

GRZEGORZ DRYMER
WSP w Bydgoszczy

NATIONALISM AND ART. EARLY RECEPTION OF J.M.SYNGE'S "THE
PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD"

I. Origins of The Playboy

Upon their first meeting in Paris in autumn 1896 W.B. Yeats (then 31) found J.M.Synge (then 24) preoccupied with the reading of French literature and the writing of "morbid and melancholy verse" in an attic of a cheap hotel. Finding him in such a cheerless disposition and hearing that had learnt Gaelic while in Trinity, Yeats urged the young poet and musician to visit the Irish-speaking community of the Aran Islands where he would find "a life that had never been expressed in literature instead of a life where all had been expressed"¹. As Yeats confesses in the Autobiographies, he little thought then (or thought little?) of the scope of Synge's literary gift but felt that the young poet "needed something to take him out of his morbidity and melancholy"² Yeats himself had visited the Aran Islands only several months earlier and, as he recalls, immediately after landing there with a bunch of friends was summoned before the oldest man upon the island Inishmaan who "with laughing eyes, had said, 'If any gentleman had done crime, we'll hide him. There was a gentleman that killed his father, and I had him in my own house six months till he got away to America"³.

Synge took Yeats' advice and visited the Aran Islands, indeed more than once, and also had an opportunity to encounter this same old islander of whom he writes in the Aran Islands:

"He often tells me about a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives with whom he was said to be related. They hid him in a hole - which the old man has shown me - and kept him safe for weeks, though the police came and searched for him, and he could hear their boots grinding on the stones over his head. In spite of a reward which was offered, the island was incorruptible, and after much trouble the man was safely shipped to America"⁴.

Synge's version differs slightly from Yeats' who dramatized the story by making the old man named Mourteen the actual participant in the event while in the Aran Islands he appears only as a narrator (NB it questions Yeats' credibility for fact in Autobiographies). Nevertheless both stories amount to the same and appear to be essentially accurate in the light of Professor O'Máille's later research⁵.

These two men: Yeats and old Mourteen of Inishmaan may be justly credited with having initially inspired Synge into writing the play which was to stir the opinions of Dublin's audience in the famous dispute of 1907, the play which has since been recognized as one of the topmost achievements of the Irish Literary Revival.

2. Reality and fantasy in The Playboy

The quoted accounts of the incident of hiding out a paricide prove its authenticity beyond any doubt. What Synge actually did with this authentic material he had gathered from the islanders is quite another matter. The author transformed the original tale into a highly dramatized free "variation on a theme" far divorced from the actual realities of the Inishmaan affair, and yet, it may be claimed, reflecting the

peasant mentality, the psychological reality of 19 c. rural Western Ireland.

Christy Mahon ("the playboy"), in a very miserable condition: hungry and frightened, arrives at a desolate country shebeen^x) in county Mayo owned by Michael James. The latter has a daughter Pegeen, beautiful and resolute, engaged to a Shawn Keogh, a good-for-nothing, cowardly young farmer. The wretched Christy begs shelter offering in exchange to tell an unusual tale. He soon discovers that the peasants are sensation-thirsty and tells his story colouring it up a bit for better effect: he has killed his own tyrannical father with a spade while working in the field and buried him there.

The tale wins him popular admiration for his exceptional daring and - along with it - Pegeen's heart. She abandons Shawn Keogh and promises to marry Christy. Initially shy and frightened, Christy Mahon gains in confidence as the whole local female populace try to make love to him. The male half respect him for winning all the contests in the games held in the village.

However, while his position in the community reaches its peak, the supposedly dead father appears in pursuit of Christy. Old Mahon tells the peasants what laughing-stock of a fool Christy used to be back at home in Kerry and tries to bully the son into following him back to their farm. Fearing the loss of reputation and Pegeen's love, Christy chases him out of the shebeen and splits his head again with the routine spade. But this time the villagers witnessing Old Mahon's end turn against Christy, seize and bind him determined to give him up to the police for murder. Peggen, too, denounces Christy for, as she says: (...) there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed."

x) Shebeen = a non-licensed country pub dealing in beer and poteen, i.e. illegally distilled whiskey.

Suddenly, in the midst of cruel torture inflicted on his son, Old Mahon makes his second entry crawling on all fours with a bleeding head. He scares the drunken peasants away, who take him for a spirit, and frees Christy from the rope. They leave together, but their mutual relationship is now reversed with Christy fully confident of his own strength and valour bullying the submissive father. Pegeen is left with the softy Shawn renewing his proposals, and cries out: "I've lost the only playboy of the western world".

The primary assumption that must have guided Synge in writing The Playboy was that no self-respecting Irish peasant should ever cooperate with the police, no matter what affair might be at stake. This finds support in the Inishmaan story itself, as well as in numerous other works of Irish authors: from Michael Banim and William Carleton in 19c. to the more recent James Stephens and Flann O'Brian. The idea of hiding out a murderer from the forces of the law should not, then, in itself look revolting to the patriotic Irish audience of Synge's time. However, the playwright went more than a step further in his image of the Western peasantry having made them not only offer to hide Christy Mahon from the police, but actually admire him for his supposed gallantry in performing the terrible deed of parricide.

