</sup>"An Irish Historian," Prose, p. 361.

<sup>62</sup>"The Poems of Geoffrey Keating," Prose, p. 359.

not the cadence of men who are poor".<sup>63</sup> In reviewing the work of A. H. Leahy, Seumas MacManus, and Fiona Macleod, it seems to be their language he objects to most often. To capture the spirit of Ireland on the printed page in English is a difficult task, and in his critical essays Synge fearlessly points out the failings of others; he had such a sensitive feel for the language that he had to object to those who did not meet his high standards.

As can be seen Synge read widely while in Paris, but in his later more creative years he spent more time talking to people than reading. His mind was cultivated and receptive when he started his trips to the desolate areas of Ireland, and he found there the materials his imagination was ready to work upon. The kind of life there had to be experienced by Synge, not merely read about, and so he followed his artist's intuition and became a sympathetic observer of real life.

A literary artist and a musician, J. M. Synge also attempted a little painting. It seems his taste in art ran from the Old Masters to the French Impressionists, and he especially acknowledges Rembrandt as joining "personal distinction to a great distinction of time and place", the three elements he believed necessary to produce great art.<sup>64</sup>

Synge had a healthy appreciation of good art, and his article on the new art gallery in Dublin shows his taste. He believed that a

<sup>63</sup>"An Epic of Ulster" Prose, p. 368.

<sup>64</sup>"Various Notes" Prose, p. 349.

good art gallery was "a sort of home for one's mind", and that "writers as well as painters (could benefit from becoming)...familiar with...independent and vigorous works".<sup>65</sup> It can be seen from this that Synge thought the imagination was fed from all forms of great art.

Padraic Colum noted Synge's affinity for medieval art,<sup>66</sup> an art that was representational, yet reflected the life and the spirit of the people. This is in line with his love of old literature and primitive people and places. In "The Aran Islands" Synge says, "Every article on these islands has an almost personal character, which gives this simple life, where all art is unknown, something of the artistic beauty of mediaeval life."<sup>67</sup> The emotions Synge experienced on Aran affected his spirit in the same way as a work of art, and he saw the peasants there as having "some of the emotions that are thought peculiar to men who have lived with the arts".<sup>68</sup> This linking of men who live closest to nature with those who live with the greatest achievements of civilization is indicative of the duality of refinements and the wholeness of the vision in Synge -- his appreciation of the world encompassed all that was beautiful and living, natural or cultivated.

Synge was aware as an artist of the interplay of colors and light. After viewing a glen in Wicklow he says, "Such patches of growth come out on these mornings after rain with extraordinary purity

<sup>65</sup>"Good Pictures in Dublin: The New Municipal Gallery," Prose, p. 392.

<sup>66</sup>Road Round Ireland, p. 371.

<sup>67</sup>Prose, p. 59.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

and richness of tint, and for the eye that is sensitive to color, there is nothing, I think, that is more beautiful."<sup>69</sup> He found in the natural setting of Aran all the beauty that is purposefully arranged in art. "A ray of sunlight fell on her (a young girl on Inishmaan), and on a portion of rye, giving her figure and red dress with the straw under it a curious relief against the nets and oilskins, and forming a natural picture of exquisite harmony and color."<sup>70</sup> His observations throughout his prose writings indicate his artistic sensitivity to his surroundings.

In his plays the natural settings often give impetus to his characters' moods. Christy is discovered in the dark of night, but emerges the next day a hero, only to walk off into the sunset of Mayo and find a new life. The neutrally colored interior of the cottage in Riders to the Sea is the perfect background for the red petticoats and red sail which bring death at the conclusion. The drab colored images of the bogs and glens conjured up in Nora's dialogue help to convince the audience that her surroundings are unbearable. In When the Moon Has Set the contrast of light and dark is effectively used in the dialogue. The title moves on the same axis as the imagery, from the darkness of spiritual distance to the brightness of life and love achieved when the night goes.

Visual art for Synge was an inspiration, but music of all the art forms, held the greatest sway with him in his youth. At sixteen

<sup>69</sup>"(People and Places)," Prose, p. 193.

<sup>70</sup>"The Aran Islands," Prose, p. 130.

Synge took up the violin, and he spent most of his time while in college studying music. In 1891 he joined the University orchestra. Too nervous to ever perform a solo, after several years of study abroad Synge gave up music. This problem of the artist not being able to perform in front of an audience obsessed him. He saw in this a basic problem, that of the audience not being appreciative of or being hostile to the performer, and hence the artist being unable to give pleasure. Alan Price says: "The attempt is usually a failure, perhaps because of a flaw in the artist, perhaps because he has been unnaturally forced into theorizing and constructing systems and rationalizing his own work, or perhaps because the audience refuses to collaborate."<sup>71</sup> "All art is a collaboration," Synge declares in the Preface to the Playboy. Ironically, in this play the artist (Christy) succeeds in spite of his audience (the Mayoites), while Synge the man was condemned (and forced in an interview to explain the work) for presenting such issues. The rightness of Synge's observations was proved by the rioting of the audiences. In Well of the Saints and in Shadow of the Glen, Martin Doull and Nora wish to set free their poetic natures which have been hampered by the indifference of a less vibrant society, and again show this theme.

One section of "The Aran Islands", published originally as "A Dream on Inishmaan" in 1903, shows particularly well the effect music had on Synge. In his sleep Synge found himself being attracted to the

<sup>71</sup>"Synge's Prose Writings: A First View of the Whole", p. 222.

sound of music from an unnamed string instrument which became increasingly louder. The music gained control of him, and he danced till the "ecstasy turned to an agony", and he awoke.<sup>72</sup> This painful dream Synge used to illustrate the "psychic memory attached to" the island. This shows that the local belief in the supernatural on Inishmaan affected him personally, and also that it worked subconsciously on his own fears -- especially that related to his performing as a musician. The intensity of the music is similar to the excitement he felt when he performed as a college student in an orchestra.

Synge not only studied music but also spoke several languages. The fine tuning of his ear permitted him to capture not only the sense and technical accuracy of his Anglo-Irish idiom but also the poetic cadences and carefully modulated rhythms heard in his plays.

In The Stephens Typescript on page 1376 his nephew notes that Synge reworked his articles over and over until he achieved "'an artistic whole, internally balanced like a musical composition'".<sup>73</sup>

Synge the musician is present in all his writings. He often makes analogies between life and music. In a draft of Act II of When the Moon Has Set Ann Saddlemeier finds this statement by Colm: "The world is an orchestra where every living thing plays one entry and then gives his place to another. We must be careful to play all the notes.... Every passion will unite in discords resolving in what are to us

<sup>72</sup>Prose, pp. 99-100.

<sup>73</sup>See "In Wicklow: An Autumn Night in the Hills," Prose, p. 187.

inconceivable harmonies."<sup>74</sup> This correspondence is a definite undertone in the plays. Christy's stay at the shebeen is the decisive period in time when his harmony in life is achieved. Alan Price sees Riders to the Sea as a piece with four movements, exposition, development, variation, and climax,<sup>75</sup> just as in a symphony. The "fine bit of talk" of the Tramp in Shadow of the Glen, of Martin in Well of the Saints and of Mary Byrne in Tinker's Wedding shows their sensitive imaginations, like Synge's in musical rhythms.

In the Preface to Tinker's Wedding Synge says, "The drama is made serious in the French sense of the word -- not by the degree in which it is taken up with problems that are serious in themselves, but by the degree in which it gives the nourishment, not very easy to define, on which our imaginations live." This goal, to feed men's imaginations, Synge tried to attain in his plays. In the same place he adds, "The drama, like the symphony, does not teach or prove anything." With this idea in mind Synge went about producing plays which were not didactic. Daniel Corkery happens to be accurate when he states: "...in the grand and perfect manner (they do) what all instruction aims at; they open up new horizons, they release new powers within us."<sup>76</sup> Synge created a certain kind of play, limited in its scope, and yet with the universal qualities which appeal to and enlighten all men.

Padraic Colum says Synge once told him that all of his writing was subjective and "came out of the moods" in his life.<sup>77</sup> If this is

<sup>74</sup>J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Vol. III: Plays, p. 176.

<sup>75</sup>Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama, p. 181.

<sup>76</sup>Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 181.

<sup>77</sup>Road Round Ireland, p. 365.

true then the objectivity and polished method of his fine plays and topographical prose are the products of the artist's firm hand guiding the vital spirit of the man. To better understand the works of J. M. Synge a knowledge of the man, especially before he imposed his artistic objectivity on his work, would be helpful. In the recently published Oxford edition of his prose we have for the first time three of Synge's earliest efforts. These pieces are all highly subjective and autobiographical in nature, yet show most of the elements of Synge's imagination animated and aspiring. We see in them Synge the man before he found the native material and literary genre with which he was to create literature of lasting value. In the Autobiography, "Vita Vecchia" and "Etude Morbide", much can be learned about Synge as an individual and as an artist.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF J. M. SYNGE

J. M. Synge's most important attempt at writing autobiography is contained in a brief collage of events, emotions and thoughts covering his first twenty-two years of life. This collection, written mainly between 1896 and 1898, was not brought together from his manuscripts and published until very recently.<sup>78</sup> Several reasons for Synge's not forming this material into a published whole in his lifetime have been hypothesized by Mr. Price. He says perhaps Synge did not believe these writings met his standards of excellence, or possibly he thought them too revealing, pointing out the writer's request not to publish "Vita Vecchia" or "Etude Morbide" in his lifetime.<sup>79</sup> This second point is supported by the essay "Under Ether". At the onset of an operation Synge records, "I felt I was talking of a lady I had known years before, and sudden terror seized me that I should spread forth all the secrets of my life."<sup>80</sup> No matter what Synge's reasons were for not publishing the Autobiography, it is evident he did work on it as late as 1903, and he did see value in work of this type.

