

## Reminiscences of J. M. Synge

(1928)

IT WAS not until late in his rather short life that Synge discovered his true ability to lie neither in philosophy nor music but in drama, and one may wonder how he came to make this discovery, for he was a painfully slow writer, and his very slowness might have led him to distrust an art-form that was so difficult to handle. To the end writing was a toil to him.

In this, however, he was not exceptional; for the majority of writers have assured us that writing is a labour from which one may really shrink a little. Synge occasionally got some reviewing to do for a literary weekly, but he had to discontinue this because the article, for which he might receive two guineas, always cost him six weeks to write; and these were six weeks of painful cogitation as to how possibly one can say anything whatever with a pen that will afterwards be readable.

Still later he confessed that if his day's work had actually resulted in the addition of two words to his manuscript, al-

though he might not feel triumphant and inclined to celebrate the occasion, he did yet consider that the day had not been wasted, that his subject had been carried on, or was not absolutely stationary.

He lived in Paris for some years at the rue d'Assas, and his apartment was adequately furnished with a bed, an oil-stove, a book-case, and a yard of French bread, and while in Paris he really needed whatever scarce guineas might come his way. Possibly the philosophy he toiled after was sufficiently robust at this time to tide him over the bad days but, although he did not complain, he did consider that a meal which cost more than one franc twenty-five had been extravagantly paid for.

He was somewhat negative to ordinary human beings (the dramatist tends to be so), not that he disliked people, but he did not admire them. He certainly did not love his fellow-human-beings in the mass. With him more than six people could easily become a crowd, and he could consider that such a gathering would have neither wit nor looks. The dramatist will love the rare, the personal, the individual, but he cannot even be expected to love the multitude.

Dramatic qualities were to Synge more easily discoverable in the countryside than in the city. He thought that every country-bred person has a measurable idiosyncrasy: has each a distinct nose and hat and accent.

And in the country he found many another cherishable thing. Birds and beasts and plants are there. There the earth itself seems to be more manifest. Each rood of it is there observed to be utterly different from any other possible rood of space. Every slope and ridge and hill; every stream and tree and cloud is known as distinct from every other similar sight or bulk in the world.

A moor (or, as we should say in Ireland, a bog) was not

for Synge a place from which turf or peat is cut. A bog was an enchantment, as indeed it is to everyone who has become acquainted with or has lived nigh to a bog. To get well into an extensive bog is to leave all else behind; is to have left the world behind; almost to have left one's self afar and apart and forgotten. There is the bog and the clouds, and the rest merges to them.

The sea is desolate, but it is also, and unforgivably, a desolation; but the bog is not a desolation; it is desolate, but is habitable and inhabited. Birds and rats and bees and rabbits are there. An odd donkey or a goat is always, somewhere, ambling or frisking away from you; is always cropping an endless breakfast. For in a bog you could easily imagine that the breakfast of a donkey began before time began, and that it will continue while time has yet a second to draw on.

And over it all there is wind and space and cloud and silence; the wind always different, and the cloud never the same, the silence never monotonous. All these seem to live as it were one life, and one's own life participates into that, or seems scarcely to be sundered from it.

He loved some other matters also; that is, his mind went willingly to certain things. He loved music and occultism and a something that we shall call bleakness. Whatever might be authoritatively uttered on these subjects would be diligently hearkened to by him.

Music, where it is understood, is loved by most of us, for we may only love where we understand. Occultism, or the theory of magic, is delighted in by everyone who is sane enough to wish to be saner; to wish, that is, to be wiser. But bleakness is another thing, and touches only to the fine soul. It is the especial, perhaps the final, acquirement of a cultured person. At last nothing but it is beauty. That is, nothing but

bleakness can definitely satisfy the true man that is in every man.

Had he lived longer Synge might have carved a bare, an unadorned, a lean bleak art to replace the lush and somewhat vociferous art that he has left us. His art is lush, but there is continually to be found in it the wiry line, the rigour, the sharp and bare and bleak that he truly loved, and which he would have further striven to.