The Playboy of the Western World met with an extremely hostile reception primarily on the ground that an Irish peasant, and particularly a country girl, were idealistically believed to possess a highly developed and strict sense of morality which would not allow for admiring a parricide. Yet the protesters apparently overlooked the dramatic turn in Pegeen's attitude once the murder has been seemingly performed anew in front of her father's 'shebeen'. This is a very important point in the defence of Synge's "extravaganza" for it has to be borne in mind that there exists a wide gap between psychological reactions to a story and 'history', i.e. enactment of this same story. All who are acquainted with the Irish national character - be it through personal experience or

through literature - will admit that the nation has an exceptional capacity for enjoying a good story. From ancient times a good story-teller has always been a welcome guest in an Irish household. Such a welcome guest is Christy Mahon when he arrives with his thrilling narrative which he consciously expands and enriches to please his hosts. However, as soon as the supposedly dead father arrives, alive though scarred, and Christy-intoxicated with the success of his story-tries to enact it, the hearts of the villagers turn from him immediately in revolt against unnatural violence being performed in their midst, instead of just being told. This turn of action may have passed unnoticed due to the noise the rioters were rising every time the actors opened their mouths on the stage during the three tumultuous nights in the Abbey.

It is worthwhile having a look at the explanations the author himself provided for such an unconventional turn of events in the play. When interviewed by a reporter of Dublin Evening Mail during the first riotous days of the play's run he said that the plot was not probable but "it does not matter. Was Don Quixote probable? and still it is art. (...) It is a comedy, an extravaganza made to amuse." Asked if he had ever considered a possibility of hostile reception of his work, the author replied flatly: "It does not matter a rap"⁶. Freeman's Journal of 31 Jan. 1907 quotes Synge's issuing another, and quite a different comment on the attitudes in the play. The playwright is reported to have said that "the idea of the play was suggested to him (...) also by the case of Lynchehaun, who was a most brutal murderer of a woman, and yet, by the aid of Irish peasant women, managed to conceal himself from the police for months, and to get away also"⁷.

These two remarks, though apparently contradicting each other (one hinting at fantasy, another at realism) shed light on the two aspects of Synge's artistic standpoint as reflected in the play. Firstly, an author - as Synge implies - does not have to be glued to the probability of events, needs not keep

his inventiveness within the narrow limits of verisimilitude, and, above all, must not flatter or give in to the audience at the expense of his artistic freedom. This is as plain as ever has been delivered a declaration of an artist's liberty, of the 'licentia poetica'. Secondly, Synge provides another explanation, frivolously contradicting the first, by procuring an authentic example of a related murder-escape case to prove that even the most revolting literary invention cannot beat life. Thus the most extravagant artistic creation, Synge seems to imply, cannot be but enclosed within the frame of human experience, actual or potential. The contradiction of his two statements is only illusory for it illustrates the paradoxical quality of literature which cannot exceed the limits of the subjective reality of human mind, at the same time never becoming the objective, material reality. Being a study of these two "realities" in conflict, Don Quixote is, perhaps, the most accurate choice illustrating this paradox.

The playwright was not alone in his attempts to explain his intentions. Lady Gregory, and Yeats, and several other friends each in his way strongly defended Synge's play against the attacks launched by the Nationalists^{x)}. Synge's defenders took it as a matter of principle that neither an author nor a theatre should allow the public opinion to censor their creative freedom. However, none of them really outspoke Synge whose quoted explanation did not even aspire to be a defence, for it never occurred to Synge that he should defend himself against the public hysteria. His simple, slightly puzzled, and slightly arrogant remarks quoted by the press give highest credit to the playwright's intelligence and the integrity of his artistic credo.

x) The term 'Nationalists' as applied here embraces the patriotic circles grouping round the Gaelic League, the illegal Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and generally, though not quite accurately, known as 'Fenians'.

3. The riots

The players of the National Theatre Society put on The Playboy of the Western World for a week's run in January 1907. The première took place on a Saturday, Jan. 26. The performance started with an earlier Synge one-act play Riders to the Sea which was warmly received. Lady Gregory recalls that when, after a break, The Playboy started;

"the first act got its applause and the second, though one felt the audience were a little puzzled, a little shocked at the wild language. Near the end of the third act there was some hissing. We had sent a telegram to Mr. Yeats (who was away lecturing in Scotland - GD) after the first act - 'Play great success'; but at the end we sent another - 'Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift^{x)}"⁸.

In this way the turbulent week's run of the play began. The audience of the first night were the only playgoers who had a fair chance of hearing the whole play and in an unabridged version. They hissed it and that was a beginning. Since Monday, Jan. 28, 1907 the house was infested for three consecutive nights by organized groups of Nationalists making cats' noises, hissing, whistling, clapping their hands, stamping the floor, blowing tin trumpets, and such like to prevent the spectators from hearing what they declared to be a shockingly indecent and un-Irish play. NB the protesters themselves had little opportunity to check whether they were indeed right. On the last three nights the violence was suppressed, but the text had been by that time reviewed by the company and combed of the most offensive expressions in which form it appeared in print in

x) Shift = chemise, a woman's undergarment like a slip, worn next to the skin and reaching to the knees (after the Glossary in Ann Saddlemyer's O.U.P. ed. of Synge's plays).

the Abbey series.