Synge had his own theory about writing of one's own life. "I do not think biography -- even autobiography -- can reveal the person,

<sup>78</sup>The Autobiography of J. M. Synge, ed. Alan Price (Dublin, 1965)  
-- hereafter cited as Autobiography.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>80</sup>Prose, p. 41.

but art may. The thoughts and deeds of a lifetime are impersonal and concrete -- might have been done by anyone -- while art is the expression of the essential or abstract beauty of the person."<sup>81</sup> Synge felt that the essence of life, covered up by "thoughts and deeds", had to be discovered by the writer and set down as art. Perhaps the best example from the plays to illustrate this point is in Riders to the Sea. Here he takes his life on Aran and the typical islander's life, and translates it into a piece of art as compelling as any symphony or piece of sculpture. Synge said, "The artistic value of any work of art is measured by its uniqueness. Its human value is given largely by its intensity and its richness, for if it is rich it is many-sided or universal....No personal originality is enough to make a rich work unique...."<sup>82</sup> It can be seen Synge desired work which could appeal to all men and to what is human in all men. He thought that originality from within the artist's imagination, not his personal experiences, had to produce this. The problem of writing about his life can be seen as a search for the unique and yet the universal in his life and spirit.

At the onset something must be said of the play which is most closely allied to the Autobiography, When the Moon Has Set. Thanks to the efforts of Dr. Ann Saddlemyer, we now have not only an excellent text of Synge's only non-peasant play, but also invaluable notes which shed light on Synge's creative processes.<sup>83</sup> Especially in the

<sup>81</sup>Autobiography, p. 13.

<sup>82</sup>"Various Notes," Prose, p. 350.

<sup>83</sup>See When the Moon Has Set, J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume III, Plays.

sections of the play which Synge eliminated we are able to see the close connection of ideas with the Autobiography. Many of the phrases and sentences, as well as the concepts, presented in the latter were at one time part of the play. It seems that the more didactic passages were eliminated as Synge worked on the play, this being in keeping with his opinion that plays should represent life and not only talk about it.

Colm, a young man of the landlord class, has returned from Paris to his dying uncle's estate. Here he has met a young nun, his distant cousin, and has fallen in love with her. As the play opens we learn that the uncle has died. The one night in which the play takes place shows us Colm's attempt to convince Sister Eileen that it is more Godly for her to love and marry him than to remain a nun. During their discussion Mary Costello, a madwoman, comes into the house and relates the tragic and similar tale of her love for the dead uncle whom she abandoned because of his religious beliefs. Her actions have left death and madness in their sorrowful wake. Through this sad vision and Colm's eloquent logic, Eileen is led to accept him and to give up her life as a nun.

When the Moon Has Set is Synge's only non-peasant play. From a Memorandum to Synge's executors, 1909, we have W. B. Yeats' thoughts on the work: "It is morbid and conventional though with an air of originality. The only thing interesting about it is that it shows his preoccupation with the thought of death."<sup>84</sup> In light of his other

<sup>84</sup>J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume III, Plays, p. 155.

plays, this one becomes of more interest. We see him trying to create a definite local atmosphere, to deal with the life he knows, and making an early attempt, with the character of the Bride, to put his Anglo-Irish dialogue on the stage. Perhaps because the play is too concerned with Synge's personality and his private life, it is less universal in appeal than his other works.

Of all of the plays, When the Moon Has Set contains the character most like Synge. Colm Sweeny has lived in France and noted the degradation there, but he believes like Synge: "The old-fashioned Irish conservatism and morality seemed to have evolved a melancholy degeneration worse than anything in Paris. Everyone seemed to be taking his friends to the asylum or bringing them back from it."<sup>85</sup> The noting of the effects of society and local atmosphere on personality is characteristic of Synge. Colm's beliefs about religion are similar to Synge's, and he feels the same forces in life working through him. He is aware of the loneliness of Wicklow, the processes of decay and death in nature, and especially the inspirational effect of woman. His intense personality and eloquent concern with and use of language form other connections with the playwright. The relationship and the central problem encountered by Colm in his love for Eileen is quite similar to the situation that existed between Synge and Cherry Matheson. It is important to note that Colm's successful conversion of Sister Eileen to a rich and fertile earthly love is opposite to the conclusion of

<sup>85</sup>When the Moon Has Set, J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume III, Plays, p. 160.

Synge's wooing -- her rejection of him because of his agnosticism.

One section of dialogue which Synge did not keep in the play is very similar to the first paragraph of the Autobiography. "Every life is a symphony. It is this cosmic element in the person which gives all personal art, and all sincere life, and all passions to love a share in the dignity of the world....If art is the expression of the abstract beauty of the person there are times when the person is the expression of the beauty that is beyond the world...."<sup>85</sup> This speech shows the direct relationship between the art and beauty of life and the person who, through his actions and beliefs, is able to reflect these abstracts. Thus what the artist must do to achieve art is the same process all men must work through to find a useful and fulfilling life.

It can be said that in both the play and the Autobiography Synge stresses the importance of the individual to try to make use of his talents and capabilities to the fullest extent. Synge reflects on his youth for the same reasons Wordsworth did. They found childhood the most fully alive and radiant stage in life and therefore sought to express it as art. They used their own lives as material, for intimate knowledge of their subject was necessary. Later Synge found that the primitive peoples of Ireland served his purpose more fully, but in his early work we find inspiration and insight stemming from his own experiences and moods.

<sup>85</sup>When the Moon Has Set, J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume III, Plays, p. 176.

In When the Moon Has Set Synge seems to imply it is almost a sacred commandment of nature to live as fully as possible. Colm says, "The worst vice is slight compared with the guiltiness of a man or woman who defies the central order of the world....The only truth a wave knows is that it is going to break. The only truth a bud knows is that it is going to expand and flower."<sup>86</sup> This view of man as being possessed with the same impetus to live for his one brilliant moment, as all the living things of nature do, is central to Synge. He has Colm implore Sister Eileen to "share in the pain and passion of the world". This is what Synge asks of all of us who read his plays, and it seems that in the Autobiography we see the forces at work on him early in his life which made him find this kind of vitality so important to his work.

As Mr. Price has pointed out, "He (Synge) apprehended what is valid in the recapitulation theory, the links between the child and primitive man, long before his visits to the Aran Islands..."<sup>87</sup> Synge says, "...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 folk-lore."<sup>88</sup> The truth of this statement has been affirmed by social scientists, but it is noteworthy that Synge was able to comprehend this from his own close observations and recollections of youth. Synge recalls an inventive game he played with his brother in which they constructed

<sup>86</sup>J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume III, Plays, p. 168.

<sup>87</sup>"Synge's Prose Writings: A First View of the Whole," p. 221.

<sup>88</sup>Autobiography, p. 13.

supernatural adventures for a character named "Squirrelly" to participate in. He later saw in this game the link between the "legendary instinct" and the imaginative quality of folk-lore.

Throughout the Autobiography we find Synge perceptively noting the feelings he had as a child which he recognized as having a timeless origin. Synge realized the highly imaginative element which is present in children is of the same fiber as that of the folk-tale. The truthfulness and yet the unrestricted fancy of both of these imaginations appealed to Synge. The combination of the two is what he strove for in his plays, richness and actuality, and its roots can be seen here as taking hold early in his life.

Synge recalls in his mid-teens having "psychical adventures" which sprung from his study of nature and his blossoming imagination. He tells of an evening in Wicklow when he mistook, in a moment of horror, a natural setting for a macabre set of eyes. Although he soon realized the true nature of what he saw, the area remained a menacing one to him for a time. The event caused him to record, "(It is) probably from real forces of nature, from such powerful and hypnotic suggestions of the earth upon prepared personalities, and not from trivial accidents of (shape and) colour, that local myths or superstitions arise."<sup>89</sup> His understanding of the mind of man and how it is constantly in a state of flux is important. He stresses the fact that certain minds are cultivated to react to the definite suggestions of nature, and he believes that the supernatural is often linked inseparably to the natural

<sup>89</sup> Autobiography, p. 22.

through the power of the individual imagination. On Aran he particularly noted this characteristic. In Riders to the Sea Maurya's psychic vision of her dead son riding behind her last living one immediately precedes Bartley's death. We can see in this the willingness of her imagination to foresee in a supernatural omen what she knows to be inevitable. The Tramp in Shadow of the Glen is another such imaginative and "prepared" person, accustomed to meditating on nature.

Synge experienced sensations in his childhood which were similar to those of primitive people. Confronted with death at an early age, he could not comprehend the Christian attitude. He retreated to nature and there experienced the kind of joy associated with festivities at a funeral. The joyous attitude of Michael James at the prospect of the wake ties into this idea of a pagan ritual for the dead.

The "divinity" of the primitive and the child, "that has never learned or wished to admire" itself, Synge thought the most perfect kind of beauty. The exultation of this divine beauty in nature is non-intellectual. It is of the same sort, as Synge acknowledges, as that found in Wordsworth's poetry. Synge realized that in folk-culture and in childhood exuberance and unrestricted joy there is a beautiful reality which cannot be appreciated till it is lost.

