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'The Play, boy, of the Wet, Stern World': Flann O'Brien and John Millington Synge

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This article explores Brian O'Nolan's (Flann O'Brien's, Myles na gCopaleen's) relation to John Millington Synge. Synge (1871–1909) was the premier dramatist of the Irish Revival, and O'Nolan's response to Synge is metonymic of his response to that pre-revolutionary cultural formation. The article provides a mainly chronological account of O'Nolan's references to Synge, with particular focus on a significant *Cruiskeen Lawn* column from 1942. It interprets and contextualises each of these textual occasions to draw out their cultural significance. Standing back from these particular textual instances, the article then aims to characterise O'Nolan's relation to Synge as a whole, and to consider what this tells us about O'Nolan's relation to the Revival.

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Introduction

Seamus Deane described Flann O'Brien as a Free State author, a writer of 'the little world that succeeded to the extravagant rhetoric of the Revival and the Rising and the War of Independence and the Civil War.'¹ This world was one that had 'lost faith in the heroic consciousness of the heroic individual and [...] replaced it by the unheroic consciousness of the ordinary, of the Plain People of Ireland.'² The historical contrast that Deane presents invites a closer analysis than current scholarship has given us of O'Brien's relation to the Irish Revival. This relation stands as one significant instance of what the pre-revolutionary Irish culture of the 1900s meant in the independent Ireland of the mid-twentieth century.

Focusing on Brian O'Nolan's relation to John Millington Synge, this article develops the historical perspective outlined above. It provides a mainly chronological account of O'Nolan's references to Synge, as information that is useful to any assessment of O'Nolan's relation to Irish cultural history. In doing so, it interprets each of these textual occasions to draw out their cultural significance. Ultimately, the article aims to characterise O'Nolan's relation to Synge as a whole, and to consider what this tells us about O'Nolan's relation to the Irish Revival. This assessment will include the way that O'Nolan viewed this generation's relation to the rural West of Ireland. I shall argue that O'Nolan ultimately tends to conflate Synge with a notion of the Revival as a whole, which he in turn tends to present negatively. We shall see that this presentation involves O'Nolan in some elision and simplification, while his critique of the Revival's (and Synge's) idealisation of the West can also become contradictory. It becomes apparent that O'Nolan, in part, marshals a political resentment against the class that he associates with the Revival. Yet his own position is not wholly consistent, and we shall also see ways in which he can come closer to Synge. For one thing, O'Nolan could sometimes be merely playful about Synge, rather than fiercely critical of him. For another, we shall consider aspects of both writers' work which make them more alike than O'Nolan was keen to admit.

Synge's Work and Reputation

Born 40 years before O'Nolan, Synge (1871–1909) was the premier playwright of the Irish Literary Revival. Lady Augusta Gregory, W. B. Yeats, Edward Martyn, and George Moore founded the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899. From it developed the Irish National Theatre Society (1903–), and the Abbey Theatre in late 1904. Synge was adopted by

¹ Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 161–2.

² Deane, *Strange Country*, 162.

Yeats and Gregory as a talent who could enrich, perhaps even fulfil, their theatrical project. He became, alongside them, one of the directors of the Abbey, prior to his early death.

Synge's major plays include, in order of first stage production, *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903); *Riders to the Sea* (1904); *The Well of the Saints* (1905); *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907); *The Tinker's Wedding* (1909); and the posthumous *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910). He was of comfortable Protestant and Anglo-Irish background; some of his relatives had been ministers in the Church of Ireland. Seeking experiences of other cultures, he travelled Europe, including Germany, Italy, and especially Paris, studying music and languages. He spent much time in the West of Ireland, trying especially to improve his Irish. Between 1898 and 1902 he travelled annually to the Aran Islands, and in 1907 he published a book recording that experience, with illustrations by Jack Butler Yeats. He also travelled around Kerry, Mayo, and Donegal. Inspired by these travels in Ireland, Synge's subject matter was rural. None of his completed plays depicts a settlement larger than a village.