On Monday, Jan. 28, the police were first introduced in the theatre to prevent the rioting, but to no avail. The next day Lady Gregory asked assistance of one of her Galway relatives who brought a group of Trinity students to protect the performance alongside the police. The idea worked out badly with the drunken students only adding to the general disorder by exchanging rude remarks with the Nationalist youth, making attempts to fight them, singing "God Save the King", and, paradoxically, having been forcibly ejected by the police. One was arrested for exchanging blows with a policeman and fined £ 5, while two Nationalists who were fished out from the pit were fined only £ 2 each, W.B. Yeats prosecuting⁹. On Wednesday, Jan. 30, 1907, 50 police were sent to the theatre and on Thursday 200 with the result of a few more arrests and ejections. Thursday was the first night since the premiere when the players were audible and on Friday and Saturday there were no more disturbances but the audience were small in number and consisted mainly of ladies attracted by the notorious reputation of the play.

Joseph Halloway, a devout playgoer visiting Dublin theatres almost daily over the period of more than 25 years, may be well picked up as a spokesman for the sentiments of the louder portion of the spectators, even though he himself was not involved in the rioting. In the diary that he had been writing between 1899 and 1926 he maliciously remarks under The Playboy week entries:

"The prestige of the theatre has fled (...)
since it became a police-protected society."

He abuses the author ("Synge's nasty mind") and defenders of the play ("Humbug. The name is Yeats". and "Yeats, Synge, and Gregory are all degenerates of the worst type (...), the dung-heap of a mind")¹⁰.

Criticism of varying hue came even from those who regarded themselves friends of the company and the author or, indeed,

from people closely associated with the Abbey. Among those William Boyle, the theatre's successful author (now almost forgotten), wrote a letter to W.B. Yeats, characteristically, without having seen or read The Playboy:

"Dear Mr. Yeats,

I regret to be obliged to write to withdraw my three plays - The Building Fund, The Eloquent Dempsy, and The Mineral Workers - from the repertoire of The National Theatre, Ltd., as a protest against your action in attempting to force a play - at the risk of a riot - upon the Dublin public contrary to their protests of its being a gross misrepresentation of the character of our Western peasantry.

I remain,

Yours truly,

William Voyle"¹¹.

4. The press battle

Following the first controversial performance of The Playboy, and particularly after the rioting and introduction of the police in The Abbey on several consecutive nights, the Dublin papers focussed their attention on the scandalous play, its author, and the obstinate company. Of the many published critical letters from the indignant readers, one from a country lady has become a particularly rewarding target for a number of critics over the years. The letter signed "A Western Girl" was published in Freeman's Journal of Monday, Jan. 28, 1907. The critical lady objected to

"(...) putting on the boards of a Dublin theatre a play representing Irish people actively sympathising with a parricide, while Irish girls fling themselves into his arms. Could any Irish person accept this as a true picture of Irish life?"

The letter also forwards criticism of the language Synge employs, the criticism which in itself is a masterpiece of Victorian prudish, euphemistic, and elliptical style as fine as ever could be found:

"Nothing redeems the general sordidness of the piece. Every character uses coarse expressions, and Miss Allgood (one of the most charming actresses I have ever seen) is forced, before the most fashionable audience in Dublin, to use a word indicating an essential item of female attire, which the lady would probably never utter in ordinary circumstances, even to herself"¹².

The reviewer of the Irish Independent writes on the same day that the character of Christy Mahon "is certainly not a type to be presented even in a farce in an Irish theatre under the auspices of a movement that has for its very objects the destruction of such stage-Irishman types as Christie(sic) Mahon"¹³.

H.S.D., a critic in the Evening Mail (Jan. 28, 1907), ventures to defend the play by saying that:

"Mr. Synge's Irish peasants - putting aside their absurd motives - are wonderful. It is a far cry from the stage Irishman(...). Christie is the living, breathing Irish peasant, unsoiled by contact with the world beyond his own barony, Mr. Synge's literary craftsmanship is marvellous. His peasants' talk is racy of the soil..."

However, H.S.D. hastens to add a reservation, as if anxious to stand in line with other critics:

"But there is one thing worth protesting against - occasional indelicacy in the dialogue.(...) We do resent it, when having given proof of brilliant powers of dialogue, he deliberately assails our ears with coarse or blasphemous language"¹⁴.

In the same article a not-quite-new accusation found a new champion denouncing Synge for yielding to "decadent ideas of the literary flaneurs of Paris", reminiscent of a prolonged press controversy between Yeats and Griffith over In the Shadow of the Glen in Freeman's Journal in 1905¹⁵.

Another of Synge's critics, Alice L. Milligan^{16(x)} was concerned with the proper image of Ireland in plays likely to be staged in Britain where the audiences, she believed, would heartily greet any ridicule of the Irish. The already mentioned denouncer of Synge's vulgarity, 'A Western Girl', displays similar indignancy when she exclaims in her notorious letter to Freeman's Journal:

"Fancy such a play being produced in England!"¹⁷

Paradoxically, very soon the play was shown in England and won the Abbey considerable applause, the British reviewers finding themselves at a loss as to the reason of the turmoil in Dublin.