The habit of observation as well as that of inner-reflection Synge acquired at a young age. "What is elemental and untamed seems always to have drawn me, and as a boy I studied the arabs of the street."<sup>90</sup>

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

He was enthralled by the passion and the vitality of the children he saw in the slums of Harold's Cross. Perhaps being a sickly child from a restrained and puritanical environment increased the vicarious pleasure he took in watching the wildness and freedom of the youngsters at play. These barbarous children exhibited many of the traits of primitive people, and this was something Synge was always able to relate to.

From the Autobiography we can see that Synge's childhood was greatly influenced by religion. The evangelical Protestantism of his mother, with its emphasis on Hell and damnation, presented a problem to Synge throughout his life. The rather vivid descriptions of the eternal pain of the damned caused fear in the boy, too young to understand such religious doctrine. Synge the man was able to realize the obvious point of his mother's teachings, to instill in him her faith, but even a young child could not accept the puritanical and confining elements of the family faith. "When I went to church I remember wondering whether it might not all be a fraud got together to aid the bringing-up of children which I believed to be arduous."<sup>91</sup> From this we can see gentle humour, irony, sympathy for his mother and the human logic he always exercised. In his Autobiography Synge traces the forces which led to his agnosticism -- the kind of religion he was taught, his imagination, nature, and science.

Although Synge had moments of Protestant revelation up until his

<sup>91</sup>Autobiography, p. 15.

teens, he found he could never sustain the feeling that he was saved. The passion of the emotions he experienced did impress him, but these became transferred to his awe for nature. From his study of nature and reading of Darwin's theory of evolution, Synge became aware of the inconsistencies in the Christian doctrine. Although for a time he tried reading works of faith in an effort to convince himself he was wrong, eventually he derided these tracts. He turned to the reading of Carlyle, Leslie Stephen and Matthew Arnold, and it was not long afterwards Synge began to form a similar kind of nature-mysticism. Synge states, "(In me though,) science was (not inconsonant) with the imagination, and through this (intercourse) the forces which rid me eventually of theological mysticism reinforced my innate feeling for the profound mysteries of life."<sup>92</sup> Here we again see that Synge sought a union of the imagination and the real world.

At this same time in his youth Synge was becoming inclined toward art as a means of expression, and he writes: "The man who feels most exquisitely joy in what is perfect in art and nature is the man who from the width and power of his mind hides the greatest number of Satanic or barbarous sympathies. His opposite is the narrow churchman or reformer who knows no ecstasy and is shocked chiefly by the material discomforts of earth or Hell."<sup>93</sup> This paradox Synge felt existed particularly in Ireland, and in his plays he wished to show this truth to a reticent audience. Synge gives an example of this principle in

<sup>92</sup>Autobiography, p. 21.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

The Tinker's Wedding. The pagan, Mary Byrne, is a purer soul and more appreciative of life than the Priest who is willing to use God to scare off the tinkers.

Synge's feeling of loneliness was derived partly from his problems with religion. His mother's brand of religion made him timid and nervous as a child. He states, "...the well-meant but extraordinary cruelty of introducing the idea of Hell into the imagination of a nervous child has probably caused more misery than many customs that the same people send missionaries to eradicate."<sup>94</sup> Here again we have a reference to primitive people as being less harmful to the creative and sensitive individual than institutional Christianity.

The ill-health which Synge suffered from in youth caused him to be out of school for long periods of time, and this often led him to be a lone explorer of the hills and glens of Dublin and Wicklow. This isolation was not by choice, but was established by circumstance, and became a habit only as he grew up. Synge admits that: "...I began while still very young to live in my imagination in enchanted premises that had high walls with glass on top where I sat and drank ginger-beer in a sort of perpetual summer...."<sup>95</sup> This may be typical of childhood fancy, and yet the isolated quality of this scene is not usual.

Synge's illness kept him in one spring, and he took up butterfly collecting. "It gave me a great fondness," he recalls, "for the eerie and night and encouraged a lonely temperament which was

<sup>94</sup>Autobiography, p. 15.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

taking possession of me."<sup>96</sup> This led him to his passion for what is isolated and yet sensitive in nature. Synge came to believe, "The poacher, the painter and the poet are the only men who really know nature..."<sup>97</sup> and this seems to be reflected in plays like the Playboy, Shadow of the Glen and Well of the Saints. Only those who get their physical or spiritual life directly from nature can truly begin to understand the wonders held there.

Perhaps the most touching confession of Synge's loneliness is found in these lines from the Autobiography. "By the time I was sixteen or seventeen I had renounced Christianity after a good deal of wobbling...I felt sort of shame in being thought an infidel...This story is easily told, but it was a terrible experience. By it I laid a chasm between my present and my past and between myself and my kindred and friends. Till I was twenty-three I never met or at least knew a man or woman who shared my opinions."<sup>98</sup> This existing apart from people he could communicate with figures largely in Synge's work, especially in "Vita Vecchia".

Synge's difficulty in communicating, especially as an artist, is also seen as dating from his childhood. The strict religious code of his family led them to frown on whatever was creative or fanciful in children. When young Synge tried to make up words to express the sensations he received from nature, he was always reprimanded for "talking gibberish". At the age of seven he tried

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., pp. 23-24.

to recite to his family a poem he had created, but became nervous and had to stop. Later, in "Etude Morbide" we see in the character of the fiddler the more drastic results hypersensitivity in public can produce.

Although there were frustrations and restrictions on his youth, this was a basically happy time for Synge. He was becoming an introverted personality, but he was not without humour, and this shines through in the Autobiography. He played with other children and appreciated their company, and he seems to have adjusted rather well to his ill health. He was easily amused, and often he found in nature the companionship he was deprived of by not being at school. With a bright and imaginative mind he was fully capable of entertaining himself. In his music and studies he was later able to find the satisfaction he needed. On the whole his youth was pleasant, and perhaps because Synge was able to adjust to his environment and to look at life somewhat objectively, he cultivated and nourished his mind with healthy material instead of becoming so self-conscious and self-centered that he could never produce art.

Synge was strongly affected throughout his life by women, and this led to his particular concern about sex, especially its sublimation into religion. He saw the Churches, Protestant and Catholic, trying to keep the normal and healthy sexual impulses in repression, and he realized that this could only lead to frustration and even aggression. In an early draft of When the Moon Has Set, Colm

writes to a friend, "The interest of the present moment is to know whether she will give up her religion and remain with me...or add another to the unhealthy women of Ireland who scorn the rules of life and the beauty that is possible and only possible within them."<sup>99</sup>

Here we find concisely expressed the problem and conflict Synge perceived in his homeland. In his own life it played an important role in the personalities of his mother and Cherry Matheson.

In the Autobiography we find Synge's first recollections of the opposite sex and also his first perceptive thoughts on the relation of woman to life. In recording the many nurses he had as a child, he notes that one who was attractive was soon sent away; this leads us to believe he felt her physical beauty hampered her occupation. Synge notes an amusing early incident in which he was placed indiscreetly in a bathing box with a lady. Although he was assumed too young to remember the details, he was left with a vivid memory. This incident, which was perfectly natural, would have occasioned horror among his elders if it were known.

His first strong attachment for a girl was for a little neighbor. In their friendship he saw affection and imagination working toward producing a healthy and natural relationship together. They shared many interests together and this helped to develop his personality. They often played in the woods, and the atmosphere he presents as surrounding their relationship is quite similar to that in which Deirdre meets the Sons of Usna. In their childish way they were

<sup>99</sup> J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume III, Plays, p. 172.

much more honest than any adults could have been. At that time the children had not been cramped by the moral and religious codes of their elders, and they were able to discuss such subjects as sex with what Synge termed a "wholesome propriety". The aura of complete happiness which existed for Synge when he was with this girl is like that Christy felt in the sunshine of Pegeen's favor.

When the girl's affection was transferred to a cousin of Synge's, he felt the torment that we bring on ourselves by giving love to another human being. Although he fretted, Synge was not bitter, only lonesome. Synge tells how he used to kiss her hair and whistle the only love-song he knew, "Down in Alabama", while he pined for her. Such little details as these show us the typical reactions of childhood.

When Synge writes of his puberty we find the sensations and thoughts going through him that must be common to all men. He thought himself a "low miscreant" for having robust desires. Later he recognized that the inhibiting forces of society had made him feel this way. He subconsciously sublimated his sexual impulses in various ways. Art, music and nature became substitutes for him. "Often...I worked myself into a sort of mystical ecstasy with music and the works of Carlyle and Wordsworth..."<sup>100</sup> He would work mathematical problems and then switch to musical composition in a fury of characteristically adolescent changeableness. The boy yearned, as all youth does, to be all things at one and the same time. The expectancy of the full

<sup>100</sup> Autobiography, p. 24.

awakening to life in Synge is carefully recorded and is full of all the passion and probing of gifted youth.

Synge at that time viewed women as "a supreme glory, yet intangible, unattainable". This is similar to the attitude of the undeveloped Christy Mahon. Martin Doul finds the imagined beauty of his wife and the real beauty of Molly a source of inspiration, but they become unattainable for him. The splendid Deirdre is the best example of this "supreme glory", and as she comprehends it in herself she becomes willing to die to keep it alive in men's imaginations. The last of his plays, Deirdre shows this vision of woman as staying with Synge throughout his life. The fact that he achieved a very satisfying relationship with the beautiful young Molly Allgood at the time he wrote Deirdre may have affirmed his belief that such womanhood was as worthy of his worship as any work of nature or art.