His knowledge of the countryside was extensive and penetrating. He knew the call of every bird and the habit of most creatures that are to be found in our ways and pastures. His approach to knowledge was—to be silent; to look eagerly at all that came; and to listen intently to all that happened. And, in his approach to a knowledge of the human inhabitants of the countryside, he used the same approach and attitude.

As a boy he had wandered the hills of Dublin and Wicklow, and he knew these intimately. He could assure a thirsty companion that behind a certain folding of a certain hilly track there was a well. And, if one was thirstier still, he would tell behind how many hills-and-a-half a tavern lay: or that on sixteen rising turns to the left a slaty cottage was couched among slaty rocks and that there one could get a glass of milk and a cake from the griddle.

And he knew that in all these places, if one were well-bred—if, that is, one were silent and inconspicuous—there could be heard a fashion of speech which was not conned from books; which had no acquaintance with art or science or scholarship, and which was yet abundant and racy and of a remarkable texture—the wild, the exuberant speech of isolated people. People who are always as timid in action as they are bold in talk: being bold indeed in the only thing they have practice of. For from these people every adventure but the

adventure of speech has been retired, and they must seek in conversation all of the change, all of the excitement that others win from travel, from theatres, from the press of men and affairs.

He was different from many of his countrymen in a number of ways. One, but of prime importance, was that he came of a Protestant stock. A stock that included bishops and canons and missionaries who, through generations, had been to and returned from distant lands and curious peoples. He grew in a house that was filled with the furnitures and curiosities of strange countries.

His true schooling was up in the mountain and out on the bog; it came from the shy but vital life that moves in solitudes. His professors were the mountainy men and women, themselves almost as humble in station, almost as sundered from change, almost as bereft of ambition, but as vital, persistent, self-centred as was the lowly animal life that throve about them.

From these teachers he learned to delight in the curious cadences that may be in speech. He learned the craft of packing a phrase until it is explosive with adventure; the art of lightening however tragic or despairing a concept with just the irony or humour or tenderness that brings it back to earth and to a human relation.

He loved the village tailor who said, "I will make you a suit, sir, that will go around and about you like a curtain."

And when he once lamented the ageing condition of his own hat he was comforted by the remark of the person to whom he was speaking:—"Let you not throw away the hat," quoth his companion, "for there is an art about an old hat that is not in a new hat."

And what might that art be? Synge enquired.

“The art of an old hat is to cock it, and ’tis known that no person whatever would care to cock a new hat.”

He loved the simple human relation, and however fantastic a tale he may be telling, it is always human. Perhaps his limitation lay here. He is a folk-writer working on folk material. His fantasy does not attempt anything but the world we live in; does not bid for an extra world or a spiritual experience. His tales are wonderful indeed; but they are wonderful because of the bog and the mountain that are in them; because of the men and women that rage and riot in them; because of all the things that he knew and loved so well.

And in this he differs from the other writers of his quality. The quest after divinity that is the Irish writer’s torment and his joy, brought to Synge neither joy nor torment. Perhaps he had no time for these. “Men and women and their delicious burdens” were what he sought and wrote of. The common physical and mental vigour of life was what he loved and would seek. He was for years a sick man, and perhaps guessing that he was a doomed man, he did not search for another world, and a greater being: divining that he must quit the habitual earth, the companionable sun, the comforting spaces ere he could really fathom these or savour this life to the full.

A silent, an aloof, a listening man! Listening to and watching all that which had never been completely his, and from which he should soon be parted. He would stand on a headland that jutted steeply on the sea, and he would look and look and look at the sparkling waters below. He would look at a meadow, a sunset, a man, as though he must satiate his eyes with their wonder, and, if it could be, saturate his very being with all that he should not carry with him.

He died in a Dublin hospital. A doctor who attended him told that when his end was nigh, Synge petitioned that he

might be lifted in bed so that he should look from the window and see the Dublin hills. Twice he was so lifted, and he looked again on the shapes that he loved better than all other shapes of the world.

But when on the third morning he looked from the window, he looked on blankness; there was a thick mist without, and he could not see the hills. As he was lowered again he was weeping, quietly, forlornly, and in a little time he died.