The argument in the press began to acquire a wider span drawing in the whole company, and particularly W.B. Yeats. The already mentioned Alice L. Milligan blamed him with having deliberately put on The Playboy - which he knew would cause a scandal - in a near Machiavellian intrigue of drawing public attention to his theatre badly wanting of audience and finance¹⁸. Similar accusations poured from many directions, among them from an Ulster paper Irish News and Belfast Morning News which denied the theatre the right to call itself National:

"All this cant and rant about 'Art' by Yeats and Synge is the veriest humbug-old, exploded, meaningless humbug, too. These men call their playhouse 'The National Theatre'. Let them shed the misnomer, remove the words 'National' and 'Irish' from their theatre, their programmes, their plays, and all their proceedings, and

x) Her play The Last Feast of the Fianna was staged by The Irish Literary Theatre as one of its first productions (1899).

belongings, and we, of Ireland and for Ireland, will have no further right to complain. (...) Those who think with them, will be then quite at liberty to patronise the Yeats-Synge plays, and applaud paricides and 'Pegeen Mikes' to the content of their elevated and artistic hearts. But let the farce of representing this foul rubbish as 'National' or 'Irish' drama be dropped in common decency"¹⁹.

The name of Shakespeare was called upon by both parties in the argument. Yeats rhetorically asked his adversaries:

"Is it a caricature of the Irish people? It is no more a caricature of the people of Ireland than 'Macbeth' is a caricature of the people of Scotland or 'Falstaff' a caricature of the gentlemen of England"²⁰.

Which Freeman's Journal answered working further on the analogy:

"Mr. Yeats asks is Lady Macbeth a type of the Queens of Scotland? The question is purile. It might have some relevance if Lady Macbeth danced a Highland fling after the murder of Duncan, and if she was congratulated all round on the murder"²¹.

The defenders of The Playboy were outraged by what they thought to be an attempt at public censorship and penalizing an independently minded author. They drew historical parallels with other dissident artists since recognized as classics. In a letter to the Irish Times Ellen Duncan wrote:

"When Manet, discarding convention and the 'Ideal' painted real ladies in real gardens, playing with real babies, the Paris public was scandalized"²².

Yeats procured some other historical parallels:

"A very large number of the great plays of the world have been produced in the face of intense popular opposition. Ibsen's League of Youth, which is now the most popular of all Norwegian plays, had to face an intense opposition from the patriotic party in Norway. It is taken as a satire on the popular side, and now it is most popular with that very party - indeed with all Norway. Every student of drama has read how Molière was treated when he wrote Tartuffe. He was denounced with extraordinary violence, and was all but denied Christian burial. Fine drama, by its very nature, rouses the most fiery passions"²³.

One cannot but appreciate Yeats' deep insight into the nature of Playboy controversy. Indeed, his parallels have an almost prophetic quality: the play has really become a national classic and Synge's death in 1909 passed deliberately almost unnoticed by the Nationalists. On this latter occasion Yeats noted down in his Autobiographies:

"The Irish weekly papers notice Synge's death with short and for the most part grudging notices. There was one obscure Gaelic League singer who was a leader of the demonstration against Playboy. He died on the same day. Sinn Fein notices both deaths in the same article and gives three-fourths of it to the rioter. For Synge it has but grudging words, as was to be expected"²⁴.

One of the very few speakers for the play in the initial stage of the struggle, "Pat" (Patrick Kenny) of the Irish Times,



in a review of Jan. 30, 1907 wrote of Synge's compassion with the morbidity of peasant life, especially that of the Western women. He saw a deeper sense in Pegeen's choosing for a husband rather Christy Mahon, a daring murderer, than an unmanly weakling Shawn. "Pat" tried to explain to the partial audience that their critical judgement of the language was but a matter of convention, while a not unfrequent coarse expression in the mouth of a Western peasant was nothing unusual in reality and was but a different convention of speech²⁵. In one of the few public statements Synge ever wrote for the press, the playwright gratefully acknowledged "Pat's" sober tone:

"although parts of it (i.e. Playboy - GD) are, or are meant to be, extravagant comedy, still a great deal that is in it, and a great deal more that is behind it, is perfectly serious, when looked at in a certain light. (...) There are, it may be hinted, several sides to The Playboy. 'Pat', I am glad to notice, has seen some of them in his way. There may be still others if anyone cares to look for them"²⁶.

The press battle fought during and after the first week of The Playboy in the Abbey drew in practically all Dublin and several provincial papers as well as the weeklies which joined the struggle at the end of the troubled week. The Freeman's Journal, Sinn Fein, and The Leader were the most severe critics of Synge and his play and launched a campaign aimed at discrediting The Abbey. As a result the theatre suffered a considerable loss of support, the Nationalists for a long time abstained from visiting The Abbey which weighed heavily on its finances, until the British and American tours improved the situation and international success attracted new audiences in Dublin. The defenders of Synge and the company found their spokesman and supporter in the Irish Times. Almost all other newspapers and journals published reviews, reports, and letters from readers condemning the play and The Abbey. The varied in

violence of accusations and depth of criticism, some of the journalists trying to retain an appearance of impartiality, others openly declaring hostility, still others hunting for comic incidents. Some, like good sports, cheered at every score by either party while witnessing the amusing incidents in the theatre and in court.