At the beginning of the Autobiography Synge states that the smell of flowers and a Paris breeze have brought his thoughts back to his childhood. This association of nature and of the senses with his childhood relates to the naturally physical atmosphere of youth and to his imaginative beginnings. At an early age Synge says he was already "a worshipper of nature", and was aware even then of a conflict between nature and the commercialism of men. He didn't like any man-made objects intruding on nature's beauty. "My wish was that nature should be untouched by man...."<sup>101</sup> He always sought to keep commercialism out of the isolated and wild regions of Ireland he loved.

<sup>101</sup>Autobiography, p. 25.

Synge admits that in childhood games he always failed at commerce, though he was more successful at war. This relates to his theory that the gifted creative person is rarely prosperous in business. The thought that the man concerned with money matters is at variance with the man concerned with beauty can be found as a minor theme in several of his plays, especially in Shadow of the Glen. The primitive people who are able to truly appreciate beauty and life in Riders to the Sea are among the poorest economically that European culture could produce. Their closeness to nature enables their sensitivities to be refined. Again, The Tinker's Wedding shows people who are materially poor but imaginatively rich.

Synge was observant as a child, and he found that he had "a strong feeling for the colour of locality". As he matured he found that careful observation led him to see things around him which others would miss. In his mature writings the use of little details to give a sense of reality is relied on heavily, and his habitual attentiveness to his surroundings can be seen as fostering Synge's method of expression. Synge pays tribute to his observation of nature in aiding him to write about life when he states: "To wander as I did for years through the dawn of night with every nerve stiff and strained with expectation gives one a singular acquaintance with the essences of the world."<sup>102</sup> Synge cultivated his physical senses through his nature walks, and to this we can give credit for his ability to appeal, even in dialogue, to our senses of taste, touch and smell, as well as

<sup>102</sup> Autobiography, p. 21.

to those of sight and sound.

Through his study of nature he found glory in the world around him. Through his study of science he found that he could not believe in the abstract doctrines about life preached in church. It was only natural that Synge should find in the real world the spiritual elements he needed to work with to produce fine drama.

The important theme of dream versus reality is present in this early work. Synge was given the dream of being saved by his mother, only to have the reality he instinctively accepted disperse this illusion. When a schoolboy he used to pick out a classmate and envision a world where they two reigned. He vividly gives us the reality of life shattering this dream: "One day the course of my class put me for a moment beside my temporary god, but before I could find a fit term for adulation he whispered an obscene banality which shattered my illusions."<sup>103</sup> His first romance was also disrupted by the reality of his cousin's entering the secluded world that he had created with his little friend. Finally in music Synge was able to find his constant dream of beauty as an exquisite actuality of all he felt to be finest in man.

Throughout the Autobiography one finds the analogy presented in the opening lines carried out. Synge thought music the most elemental of the arts, and in it he perceived the similarity between the stages of a man's life and the movements of a symphony. He felt this "translation" of life into art the main objective of the artist.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

Synge saw the cosmic "harmony" of the universe, and it was the essence of this harmony in artists such as Michelangelo and Beethoven which gave their work "the strength and dignity of nature". He appreciates the gift some artists have for linking what is universal with what is rare in life and art, and this is what he personally strove for.

Synge recognized in music a kinship with religion. "A slight and altogether subconscious avidity of sex wound itself in the extraordinary beauty..., not unlike the sexual element that exists in all really fervent ecstasies of faith."<sup>104</sup> Synge saw as one of the acceptable outlets for the natural urges of man the dedication to religion and music. He sensed that whereas music could give beauty and refine the senses, religious ecstasy left a hollow abstract that could only frustrate healthy passions.

Synge also found in music the same vital quality which he delighted in in nature. The dream could be a productive reality in music. He claims, "At times I seemed to merge, and become greater, in the tempest of music that wailed around with always beautiful passion and built cathedrals and misty mountains with purple waves, yet always I was alive and in companionship with men and women."<sup>105</sup> He could achieve in an orchestra the communion with people, notably other gifted and sensitive artists, he could never find in his home environment. Synge found the harmony of the music enabling him to find

<sup>104</sup>Autobiography, p. 27.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

harmony in life. This euphony of dream and actuality is what all Synge's protagonists seek. The end of the Autobiography shows the young Synge hopefully entering his dream -- becoming a musician. The actuality which he later met with is vividly portrayed in "Etude Morbide".

The analogies Synge draws between music and the seasons of the year and the passage of human life are all similar. He sees the ecstasy in the brightest moment of all of these, and yet realizes that a cycle must have pain to counterbalance every pleasure. "So 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 in the dissolution of the person."<sup>106</sup> The relief from the mortality and mutability of life he speaks of is perhaps most perfectly realized in Riders to the Sea when Maurya says, "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me...."<sup>107</sup>

In the Autobiography we see Synge's compassion, warmth and humour. When he describes his puberty, and the desire he felt to stroke the cheek of the beautiful lady who sat in the pew in front of him, we see his ingenuous good humour. The compassion he feels for the orphans of the street is real. Throughout this work one feels the general goodwill towards all humanity which made Synge valued as a friend of some of Ireland's most famous personalities.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>107</sup>Plays, p. 96.

Although written in Paris while he was under the influence of the most sophisticated writers, the Autobiography shares the natural and sincere enthusiasm and depth of feeling of his best works. The highly personal nature of these writings sheds light on Synge as a man and also gives us a study in the growth and maturation of all men.

The Autobiography, of course, is not a polished piece of prose. The fact that it was constructed from manuscripts which span nine years of his life accounts for the somewhat uneven quality of the writing. With its stylistic faults, this piece still stands as an interesting and valuable record of the early formation of Synge's most famous themes and of the influences which affected his early life.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## VITA VECCHIA

A group of poems linked by a prose narrative, "Vita Vecchia" forms an introspective and thinly disguised autobiographical sequence of events in the life of J. M. Synge. It was written in Paris between 1895 and 1897, and although parts were revised at varying times, most of the revisions seem to have been undertaken in 1907. Ten of the poems were published in 1909 with the poems and translations he prepared for the public, but the complete work never appeared in print until 1966.

In Clip-binder 22 Synge states, "This is a story I have inscribed in verse called Vita Vecchia, which is a series of dreams to my later life as told in the study (*Étude Morbide*) I am now trying to finish."<sup>108</sup> The vaguely differentiated series of events in "Vita Vecchia" retains the dream-like quality Synge intended. The fact that over half the work is in poetic form keeps a definite distance between reality and the poet. Mr. Price notes that in the same clip-binder Synge said: "The story is not one that I would care to narrate in all particulars."<sup>109</sup> Although some of the events here have relation to real incidents, the recorded actions are fictitious to a large degree. The rejection by Cherry Matheson, the relations with

<sup>108</sup>"Vita Vecchia," Prose, p. 16.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid.

other women he met abroad, and the overall importance of music in his life are all particulars in Synge's life with which "Vita Vecchia" deals.

The opening of the work prepares for the conflict between Synge and the "young girl". She is identified with an unbending faith, the Roman Catholic Church, and this implies that she is a representation of Cherry Matheson and her rigid Evangelical Protestantism. In his *Clip-binder* Cherry is called Scherma, the Italian masculine form meaning "shield" or "protector", and this is an accurate description of the way she felt about her religion. The second and third women who appear in "Vita Vecchia" have been assumed to have some link with the women he met abroad, and to the women in "Étude Morbide".

Synge, as the first person narrator, is seen as a young musician and aesthete, sensitive and reflective. We can assume from varied evidence that the characteristics of the man's personality in "Vita Vecchia" accurately reflect the mood of Synge's Parisian stay. The most obvious link is that Synge also studied the violin while in Paris. He had several women friends, but remained faithful to the one woman who rejected him, Cherry Matheson. Synge also wrote poetry during the period of his European travels. Perhaps most notable is the fact that we know Synge was receptive to suggestions and, as in "Dream on Inishmaan", he was liable to be moved by his dreams.

The first event of "Vita Vecchia", the dream of failure, has a basis in fact. Synge was interrupted while playing his violin for Cherry Matheson by his nephew Edward Stephens. The dream which

foretells of his breaking down while performing becomes a reality for him. The possibly unreceptive nature of the woman for whom he is playing may indicate he felt Cherry did not understand and therefore appreciate his artistic strivings. Just as Christy Mahon and Martin Doul are scorned when they reach the height of their imaginative powers, Synge must have sensed that the problem with his performance lay as much with his audience as with himself.

The lapse of time between the first and second events Synge records sets up the movement of the piece -- from dream to dream. The fact that in the second dream the artist deserts his beloved, his acknowledged dream, for a different one is important. We see he feels a compulsion towards the "sad deserted woman" which he does not try to understand. He follows her till his dream ends, as usual, in unhappiness. The death of the woman and the transient life which they lead together is echoed in several of the other poems, and it seems to mark the transitional element which is sustained in the poetry. The poet is in a constant change of mood, emotion, and place.

The return of the poet to the place where his first friend lives shows us the inspiration he gains from looking on her while he practices his violin. This quality is later linked with the spiritual experience Synge receives from nature. Here again we see the artist needing inspiration from a real and passionate source not from an abstract ideal, such as her religion.

The second poem is linked with the first in several ways. They concern women and yet contain a longing for them that is not satisfied. The last stanza of the second poem:

I have seen her finger white,  
 Round those leaves to linger light,  
 Happy leaves though crumpled quite.<sup>110</sup>

shows us the beautiful woman giving all her attention to a book, probably a Bible, which can know nothing of her charms. Again the poem does not end on a happy note, for though the poet observes her, she takes no notice of him.