As is well known, Synge's plays were also often controversial. Repeatedly, works like *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Well of the Saints* were accused of immorality or of presenting a degraded vision of the Irish peasantry. This reaction found its apotheosis in the disturbances that infamously broke out at the Abbey's production of *The Playboy* in early 1907. The putatively national theatre was assailed by protests from nationalists – some of them from the Gaelic League, Sinn Féin, or both – that Synge was traducing the nation they sought to uphold. To a degree, the controversy also broke along denominational lines, in that Catholic protesters opposed the theatrical project of the Protestant-born Yeats, Gregory, and Synge.

Despite these disruptions, after Synge's early death in 1909 his family and friends worked to enshrine his reputation through stage productions and publications.³ Maunsel in Dublin published the four-volume *Works of John M. Synge* in December 1910, which W. J. McCormack refers to as 'the first collective edition of an Irish author to be printed and published in Ireland since the eighteenth century,' followed in 1911 by 'an even more lavish five-volume Library Edition.'⁴ 1913 saw the publication in New York of *Synge and the Irish Theatre* by the French critic Maurice Bourgeois. Bourgeois was already able to cite three other books wholly or partly on Synge, published on both sides of the Atlantic, and could argue that rarely

³ On London productions see W. J. McCormack, *Fool of the Family: A Life of J. M. Synge* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 393.

⁴ McCormack, *Fool of the Family*, 402.

has a writer become a classic in so short a time as Synge. Almost alone of all the Irish authors, he has achieved a worldwide reputation. His plays, in text or in translation, have won the currency of half the globe. There is a veritable 'Synge cult' in Oxford and Cambridge; and transatlantic Universities [Yale, Harvard, and Pennsylvania] have gone so far as to take Synge's plays as text-books of English literature.⁵

McCormack takes the publication of 'a special edition of *The Playboy*, with ten colour illustrations by [Seán] Keating,' as evidence that '[t]he business of reviving Synge was afoot' once again by 1927.⁶ Yeats memorialised his friend in 'Synge and the Ireland of His Time' (1911) and *The Death of Synge* (1928), and Synge's reputation continued to be tied to Yeats's – a process extended by the poetic tributes to Synge in Yeats's poems 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' and 'Coole Park, 1929' (published in 1919 and 1931 respectively). The association with Yeats cemented the association with an Anglo-Irish cultural milieu, but after independence it also granted a kind of official esteem, as Yeats became a Senator and accepted a Nobel Prize that honoured the Irish Free State. Indeed, Yeats's Nobel acceptance speech, delivered in Stockholm in 1923, made special mention of Synge, a 'strange man of genius,' in the achievement of modern Irish culture: 'He was to do for Ireland, though more by his influence on other dramatists than by his direct influence, what Robert Burns did for Scotland.'⁷ McCormack adjudges that Synge's work was posthumously linked to 'the emergent cultural policy of the Irish Free State.'⁸ A signal event in the critical canonisation of Synge by Free State culture was Daniel Corkery's *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1931). A fiercely avowed Catholic and nationalist, Corkery denied the validity of the Anglo-Irish as Irish writers and considered them essentially foreign and 'colonial.'⁹ Yet Corkery accepted Synge as a truly Irish and nationalist writer, almost alone among his class.¹⁰ As George Moore

⁵ Maurice Bourgeois, *John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1913), ix, 239–40. By 1913 Patrick Pearse had also reversed his hostility to Synge: see Declan Kiberd, *Synge and the Irish Language* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 259.

⁶ McCormack, *Fool of the Family*, 409.

⁷ W. B. Yeats, 'The Irish Dramatic Movement,' Nobel Prize Lecture, 15 December 1923, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1923/yeats/lecture/>.

⁸ McCormack, *Fool of the Family*, 12. See also Gregory Dobbins's discussion of 'the process by which Synge was assimilated into the canon of twentieth-century Irish writing,' in 'Synge and Irish Modernism,' in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, ed. P. J. Mathews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 136. Also Mathews's comments in 'Re-Thinking Synge' in the same volume, on how Synge was 'easily co-opted to the nation building agendas of the new Irish State' (7).

⁹ Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1931), 19.