5. The arguments

The Playboy received so much critical attention at its first production, attacks poured from so many positions that it is necessary to sort out the particular arguments in order to obtain a clear picture of the nature of the popular rejection of the play.

Synge's adversaries maintained, in the first instance, that the plot was offensive to Irish character. They found it improbable that a village community should not let their dogs loose on the parricide, instead of greeting him as a hero. Furthermore, the Nationalists were revolted at the sight of an Irish girl championing a murderer amid popular approval of neighbours and family. On top of that, the concept that Pegeen should lose interest in Christy as soon as it becomes clear that he is not really a parricide, evoked utter disgust in that part of the audience.

This nationalism-based criticism coincided with a very Victorian indignancy at the language of the peasants in the play. On the first night of the play's run the silent hostility turned into an outburst of hissing only during the third act at the mention of "the essential item of female attire" - 'shift'. The audience also displayed their uncompromising Catholic orthodoxy by protesting against what they thought to be blasphemous abuse of holy names and the not unfrequent insertion of swearwords in the dialogues.

Finally, those critics who aspired to commenting on the literary value of the piece accused Synge of verbosity, of untrue representation of peasant speech. And though the initial revolt against the play on the grounds of its being a slander

on the nation was soon to be abandoned, the more literary objections to the quality of language and verbose style proved much more long-lived.

As late as 1931 Daniel Corkery (himself once an Abbey author) writes in his still recognized work on the Irish drama^{x)} about Synge's sacriligious language:

"The desire of his to go 'beyond the beyonds' accounts for his frequent introduction of phrases with religious allusions in them: if we are to challenge anyone let us challenge God himself! Still less does this obvious phrase-making of his achieve when he draws upon the religious consciousness of the people. That consciousness was (...) terra incognita to him: he knew it only dimly, could realize it only superficially. (...)"

"Every Catholic knows that no Connacht peasant, drunk or sober or utterly lost in extasy, could have used them (Blasphemous phrases - GD). (...)"
"Knowledge imbibed at our mother's knees is not to be put away from us so easily; yet to utter themselves as Synge's peasants sometimes do, such knowledge they must have forgotten; as we ourselves must forget it, if we would accept such phrases as: 'Oh, St. Joseph and St. Patrick and St. Brigid and St. James have mercy on me now!'"²⁷.

About the style Corkery has this to say:

"Mr. T. S. Eliot quite correctly points out that 'Elizabethanism was a verbal even more than an emotional debauch'; and Synge in The Playboy outdoes the Elizabethans. (...)"

x) Daniel Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature

"With Synge (...) it is always words, words, words; and sometimes very feeble words.(...) One feels the tension of the mind slackening as the words flow on and on. It is like something one would find in Sean O'Casey at his worst, or is it his best? And there is hardly a page in The Playboy that is not stuffed with such long-winded figures, (...) exhibiting nothing more than a disturbing mannerism"²⁸.

These arguments, though delivered in a scholarly tone and in a scholarly book reflect but the earlier Nationalist hostility towards Synge. In the first of the quoted passages Corkery proves to be a prejudiced orthodox Catholic, world-wide evidence being against him: do not phrases like 'Santa Madonna', 'Herr Jesus', 'Sacre bleu', 'Goddamn', etc. constitute an indispensable part of any nation's idiom? Why should the Irish be an exception? Religion playing such an important part in their lives, it has had to find a way into their speaking habits. Writing of the piety and purity "imbided at our mother's knees", which Synge was supposedly unable to understand, Corkery alludes to the 'unholy' Protestant background Synge had grown in, his forefathers forming a line of outstanding Irish Calvinist ministers. The alleged verbosity, however, is not an argument to be so easily discarded. Synge aimed at a certain stylisation, was not just copying colloquial peasant speech. One has the right to like or dislike the effect, but the author has to be credited with extreme care with which he was working on the original linguistic evidence he had been gathering in his notebooks over the years.

Synge himself claims the authenticity of the peasant idiom he utilizes in the play. In a note included in the 1907 programme he writes:

"In writing The Playboy of the Western World, as in my other plays, I have used very few words that I have not heard among the country people, or spoken

in my own childhood before I could read the newspapers. A certain number of the phrases I employ I have heard also among the fishermen of Kerry and Mayo, or from beggars nearer Dublin, and I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe, directly and indirectly, to the folk-
imagination of these people. Nearly always when some friendly or angry critic tells me that such or such a phrase could not have been spoken by a peasant, he singles out some expression that I have heard, word to word, from some old woman or child, and the same is true also, to some extent, of the actions and incidents I work with"²⁹.

These claims find some support in an incident Lady Gregory noted down in Our Irish Theatre. When in America with the company in 1911, she was told by her New York friends that an old Irish-born nurse they were employing had read Synge's In the Shadow of the Glen and said:

"Indeed, Miss, I've heard that story many's the time. It's what in the old country we call a fireside story. (...) Just the same as in the book, Miss, only it reads more nice and refined like"³⁰.

Lady Gregory ensured that she received a written version of the nurse's statement so as there would be no doubt of its authenticity because The Shadow of a Glen had also been attacked in its time, Arthur Griffith claiming that the story was Synge's invention, or rather an interpretation of the "degenerate Greek" tale of the Widow of Ephesus absurdly set in Ireland. (see p.6 and below).