Synge does not condemn his love for being a devout Christian; he actually can admire the good deeds she performs in the name of religion. It is only when the word of her confessor takes her away from him that he thinks of fighting "a crusade against the crude force (of) Christianity".<sup>111</sup> Synge is not unappreciative of devotion either. The stipulation is that the passion and woe she can cause in his breast is far greater than that for which "Stern gods had died to know". This idea that all gods are equally severe and far removed from real life is also seen in When the Moon Has Set. Colm replies to Sister Eileen's belief in God that: "I will believe in millions of them if you like, but I have no doubt they care as little for us as we care for the sorrows of an ant-hill."<sup>112</sup>

The mention Synge makes of his "desolate youth" helps to explain his dwelling on his dreams and his retreating into the hills alone when he is refused. The fact that this beautiful woman has noticed him has affected him deeply, as can be seen from the poem, "I curse my bearing, childhood, youth". Only a man who feels deeply can be brought to such a

<sup>110</sup>"Vita Vecchia," Prose, p. 17.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>112</sup>J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume III, Plays, p. 168.

complete abnegation of his life. The contrast between this early poem and the pleasant invective against Molly Allgood's sister, entitled "The Curse", is noticeable. The latter work has the humour and irony indicative of Synge's best work. The early piece is marked by an hysterical note. While the rhythm is pleasingly maintained in "The Curse", the early poem gallops along in the first stanza only to be halting and graceless in the second. The mature Synge said the most Satanic impulses are always felt by the man who lives to the fullest, and in "The Curse" we see it peeping out in Synge.

The sequence of dream becoming reality, which is presented in the incident of the beloved and the window, forces Synge to flee from Paris, "the wilderness of cities", into his familiar boyhood surroundings. The mention Synge makes of other women at the time he is supposedly deeply in love with the saintly woman, makes one wonder if perhaps his affection for all of them is not tied up in some way with his love of beauty, if perhaps all of these attachments aren't part of some much broader and all-encompassing view of life? The fact that he loves women who answer his dream, or some preconceived notion of woman, is important. His first inspiration, he says, came from "the heart of the hills", and it seems that Synge here finds women, like nature, "full of wonder and delight". The fact that Synge chose to discuss his personal relationships with women and his reactions to nature on returning to Ireland from Paris in the same piece seems to support this contention.

The first poem Synge writes while in Ireland shows the effects of his breakdown in communications with the young woman he loves. He finds he cannot communicate as he used to with nature now. He finds that his sad love songs are discordant with the harmony of life in nature. The sadness he feels is linked with the sadness of autumn, the season when life begins to decay. This note is present in almost all the poems of this sequence. He says he felt, "...the dismay that is blended for many of us with all that is (lovely and) puissant on the earth..."<sup>113</sup> The reflective mood takes him over completely. "In a little while the same moon will rise and there will be wonderful perfumes and darkness and silver and gold lights in the pathways of Wicklow, and I will be (lying) under the clay....I am haunted by the briefness of my world."<sup>114</sup> This idea that the beauty of nature he is embracing now will soon be physically beyond him is similar to the sentiments expressed in his poem, "To the Oaks of Glencree". Again here we have the awareness of death and of the brevity of life found throughout his writings; as Deirdre says, "...there is no way to keep life, or love with it, a short space only...."<sup>115</sup> As Deirdre chooses to live to capacity and to die when no longer able to do so, Synge also believes he must. "It brings me at times a passionate thirst for the fulfillment of every passive or active capacity of my person. It seems a crime that I should go home and sleep between trite sheets while heaven and earth slip away from me forever...."<sup>116</sup>

<sup>113</sup>"Vita Vecchia". Prose, p. 20.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>Plays, p. 244.

Synge makes a comparison between women and beautiful gems. He says, "Rubies and crystals that do not feel are beautiful forever, but flowers and women and artists fulfill their swift task of propagation and pass in a day..."<sup>117</sup> In When the Moon Has Set he makes a similar argument, having Colm appeal to Eileen to see that her beauty is transient. This point, that time is precious to those who are capable of producing joy and beauty, is central to "Vita Vecchia". We see that in this way nature is cruel, and that God does not intervene to prevent the natural processes of life. The personal desire to fulfill his potentialities to the fullest becomes in Christy the sole purpose of his life. When he is deserted by his friends and especially Pegeen, he finds he must live life to its fullest without any help, for he is now a man so well-rounded he can never return to his vegetable-like existence or dependence on others' imaginations. The decision Nora reaches in Shadow of the Glen is similar. She finds she must live life to capacity or give up the very best parts of her personality. Bartley is forced in Riders to the Sea to die to fulfill the part in life he must play. He does not falter in making his decision, for he knows that this is what he must do to fulfill his role in society and nature.

Synge is intensely aware of the sensuousness of nature. Throughout his works we find vivid references to whatever appeals to the physical senses. In "Vita Vecchia" he says, "An earth breath came

<sup>117</sup>"Vita Vecchia," Prose, p. 23.

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<sup>117</sup>"Vita Vecchia," Prose, p. 23.

up across the bogs, carrying essences of heath, and obscure plants and the ferment of the soil...."<sup>118</sup> In Well of the Saints Strong says Synge makes: "...the whole background...real by means of sound -- as it should be in a play with a blind man and woman as its centre."<sup>119</sup> Howarth believes Synge utilizes in his plays "the special Irish family of olfactory comedy".<sup>120</sup> Whether this is true or not is conjectural; what is true is that the appeal to the senses Synge achieved seems to have a direct relation with his nature studies in early life as seen in the Autobiography.

By saying that he thought he was better and could return to Paris, Synge implies that the emotional upset he felt affected him physically, and it seems logical that his return to nature would correct the illnesses of body and mind. The sensations one feels, physical or mental, can have equally strong effects.

The poem he writes on his return stresses his loneliness again and links him with the natural elements around him. Although in Paris, he is again able to associate himself with nature after his respite in the country.

The sonnet he writes returns us again to his love problem. The image he achieves of his loved one as a cruel angel is effectively brought out. In the three short poems Synge wrote after seeing the devout girl again, we find the emphasis in his imagery on the polar forces of God and Hell. He retains his attitude of defiance towards

<sup>118</sup> "Vita Vecchia". Prose, p. 20.

<sup>119</sup> L.A.G. Strong, John Millington Synge (London, 1941), p. 33.

<sup>120</sup> Herbert Howarth, The Irish Writers 1880-1940 (London, 1958), p. 223.

the notion of a god, yet shows he comprehends what the Christian doctrine means to those who are believers. The poem, "A Dream", uses the image of the mother and child, but the fact that they are seen in their "bland delight" in a dream only makes his contrast with reality all the more vivid.

Once again in prose Synge returns to his musings on women and nature. He sees the analogy between the brevity of the beauty of a woman and a flower. He feels the need of woman as an inspiration for his imagination and for his dreams, but at this point he feels that even this is not enough, and "...all our honour and glory is in the shadow of a dream..."<sup>121</sup> This concept is a key to the whole work, for his life he sees as but the shadow of these dreams he has had which are more vivid than the events they foretell. He finds his imagination able to encompass more wonders and beauty than he is able to seek out and grasp in reality. Here we have the dream at its farthest distance from reality. This is the main problem encountered by Martin Dougl, his problem stemming like Synge's from the soul and vision of the artist which is in him. Nora's life with Dan forms a similar problem for the dream she held of her life with him cannot exist in reality. Conchubar's dream of possessing Deirdre he finally realizes is not possible, because he lacks the kind of vision Deirdre and Naisi hold of life and love, and which they are able to make into a brief reality.

As Synge muses about life, his mind wanders back to his childhood;

<sup>121</sup>"Vita Vecchia" Prose, p. 23.

this reminds us of the way flowers and the sound of the crowds in the Autobiography reminded him of his youth. He sees that he is a different person from what he was as a child. He sees the processes of nature and the mutability of life working on him. His thought, that a child of his would be more like him in his youth than he is now, is similar to Wordsworth's idea that childhood holds special emanations all adults lose.

As his memory wanders back to his childhood we see another woman entering his life, a nurse, and we see him in his uncle's library. It is ironic that the scene he gives us is the same as the setting of When the Moon Has Set. The linking of this piece with the play is almost as strong as that with the Autobiography. We see the same man, wrought by frustrations and situations he cannot change, in both of these early pieces, but the point of view is different. While "Vita Vecchia" and the Autobiography are both subjective, in the latter Synge also looks objectively at his youthful thoughts and emotions.

In the concluding passage Synge says: "We must live like the birds that have been singing or will soon be singing over the way. They are shot and maimed and tortured, yet they go on singing -- I mean those that are left -- and what does the earth care or what do we care for the units?"<sup>122</sup> Here we see the likeness between the living things in nature and ourselves. Although we are hindered by reality, we must trust and persevere and try to live our dreams. The music of the birds brings us again to the harmony Synge believed governs the world. The image of life as a symphony is used here as in the Autobiography and When the Moon Has Set. He

<sup>122</sup>"Vita Vecchia," Prose, p. 24.

states: "We must be careful to play all the notes; it is for that we are created. If we play well we are not exorbitantly wretched."<sup>123</sup>

Synge concludes that the answer to the torments of life is the fulfilling of all our capabilities and talents to the best of our ability.