6. Analogies and further troubles with The Playboy

The Playboy riots were not a unique instance of serious disagreements between the management of The Abbey Theatre and

their Nationastist adversaries, though only once in future the protest was to be as strong as in 1907. Historically, the first of Abbey plays to receive an initially hostile welcome was Lady Gregory's The Rising of the Moon. In the Autobiographies Yeats recalls that issue and the trouble he himself got into on another occasion:

"The players would not perform it (The Rising of the Moon - GD) because they said it was an unpatriotic act to admit that a policeman was capable of patriotism.(...) When performed at last (with two years' delay - GD) the play was received with enthusiasm, but only got us into new trouble. The chief unionist Dublin newspaper denounced us for slandering His Majesty's forces (...). Nor did religious orthodoxy like us any better than political; my Countess Cathleen was denounced by Cardinal Logue as an heretical play, and when I wrote that we would like to perform 'foreign masterpieces' a Nationalist newspaper declared that 'a foreign masterpiece is a very dangerous thing'"³¹.

Synge's In the Shadow of the Glen provoked attacks from Nationalist press. Arthur Griffith insinuated in The United Irishman in 1905, when the play was staged for the second time:

"The story is two thousand years old - it was invented by the decadent Greeks - the reputation of womankind has suffered in every century from it. Mr. Synge heard the story (...). He calls Ephesus Wicklow Glen, and lo! the thing is staged and dubbed an Irish play."

"His (Synge's) play is not a work of genius - Irish or otherwise - it is a foul echo from degenerate Greece. His absurd ignorance of the Irish peasant is shown in every line of the play"³².

Similarly The Well of the Saints met with manifold criticisms,

the Nationalist camp again well represented by Griffith's slashing attack:

"The atmosphere of the play is harsh, unsympathetic, and at the same time sensual. Its note of utter hopelessness avokes a feeling akin to compassion for the author. What there is Irish, National, or dramatic about it even Oedipus might fail to solve. How is that the Irish National Theatre, which started so well, can now only alternate a decadent wail with a Calvinistic groan"³³.

However, all the above skirmishes with the unionists, the Church, and - above all - the Nationalists had never ended up in anything like an open riot of 1907. The violent scenes of that week were revived once more, much later, in february 1926, when the audience took O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars (its second and third acts in particular) for a slandering abuse of an Irishwoman (again!) and protested against a blood-sanctified national symbol: the 1916 banner of James Conolly's Citizen Army being brought into a pub. It is hard to believe that O'Casey should be accused of slandering women whom he very nearly put on a pedestal for their patience, courage, perseverance, and an undeserved martyrdom. But so he was, like the compassionate folklorist Synge of slandering Irish peasantry. The banner-in-pub controversy, though, was to a degree justified: O'casey, a declared Marxist and resigned secretary of the proletarian Citizen Army, was violently opposed to the Easter Rising in which Citizen Army and Conolly took part alongside the Nationalist Irish Volunteers of Patrick Pearse.

Thus, the fate of The Playboy was not entirely unparalleled, though the scale of hostilities was certainly exceptional. Even outside Ireland, when the play was produced in America before mixed audiences, the Irish immigrants repeated and even exceeded the Dublin riots. The New York Times of Nov. 28, 1911 gives a very lively account of what happened on the previous night, it being the New York première of The Playboy:

"When Christopher Mahon said: "I killed my father (etc.)", instantly voices began to call from all over the theatre: Shame! Shame!". A potato swept through the air from the gallery and smashed against the wings. Then came a shower of vegetables that rattled against the scenery and made the actors duck their heads and fly behind the stage setting for shelter. (...) More vegetables came sailing through the air and rolled about the stage. Then began the fall of soft cubes that broke as they hit the stage. At first these filled the men and women in the audience and on the stage with fear, for only the disturbers knew what they were. "Soon all knew. They were capsules filled with asafoetida, and their odour was suffocating and most revolting"³⁴.

In Boston and New York magistrates were sent to decide on the fitness of The Playboy to be staged, and were surprised at the riots, themselves finding nothing offensive in the play. In Philadelphia the Irish Nationalists plotted to have the cast arrested in the theatre immediately before the performance was to begin, and they very nearly succeeded. In all three cities police units were despatched to protect the players and suppress the riots. In Chicago a case was brought before the City Council whether to allow The Abbey company to perform at all. The following address by an Irish Alderman McInerney was quoted by the press to have been delivered:

"The play is a studied sarcasm on the Irish race, it points no moral, and it teaches no lesson. This play pictures an Irishman a coward, something that never happened, and it attacks the Irishwoman. There are no Irishmen connected with the company in any way"³⁵.

Some New York Irish suggested that all the company were Jews... And yet the American tour of 1911 was a full success of The

Playboy and The Abbey marking the international renown of both.