As can be seen, the ideas and situations presented in "Vita Vecchia" have links to Synge's later works, but the style and quality of this work is quite different. Parts of the prose, especially those dealing with nature, contain attractive notes and rhythms, but the poems are of little literary value. They are overly romantic and exotic at times, with dramatic effects that fail to arouse; such is the case in these awkward and jarring lines:

They fled afar and cried I Hell did borrow  
As through their notes my notes fell discord waking.<sup>124</sup>

Synge's diction and syntax along with his excessive use of alliteration and assonance produce effects like this:

My temples reeled, I staggered, scarlet dyed,  
Then sightless stood, heard weeping swift indite.<sup>125</sup>

The regularity of his rhyme and his obvious lack of pleasing rhythms mark his early poems.

The highly "literary" type of poetry here, abstract, self-centered, limited in its scope and depth is quite different from Synge's more mature poetic efforts. As Synge eventually discovered, and stated in 1908 in the Preface to the Poems, "The poetry of

<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

<sup>124</sup>"Vita Vecchia," Prose, p. 20.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

exaltation will be always the highest, but when men lose their poetic feeling for ordinary life, and cannot write poetry of ordinary things, their exalted poetry is likely to lose its strength of exaltation, in the way men cease to build beautiful churches when they have lost happiness in building shops." This was the problem the poet himself encountered in his early efforts. Compared to his ballad "Danny", or to his other Irish folk pieces, or to his majestic yet vigorous and earthy "Queens", the poems in "Vita Vecchia" are bland and unreal. The irony, humour and native vitality of "Beg-Innish" is far more appealing also. In the line from "The Passing of the Shee" we see the realization in Synge which he felt had to come to all of Ireland -- the ethereal ecstasy of the "plumed yet skinny Shee" must be exchanged for the real joy of a vigorous life.

Although the themes of this work are similar to those of the later works, the handling, style and quality are often different. Perhaps the contrast "Vita Vecchia" supplies with the later poems and the plays is its most important value, for we see in this comparison the maturation of Synge's style.

CHAPTER SIX  
ÉTUDE MORBIDE

"A morbid thing about a mad fiddler in Paris, which I hate" is the way Synge described "Étude Morbide" in 1908. Later he said, in reference to many of his early works, "...I think as a man has no right to kill one of his children if it is diseased or insane, so a man who has made the gradual and conscious expression of his personality in literature the aim of his life, has no right to suppress himself any carefully considered work which seemed good enough when it was written suppression if it is deserved will come rapidly enough from the same causes that suppress the unworthy members of a man's family."<sup>126</sup> This statement applies to "Étude Morbide". It is a study of a period in his life that influenced his literary career and helped to form his critical thoughts. For this reason we are grateful to have this work and thus agree with Synge: "At the moment of creation the balance of the critical and creative impulses which works in the forming of any artistic production is the essential artistic element of the writers temperament at that moment. To let his critical judgement of thirty five overthrow his creative impulse of twenty five is a quite different thing...."<sup>127</sup> Although the style and method of this work are very different from

<sup>126</sup>Poems, p. xiii.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., p. xiv.

Synge's later pieces, this work is still of value to us in showing the strong influence of the French and Art for Art's sake schools on his writing at this time, the major theme he was to develop in the plays and also his personal inner conflicts. "Étude Morbide" forms the third part of Synge's autobiographical efforts, and as with the other two works discussed, we find this piece an aid in understanding Synge the man and artist.

In this piece we find Synge again in the role of a musician in Paris, but as his sub-title says, this is "An Imaginary Portrait". The events are probably not drawn from his life, but we can see the emotional and intellectual problems that Synge felt in Paris in this work. As "Vita Vecchia" is related to Synge's inner life, so is "Étude Morbide". The drastic events that change the artist's life here are not factual, but the changes in the man are similar to those Synge experienced internally.

The vague sequence of events that take place in "Vita Vecchia" changes here into specific dates and actions. The dream-like quality of the latter work is transferred into these definite though imagined actions. The dream is much more of a reality, and therefore the dissolution of the dream leads to more drastic changes in the real world of the narrator.

The women who were vaguely identified in "Vita Vecchia" are given names and more realistic identities in this piece. The young woman of the Catholic faith, associated most likely with Cherry Matheson, may be partially responsible for the creation of the Celliniani. Synge met a girl in Florence by this name, but he

stated that although she suggested this character, their relationship had nothing in common with the woman of "Étude Morbide". The "third woman" of "Vita Vecchia" seems to be really related to the Celliniani, but absolute identification is impossible. The "second person" in the above work is called the Chouska in "Étude Morbide", and she seems to be a combination of an American writer and a Polish woman whom Synge met while in Paris.<sup>128</sup> The above identifications are all conjectural, and judging from Synge's propriety and honor concerning women, we can be sure his portraits are at least somewhat veiled in their descriptions of the women he knew.

Synge worked on "Étude Morbide" from 1897 through 1899, making revisions in about 1907. Part of the work which he cut sets the mood and situation of the piece. Although Synge used the third person narrator and therefore a more objective point of view in the original opening, he later decided to leave out this exposition and utilize only the first person narrative of the fiddler writing in his diary. From the original opening we learn that the scene is Paris and the main character is a violinist, nervous, introspective, lonely. We learn that he is not singular in the latter trait, "Like all who live alone in Paris he had the habit of passing some of his evening in the cafes...."<sup>129</sup> He is unusual in that he is obsessed by a dream. The dream of a woman's face is not his only vision, for he hopes soon to be a successful artist. As the piece progresses and we see the events

<sup>128</sup> See Prose, p. 16. These are basically Mr. Price's conjectures on the women's identities.

<sup>129</sup> "Étude Morbide," Prose, p. 25.

that change his life, we see his dream of life changing and therefore, also, his efforts to make these dreams into actuality. His failure to achieve a satisfying actuality is what makes the title of this work fitting. The madness and death that enter into the plot's action are necessary and are accessory and only manifestations of the basic problem -- a life that is unfulfilled in its capabilities is fruitless and unsatisfying.

In the Autobiography on page 27, Synge says when he was in an orchestra, "I played with an almost morbid assiduity." This morbid feeling seems to be the one we find in "Etude Morbide"; the artist lives with the beauty of women and music, but instead of becoming joyous he experiences an unhealthy fascination.

The young musician finds in one night the woman he has dreamed of in two real people. Although we are told the Celliniani had joy in her, his love is described as a compulsion rather than a healthy attraction. The unhappy ending of their affair, presented immediately in the May 3 entry of the journal, is hinted at in the first section that was omitted. The man says, "'I have had presentiments and dreams before but never anything like this. I hope it may end without calamity.'"<sup>130</sup> Perhaps it is because he discovered the Chouska at the same time as the Celliniani that he felt this way; whatever the reasons, "the fairy land" he discovered in real life could not last. He notes in his first entry the fact that he and the Celliniani are not compatible. The "unendurable excitement" from a work of art which

<sup>130</sup>"Etude Morbide," Prose, p. 25.

she finds is similar to the excitement and yet the morbidity Synge himself found in his music. There is a similarity between the young musician's inability to perform in public and Synge's nervousness. The fiddler is too sensitive and nervous in public to achieve his dream of successfully giving beauty through music.

The first few entries for May show the young man in his dream-world and the wonder he feels. The fact that he calls the meeting of the two women a "queer business" again makes us aware that his joy is mingled with a premonition that there will be unhappiness to follow. His dream of the women coincides with his engagement to perform at Lemerre's concert, and perhaps Synge understood that dreams could be connected with our subconscious hopes and desires and wished to show that women and music were two forms of beauty which can be thus related.

The comparison made between the two women is interesting. They are first compared to entities in nature, then to pieces of art work. The "new power of expression in this strange attachment" for these two women is similar to the delight and the healthy inspiration the artist receives from walking in the rain and smelling the leaves of the trees. Women and nature both give the fiddler an emotional impetus to try to create great art through his violin.

The Celliniani and the Chouska are quite different, yet each fulfills a need in the fiddler. The Celliniani is perhaps not a woman of the streets, but she is obviously a free and wandering soul. She has "sympathy and friendship and a vague beauty...and southern grace". She is an appreciative audience for the man. The Chouska is

an artist, and this is what appeals to him about her. She is "a perfect physical type", and has the health and stability which he himself lacks; he admires her "strange instinct for colour and sound", instincts Synge had and valued, and this links her existence to his.

Synge said a man forms himself to the conception a female friend has of him, and this makes him a better developed and finer person. Here we see this thought expressed by the musician in his June 12 entry. The two different women cultivate all the aspects of his personality and help to shape his development. The way Christy Mahon is effected by women is quite different in specifics, but the sources are similar, as were the results, to those here.

The nervousness which racks the fiddler is of two kinds. His personal sensitivity and the complete release found in music bring him to a fever pitch, aided by the heat of the summer and his unusual love relationships. He says; "My dreams which came true were less strange than this truth which is like a dream."<sup>131</sup> His ideal of woman, taking two forms, is not as beneficial as he had hoped; the reality is not satisfying him any more than the dream did. What is worse, the unhappiness and nervousness which besets him is caught by the Celliniani and makes her breakdown even more complete than his.

The second form of his nervousness is connected with his inability to perform in public. He finds that he depends on his "surroundings", or the audience he has. He calls the ordinary type of concert vulgar,

<sup>131</sup>"Etude Morbide," Prose, p. 27.

and has a premonition he will fail. When playing for the receptive Celliniani he is able to express his ecstasy on his violin completely. The excitement he feels while playing for her is similar to that described by Synge in the Autobiography when he played the Jupiter Symphony with a young Jewess sitting near him.

The young man's wish that there was a concert hall for musicians to play in similar to a church is notable. Synge believed that music could be an outlet for the sexual impulses just as a fervent form of religion could be. Here we see most plainly the relationship of the two. The Celliniani finds this man and his music her religion, and through them she finds a kind of catharsis. The artist finds his exaltation while playing as complete as that possible with any religious faith, and yet it excites him to an unhealthy degree.

The catastrophe of the concert and the madness of the Celliniani which it causes brings a change in the artist. He comes to wonder if he is not mad. The breakdown in public, a recurring theme, reaches its most awful realization here. The similarity to the Playboy riots is striking. If it had not been for Yeats' defense of Synge at that time perhaps he would have felt even more acutely the effects of this failure of the audience to accept the artist's reality.

The madness which the young man feels he is laboring under makes him think of suicide. He reads Spencer and thinks there is no point in going on for we will all return to nature sooner or later. He sees no hope in his future for he sees himself as a failure. The fear of madness he feels more acutely than any fear of death. He is lonely and nervous, and he feels a responsibility for the Celliniani's

condition. Synge portrays this desolate and morbid period of the artist's life with all the mental horror we find in the stories of Poe's. Every aspect of his existence becomes colored with unhappy and terrifying thoughts. Little details are used to portray his mood. Whatever he reads, whomever he sees, whatever he does makes him dwell on the horrors of the human condition. Synge brings the artist to the very lowest ebb in life a human can feel.

It is ironic that the fiddler curses God and then is given a new life. He finds that through his misery he feels a sympathy for the world. With a surety we expect from Synge, we find the musician wondering if he is capable of denying life after he has "known the country and the hills", the supreme glories of life for him. The immediate return to thoughts of nature prepares us for the final position the artist will take. The dream of a career and of the beautiful woman has been dashed on the boulders of reality, and the artist is now on the threshold of a new dream.

The "saintly exaltation" which the man achieves through his study of The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis is paralleled by Synge's own reading of the work. He had planned at one time to translate it. His fascination with the work took on a different form when he later saw Rabelais as a greater spiritual father. A work of Synge's not published till recently, "A Rabelaisian Rhapsody", shows all the humour of the plays as well as the irony Synge has been noted  
132  
for. The affirmation found in this newly seen piece gives us again Synge's belief in the forces of life and laughter as superior to those that deny joy to man. The argument is similar to that which

132

J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume III, Plays, pp. 183-186.

Colm presents in When the Moon Has Set, and is in direct opposition to the spiritual gratification from religion and the saints which the artist first feels on reading The Imitation.

The artist makes an effort to find his identity and a method for living life that is worthwhile through his reading. The necessity for joy and ecstasy in his life has been seen in his passion for music and for the Celliniani; now that he cannot have either of these sources of inspiration and creation, he searches his inner spirit for some sources of joy.

"As all thirst is quenched by liquid, so perhaps the inner longing of the personality is only assuaged by an ecstasy which is as multiform as the varieties of liquid, and exists as essentially in prayer as in the sound of the violin."<sup>133</sup> Synge states this in "Étude Morbide" as the first hopeful view of life the artist takes after his breakdown. It is derived from The Imitation, and is related to Synge's thoughts on religion and music as similar forms for the expression of life. In "A Rabelaisian Rhapsody" this thirst is discussed in the dialogue between St. Thomas and Rabelais, and the latter says: "My book is like the great sea that will drink up all the ordures of the world, and remain yet with clean lips and pure jubilant voice. Your book is a puddle, and marred forever did but an innocent cow look backward over it."<sup>134</sup> This conclusion that a joyous and robust attitude are best in life and art is what the fiddler

<sup>133</sup>Prose, p. 31.

<sup>134</sup>J. M. Synge: Collected Works, Volume III, Plays, p. 184.

eventually came to believe, but at this point in the piece he is only moving towards this position. He must first start with the ecstasy most like the one he has known through art, and this is expressed by St. Thomas.

Again the similarity between religion and music is perceived by the artist. "We have the same joy of progress, the same joy in infinitely exact manipulation, (the saint with his daily actions, the artist with his materials) the same joy of creation...."<sup>135</sup> Although he comes to find that the ways of the saint are not suited to him, he does try to use the same system of self-suggestion. The stoics' advice to "'act as nature leads thee'" appeals to his natural affinity for the real world.

The satisfaction the artist receives from his studies is made complete by his meditations on beautiful objects. This leads him in the face of the Celliniani's death to a philosophy which satisfied his need of beauty. "All living things demand their share of joy, and I see no permanent joy apart from the creation or touching of beautiful forms or ideas."<sup>136</sup> Eventually this opinion will lead the artist back to the creation in his own life of beauty and art. He sees that beauty is the supreme creation of man and God and that it is an end in itself.

At the peak of his exaltation doubt once again enters into the artist's mind. This seems in keeping with the personality Synge has

<sup>135</sup>"Étude Morbide," Prose, p. 31.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid, pp. 31-32.

created, nervous, lonesome, and introspective. He thinks that it is possible that this dream of a saintly existence may be a reality which is only a "morbid growth", and therefore as unhealthy and as destined for destruction as his former dream world. The religious ecstasy becomes dissipated as the young man meditates and objectifies his thoughts. After reading Spinoza he sees the limitations to the kind of joy his has been working through.

At this point in the story the artist retreats into nature. At home in Ireland the artist reacts to his natural surroundings in a healthful way. He finds the artificiality of his spiritual system and his "rather crude materialism" losing their influence on him. He reacts to the simple life found in his native country and finds he can play for the people with an enjoyment and ease he had lost in Paris. The comparison of his life in the hills with that in the city is similar to the contrast made in "Vita Vecchia".<sup>137</sup> As Synge returned to his native land to find the material he needed to nurture his talents, so this young artist finds his health and the renewal of his spirits again in nature.

Although the artist returns to Paris, the effects of his trip back into nature remain with him. He accepts the mysticism of the Chouska because he sees in her the ideal of womanhood which he saw in his dreams. Now she seems to represent a combination of religious ecstasy and the memory of the Celliniani. He allows himself to yield

<sup>137</sup>See Prose, p. 20.

up his imagination to the abstractions of delight she feels but only for a short time. He has resurrected himself from his physical and mental degeneration, and cannot retreat back to any of his original dreams. He must build a new reality out of his freshly renewed vision, and his natural instincts guide him to disavow the abstractions of exotic mysticism for the healthy glow of life lived with all the senses awakened.

While under the influence of the Chouska's mysticism he returns to the kind of ecstasy he knew in music which had almost destroyed him. He says, "I have seen symphonies of colour that moved with musical recurrence round centres I could not understand...."<sup>138</sup> Although these lines are beautiful, they are abstract and not related to reality. Much of the writing in this piece, especially the descriptive passages, are highly romantic and exotic, and they show the influence of Synge's reading of the French symbolists and of De Quincey, Pater and the Art for Art's sake school. Synge needed the sound and the unsuccessful efforts of an artist to create in his life what Synge struggled to create in his art -- joy, beauty and reality.

The dream of "divine children" and the fiddler's very real physical desires shatter the imposed reality of his mysticism. He finds he cannot deny his real self and finds he has a new dream in life, a dream of love. He says: "I am sick of the ascetic twaddle of the saints. I will not deny my masculine existence nor rise, if I can

<sup>138</sup>"Etude Morbide," Prose, p. 34.

rise, by facile abnegation."<sup>139</sup> This is his new dream and the one by which he now must live. He tries to convince the Chouska that marriage would be a beautiful reality for them, but he is spurned. Just as Cherry Matheson refused Synge because of her Evangelical Protestantism, the Chouska says that they have been with God and "no one would put a bride bed in the Sainte Chapelle". As Colm is opposed by the Catholicism of Sister Eileen, so the young man in "Vita Vecchia" is defeated by the Catholicism of the first young girl. The fact that only in When the Moon Has Set is there a fulfilling conclusion is notable. It is obvious Synge thought about this problem of religion diverting healthy and worthwhile instincts away from real life into an unsatisfying dream, and it seems it was necessary for him to write one work in which his view of life brought about a successful conclusion.

Although the Chouska says that they have experienced the inexpressible in life and therefore cannot create worthwhile art, due to his return to nature, the fiddler will be able to create some form of art in the future. He says, "All art that is not conceived by a soul in harmony with some mood of the earth is without value, and unless we are able to produce a myth more beautiful than nature...it is better to be silent..."<sup>140</sup> He has a new dream related to his artistic efforts, and we feel he will not always have to be "silent". He will return to the source of inspiration that has always been healthiest and most beneficial to his spirit. He has rejected

<sup>139</sup>"Etude Morbide," Prose, p. 34.

<sup>140</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

the artificiality of Beaudelaire and Hysmans and wants to feel the kinship he has always had with the "hills". Although as in the Autobiography he still believes that music is the "finest art", the fact that he is not destined to compose does not daunt him in his delight in life.