7. The motives

It is an easy and amusing task to look down upon and denounce what now seems a patent stupidity of the Irish Nationalists from the safe distance of over seven decades. However, it has to be borne in mind that the time of Playboy's first appearance in stage was extremely turbulent for Ireland. The Nationalist movement was gaining in confidence but was still far from enjoying the widespread support which only the tragedy of Easter Rising and the subsequent executions of its leaders were to win it. The extreme touchiness of the Fenians at all issues national in art may be well justified by the unfavourable image of Ireland and the Irish the British substandard productions of the time presented, and which was enjoyed by the British audiences. The Abbey company itself proclaimed a war on the 'stage Irishman' haunting the comedy and farce from midnineteenth century (and infesting British TV and press humour columns to this day), the figure of a halfwit amusing the audience with the clumsiness of his actions, stupidity of the mind, and distortion of speech. The Nationalists had additional reasons to mistrust artists, particularly those from the circle of The Abbey: the pre-Abbey Irish Literary Theatre was in its initial stages closely connected with the Young Ireland, the Gaelic League, and the national cause in general, but as the Irish Renaissance was progressing, the theatre drifted apart and sought its independent existence. This was desertion which Griffin and his like could not forget Yeats and Lady Gregory. Synge, who was a later arrival on the scene, became a symbol of the "unpatriotic" and "decadent" turn in the company's course, and his being a descendant of a long line of Puritan ministers did not help his or the Company's reputation either.

In this light the protests against Synge's Playboy, its plot and characters, and the persons of The Abbey managing directors were not as entirely ridiculous as they may seem now. It is also significant that the most violent reproof was directed against the alleged slander of Irish womanhood.

Significant, because it was common knowledge that a big proportion of London streetwalkers were Irish country girls who had to leave their country for want of employment and husbands there. This was too shameful to be actually acknowledged in the press battle, but the consciousness, or subconsciousness, of the fact called for the defence of a moral image of an Irish girl. The fact is well established and even found its way into literature on other occasions (e.g. G. Moore's The Lake, P. Cavanagh's Tarry Flynn). Therefore any hint at a moral slip in a Western girl had to meet with hostility from the Nationalists who pushed the issue of the Irishwoman's supposed chastity to the ridiculous extreme, and - like most revolutionary movements - insisted on the near nonexistence of sex (comp. French and Bolshevik Revolutions, Arab Muslim Revival).

The outcry of indignancy at the consequences of producing and exporting the kind of art Synge represented was also a symptom of misunderstanding the nature of contemporary Irish literature. Earlier in the 19 c. Irish writers wrote in an uncertainty as to who their audience were, or rather almost certain that if they were to be a success, they had to write for the British market. They were regional writers to a much larger degree than national. The Irish Literary Revival marked a significant change in the literary scene: a vast new audience emerged in Ireland eager to welcome a national literature which indeed developed rapidly and flourished at the turn of the 19th century. It was so overwhelmingly original and exotic and yet so familiar to the British public by means of the common language and common elements in the two cultures, that it was widely read and appreciated also in Britain, even though the new Irish writer did not have to give much thought to the British public in the way Maria Edgeworth, Griffin, or Carleton had to. Unfortunately, the Nationalists seemed to have been unaware of this change of quality in Irish creative art and, judging probably by the popularity of the Irish authors across the Irish Sea, such as Wilde, Moore, Shaw, and Yeats, apparently still put a regional measure to the national Irish literature. Hence their concern with the 'export quality' of Synge's

drama. They were mistaken, as history proves, but they did not have the knowledge of the history which was only in progress in their time.

Since the times of Fenians, the Irish Nationalists acquired a bad habit of terrorising their compatriots into patriotism. This tendency, too, found its expression in the way they treated The Playboy. By instigating scandalous riots in The Abbey, they attempted to terrorize the uninvolved part of the audience into not hearing the offensive piece. By launching a slandering press campaign, they aimed at breaking the will of the players and the management of The National Theatre. Had not The Abbey had a wealthy and generous benefactor in the person of Miss Horniman, herself-paradoxically-an Englishwoman, the small circle of ardent supporters and faithful playgoers would not have saved the company from either bankruptcy or submission to the expectations of the Nationalists. This would strand the theatre into a backwater of Gaelic legend and heroic tale, or propagandist Nationalist drama produced in scores by a multitude of minor playwrights. Had it come to such a pass, The Abbey would have to feed its audience the very kind of 'art' Yeats had come to abhor, though at times he himself approached it dangerously near. Of this type of literature he writes rather contemptuously in the Autobiographies:

"There is a dying-out of national feeling very simple in its origin. You cannot keep the idea of a notion alive where there are no national institutions to reverence, no national success to admire, without a model of it in the mind of the people. You can call it 'Cathleen ni Houlihan' or 'Shan van Voght' (...) and love that image, but for the general purposes of life you must have a complex mass of images, something like an architect's model. The Young Ireland poets created a mass of obvious images that filled the minds of the young - Wolfe Tone, King Brian, Emmet, Owen Roe, Sarsfield, the Fisherman of

Kinsala - answered the traditional slanders on Irish character and entered so into the affections that it followed men to the scaffold. The ethical ideas implied were of necessity very simple"³⁶.

On another occasion Yeats attempts to put in a perspective the two incompatible kinds of patriotism which placed Synge, and himself for that matter, and the Nationalists of Griffith's type in the opposite camps:

"Allingham and Davis have two different kinds of love of Ireland. In Allingham I find the entire emotion for the place one grew up in which I felt as a child. Davis on the other hand was concerned with ideas of Ireland, with conscious patriotism. His Ireland was artificial, an idea built up in a couple of generations by a few commonplace men (...). This (Allingham kind - GD) love was instinctive and left the soul free. If I could have kept it and yet never felt the influence of Young Ireland I had given a more profound picture of Ireland in my work. Synge's purity of genius comes in part from having kept this instinct and this alone. (...) One cannot sum up a nation intellectually, and when the summing-up is made by half-educated men the idea fills one with alarm"³⁷.

These remarks about nationalism and patriotism put the nature of the Playboy controversy in a nutshell. The two standpoints were incompatible and had to clash at some point. However, one should not look at this antagonism as something entirely anachronistic, something that could have been avoided had the Nationalists understood better... The idealistic type of nationalism had its own historical role to fulfill in creating an independent Irish state, the emergence of which was a historical necessity in the Europe of full-grown national ambitions of other long oppressed nations: Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Czechs, Ukrainians, Yugoslavs.

It would be hard to predict what monstrous dimensions should the current Northern terrorism acquire in the whole of the country, had not the Nationalists won the day in 1921, when the Free State saw daylight.

A very serious fault about Celtic Nationalism, deriving directly from its terrorist tactics and "ethical ideas (...) of necessity very simple", was that a great part of the movement after the winning of independence degenerated into a clerical, reactionary chauvinism turning down one after another a number of worthy artists, an intellectual tyranny which was all that remained of the combat spirit of Fenianism and which drove O'Casey, and Beckett out of the country, which pushed Cavanagh out of his flowery corner into the indifferent Dublin, and which prevented the greatest of Irish writers James Joyce from ever returning from his exile.

John Millington Synge never yielded to this tyranny, which an artist of a lesser integrity may have done. To give Yeats voice once again:

"Both Synge and Lady Gregory isolate themselves, Synge instinctively and Lady Gregory consciously, from all contagious opinions of poorer minds: Synge so instinctively and naturally - helped by the habits of an invalid - that no one is conscious of his rejection"³⁸.

Synge succeeded in retaining this original artistic integrity of his which allowed him to survive the Playboy crisis without visible scars. The play itself did not suffer having since proved a truly great achievement of dramatic art and having become a national classic. Indeed, one may wonder if the storm around its production in 1907 had not enhanced the career of The Abbey and the Irish drama by drawing public attention in Britain, America, and elsewhere to the achievement of the Irish dramatists.

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NOTES

- 1 Yeats, W. B., Autobiographies, p. 343;
- 2 Ibid., p. 343;
- 3 Ibid., p. 569;
- 4 as quoted in - Corkery, D., Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 191;
- 5 Ibid., p. 191;
- 6 Kilroy, J., The 'Playboy' Riots, pp. 23-24;
- 7 Ibid., p. 34;
- 8 Gregory, Lady Augusta, Our Irish Theatre, p. 112;
- 9 Joseph Halloway's Abbey Theatre, pp. 84-85;
- 10 Ibid., pp. 82-87;
- 11 Ibid., p. 87;
- 12 Kilroy, J., op. cit., pp. 9-10;
- 13 Ibid., p. 12;
- 14 Ibid., pp. 13-14;
- 15 Hogan, R. and Kilroy, J., The Abbey Theatre. The Years of Synge, pp. 10-15;

- 16 Kilroy, J., op.cit., p.79;
- 17 Ibid., p.10;
- 18 Ibid., p.79;
- 19 Ibid., p.61;
- 20 Ibid., p.49;
- 21 Ibid., p.34;
- 22 Ibid., p.55;
- 23 Ibid., p.81;
- 24 Yeats, W.B., op.cit., p.510;
- 25 Ibid., pp.37-40;
- 26 Ibid., p.41;
- 27 Corkery, D., op.cit., pp.198-199;
- 28 Ibid., pp.196-197;
- 29 Hogan and Kilroy, op.cit., p.124;
- 30 Gregory, Lady A., op.cit., pp.110-111;
- 31 Yeats, W.B., op.cit., pp.565-566;
- 32 Hogan and Kilroy, op.cit., pp.10-11;
- 33 Ibid., p.20;
- 34 Gregory, Lady A., op.cit., pp.280-281;
- 35 Ibid., p.297;
- 36 Yeats, W.B., op.cit., p.493;
- 37 Ibid., p.297;
- 38 Ibid., pp.471-472;

NACJONALIZM A SZTUKA. WCZESNA RECEPCJA J.M.SYNGE'A "THE
PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD"

Streszczenie

"THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD" został początkowo pozytywnie przyjęty zarówno przez krytyków jak i publiczność oglądającą wystawioną sztukę. Przez wielu jednakże sztuka została ostro zaatakowana przede wszystkim ze względu na fabułę, która miała obrażać charakter typowego Irlandczyka. Czysto nacjonalistyczne ataki zbiegły się z krytyką języka sztuki, który zawierał zgodnie z ówczesnymi poglądami zbyt wiele zwrotów potocznych i mało eleganckich. Najbardziej ostre ataki odpierane były dobrą argumentacją samego Synge'a. Niektóre zarzuty w stosunku do sztuki mają jednak swoje głębokie uzasadnienie.