We see Synge's artistic views as changed in a letter written to the Chouska; "I turn daily further from poetry which is but a shaping of jewels and seek a tone as lone and calm as night upon the hills."<sup>141</sup> This statement of Synge's turning away from the most subjective form of expression, poetry, seems to make the maturing process of the artist's critical thinking. The musician sees that stories in verse and lyric poetry are substitutions for his beloved music, and this thought, it seems, is related to Synge's opinion that "Lyrics can be written by people who are immature, drama cannot. Dramatic art is first of all a childish art -- a reproduction of external experience -- without form or philosophy; then after a lyrical interval we have it as mature drama dealing with the deeper truth of general life in a perfect form and with mature philosophy."<sup>142</sup> It can be seen that Synge realized the very basic quality and purpose of drama, to show the actions of life on the stage. He viewed the second stage in the development of drama as a more romantic, abstracted, and poetic one. The flowering of the drama he visualized as a shaping of a philosophy of life and a vision of life's meaning into an object of art and beauty with form and grace. So here we see that what has

<sup>141</sup>Ibid.

<sup>142</sup>"Various Notes," Prose, p. 350.

transpired in the life of the artist is similar to the artistic development of Synge's literary philosophy.

The Chouska's last words to him carry the dream they have lived together to a conclusion. "In the end we will dream away our existences, happier than in the world."<sup>143</sup> She lives in her dream without creating a reality from it; this is what the young man cannot do. He must have an actuality that is built from his dream, which is tangible and fulfilling for the body as well as the mind. His warning to her that she must not "renounce all offspring" from her mind even though she renounces those of her body shows his understanding of her position. Her choice cannot be his, but since he can never marry her, he acquiesces to this imposed fate in a graceful and compassionate manner.

The inner clashes and changing ideas on philosophy and literature of the fiddler in "Étude Morbide" are probably reflections of Synge's own thoughts and emotions during his stays in Paris. For this reason this piece is valuable in helping us to see the evolution of Synge as a man and as a writer. As a piece of literature, "Étude Morbide" is unsatisfying in many ways. Like "Vita Vecchia" this work is too wavering and flighty. Although part of the reason for the lack of a sustained note is due to the fact Synge never prepared this piece for publication, it is inherent in the nature of the work. It is unrelated to any kind of reality except that which exists in the erratic mind of the fiddler. The inward turning view of life presented

<sup>143</sup>"Étude Morbide," Prose, p. 36.

is definitely inferior to the universal quality of the topographical works and especially of the plays. The highly literary and artificial tone and style used produce an overly exotic and dramatic effect. We never feel at one with the fiddler. His seriousness never lets us see more than one side of him; therefore we never really know or understand him. The humour and irony of the later works cannot be found. We have a purposely disjointed and ethereal record of emotions, thoughts and events that never seem to have any relevance for the reader. An example of this shows the problems of this affected style: "Symbols of things beyond my comprehension cloud through the waving of the inward light. Strange stars shine upon me with prophetic rays. Purple feathers float in my hands, and choral symphonies wind themselves about me."<sup>144</sup> The vague and overly theatrical language does not produce the exaltation desired. Awkward images and super-human metaphors are not effective.

As can be seen, this work fails as a whole. Although Synge at times will use some small details to illuminate a passage, the instances of this are few. The observations he makes on literature and his changing point of view are valuable. The description of the fiddler playing his violin for the peasants reminds us again that Synge needed to write of a fully alive and vigorous kind of life. We can view this piece perhaps as the most extreme example of the influence of the French school on the young Synge. Perhaps the contrast between "Étude Morbide" and the plays will help us more fully appreciate the grace, beauty and

<sup>144</sup>"Étude Morbide," Prose, p. 34.

fine reality indicative of the latter. What is certain is that Synge underwent a great change in his writing technique, and it is possible that in realizing the problems of artificial prose, he was drawn to the natural and flowing language of his best works.

With the recent publication of the Oxford Collected Works of John Millington Synge, the world now has a definitive edition of his works. We are fortunate that not only can we see the end total of his efforts as a writer, but also we can trace his developing art and philosophy of literature.<sup>125</sup> In looking at the three volumes examined here, the Autobiography, "Vivia Vachia" and "The White Heron", we find an exceptionally good record of the early influences on Synge. His affinity for nature and primitive man, his awareness of society and man in the midst of life, his love of art, music, and fine literature, his fears and frustrations stemming from restrictive and conflicting moral and religious codes, and his basically introverted personality can be seen as shaping the young and sensitive Synge. From these sources came his most important and pervasive theme, that of the dream versus reality. This problem is central not only to his literary work but also became the symbol of his personal dilemma as a playwright striving to present his artistic vision of life to an audience. His problems were complex; he needed the proper stimulus of experiences for imagination, the kind of material from which he could shape his vision, the genre in which he could best express himself,

<sup>125</sup> See Alan Price, "Synge's Prose Writings: A First View of the Whole," Modern Drama, IX (November, 1967), 221-226.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## CONCLUSION

With the recent publication of the Oxford Collected Works of John Millington Synge, the world now has a definitive edition of his works. We are fortunate that now not only can we see the sum total of his efforts as a writer, but also we can trace his developing art and philosophy of literature.<sup>145</sup> In looking at the three pieces examined here, the Autobiography, "Vita Vecchia" and "Étude Morbide", we find an especially good record of the early influences on Synge. His affinity for nature and primitive man, his awareness of decay and death in the midst of life, his love of art, music, and fine literature, his fears and frustrations stemming from restrictive and forbidding moral and religious codes, and his basically introverted personality can be seen as shaping the young and sensitive Synge. From these sources came his most important and pervasive theme, that of the dream versus reality. This problem is central not only to his literary work but also became the symbol of his personal dilemma as a playwright striving to present his artistic vision of life to an audience. His problems were complex; he needed the proper stimulus of inspiration for imagination, the kind of material from which he could shape his vision, the genre in which he could best express himself,

<sup>145</sup>See Alan Price, "Synge's Prose Writings: A First View of the Whole," Modern Drama, II (December, 1969), 221-226.

and a responsive and receptive audience. Women and the primitive parts of Ireland inspired him. The folk-lore and life on the Aran Islands and in desolate sections like Wicklow supplied him with suitable material for his art. The drama he found to be the form in which he could crystallize his vision and bring it to life. Synge said, "All art is a collaboration," and he understood the importance of the audience in relation to the meaningful performance of a play. His audience - though in his own time and country a small minority - has since become the world and all those who love life and joy captured in art.

The accurate record of Synge's early life in Ireland presented in the Autobiography helps us to appreciate his formative view of life and also gives us, as Mr. Price notes, an unusually perceptive insight into the maturation process at work.<sup>146</sup> The effects of environment on a very young child are clearly noted and often acutely analyzed by Synge. We see the imaginative child growing into a sensitive and talented adult plagued by societal problems. The analogy his life suggests to us with the youth of today seems valid, and reaffirms the value of the piece.

"Vita Vecchia" and "Étude Morbide", though fictional to a great extent, serve to give us a "spiritual autobiography", as Greene and Stephens have called them, of Synge's activities abroad.<sup>147</sup> Although the events may be imaginary, the problems and thoughts Synge relates were encountered. He was absorbed at this time in his music studies.

<sup>146</sup>"Synge's Prose Writings: A First View of The Whole," p. 221.

<sup>147</sup>J. M. Synge, 1871-1909, p. 60.

The concept that music and a man's life have the same kind of movements and harmony, an analogy also found in the Autobiography and in When the Moon Has Set, is given weight and form in the events in these works. In "Étude Morbide" we also see the sequences of the seasons and of an artist's life tending towards the same kind of harmony and movement found in a symphony.

The search for meaning and expression in life is carried on throughout these pieces. We see the artist striving in his personal life to find joy and inspiration so that he will be able to create beautiful and meaningful art. Synge stresses the importance of the artist to nourish his imagination so that he may give the world art that is significant in its relation to life and at the same time full of the joy which makes a naturally painful life bearable and at times worthwhile.

Through these autobiographical works we are able to trace Synge's gradually developing critical judgment. We see him evolving from an often awkward and abstract lyric poet into a young man who will eventually write mature drama and perceptive essays. We see Synge moving towards the views on art as well as in life which are best exhibited in his plays.

By looking at the gradual movement from these very personal pieces to the plays, we see Synge's growing realization that art must truly be "the expression of the essential or abstract beauty of the person". The subjectivity of his early pieces eventually gave way to a more objective and, therefore, broader view of life. He was able to keep his uniquely sensitive mind and ever alert senses open to experience while he objectively viewed the world about him. Although in his earliest work

we can see his mind trying to objectify experiences and endeavoring to perceive what is real and of value in life, his narrow scope of vision and his self-conscious and affected style hamper him greatly.

Synge's basic view that the world and life are tragic, and that only in the acceptance and awareness of inevitable death and mutability can we realistically begin to search for happiness, is present in all his work. Through our understanding of the harsh nature of life, he hopes we will be able to see the need for each person to fulfill his best potentials and to live as fully and as meaningfully as possible. Though his honest humour, compassion for humanity, and his delightful irony, Synge makes palatable and entertaining his presentation of life in his plays. His love of life and the beauty therein also serve this purpose. Synge stated: "The drama, like the symphony, does not teach or prove anything." Yet from his work we are given that necessary understanding of life as well as the joy and reality he strove to create.

The three subjective and autobiographical pieces examined here are not of the same high stylistic and imaginative quality as the plays, but they do have some literary worth. Perhaps what is most important about their appearance is that they provide insight into Synge the man. They show his gradual evolution mentally, spiritually, and critically; they present a unique look at the way his personal temperament and thoughts figure in his writing; and they are perceptive and interesting revelations about youth and its dreams. We are fortunate that we now possess these autobiographical writings which will help us in our future estimates of all of Synge's works.

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