¹⁰ Corkery was also mentor to his fellow Corkonian Sean O'Faolain, whose *The Irish* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969 [1947]) cites a 'Big Four' of modern Irish writers: Yeats, Joyce, Synge, and O'Casey, without whom Irish literature 'would now be regarded throughout the world as no more and no less than an interesting literature. These four writers [...] made Dublin a European literary centre' (131).

reflected, with characteristically malicious wit, 'Synge's death seems to have done him a great deal of good.'¹¹

As commentator and artist, Brian O'Nolan arrives around thirty years after Synge. As we shall see, his response to the dramatist demonstrates his attitude to the Revival and stands as a significant instance of the response from post-revolutionary Ireland to that earlier cultural movement which had now been canonised in the new state.

O'Nolan on Synge: The 1930s

O'Nolan's earliest response to Synge is the two-page playlet *The Bog of Allen*, attributed to dramatist Samuel Hall and published in *Comhthrom Féinne* in March 1933. The opening stage direction takes us to:

The Kitchen in Allen Bogg's hovel in the middle of the Bog of Allen, miles from dry land. [...] It is a typically Irish household. The floor is flagged with green moss between the cracks. [...] In a corner is a bed with a white sow in it. All the bed-clothes, including the blankets, are made of Irish poplin. [...] Maggie, Bogg's wife, is sitting spinning. She is dressed completely in green, as the Wearin' o' the Green is a strict rule in the house.¹²

The text plays on the fetishisation of the West of the country as the real Ireland. Although Synge had been attacked by nationalists for supposedly denigrating the Western peasantry, *The Bog of Allen* partly responds to his role in forming modern Irish rural drama. Its dialogue, which Maebh Long considers a 'satire on the language of the Abbey Theatre,' is cast in Hiberno-English with exaggerated features.¹³ Farmer Allen Bogg asks his wife Maggie 'What does be for the dinner?', and as a cow puts its head through the door she asks 'What does that yolk be lookin' in on the door for, Allen?'¹⁴ The Hiberno-English substitution of 'do be' for 'is,' an adaptation from Irish grammar, occurs in parts of Synge's work, as in *The Well of the Saints*: 'If it's lies she does be telling she's a sweet, beautiful voice you'd never tire to be hearing'; 'and you'll

¹¹ Quoted in Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre 1899-1999: Form and Pressure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 52.

¹² 'The Bog of Allen,' originally published in *Comhthrom Féinne* 5, no. 3 (March 1933), reprinted in Flann O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles: A Selection of the Earlier Writings of Brian O'Nolan*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Grafton, 1988), 41.

¹³ Maebh Long, "'No more drunk, truculent, witty, celtic, dark, desperate, amorous paddies!': Brian O'Nolan and the Irish Stereotype,' in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 41.

¹⁴ O'Brien, 'The Bog of Allen,' 41-2.

hear Timmy himself, the time he does be sitting in his forge'; 'for it's fine prayers he does be saying.'¹⁵

Allen Bogg's lament picks up the central concern of *Riders to the Sea*: 'Ochone, it will be little I'll be wantin' soon but a coffin of the good bog-oak.'¹⁶ That play is also cited in the fifth issue of O'Nolan's magazine *Blather* (January 1935), in the article 'The Abbey Theatre Subsidy.' The government's subsidy of £750 to the Abbey, *Blather* claims,

is paid on condition the Abbey Players go to America and remain there for nine months of the year. The idea is to prevent at all costs the further production in Dublin of *Riders to the Sea* and *Professor Tim*. [...] It is admitted that thousands of playgoers who turned their faces sadly to the emigrant ship early in the present century because of *Riders to the Sea* are now pouring back from the States in hordes. Two thousand of them are camping in the Phoenix Park at the moment. When they are asked about the Abbey Players in Boston, they look away and refuse to talk. One man laughed hollowly when questioned and disappeared into the trees.¹⁷

The joke is serenely deadpan in the conventional elegance of its idiom ('turned their faces sadly to the emigrant ship'). In this gag, something supposed to be a source of pleasure or edification (the work of the national theatre) is not merely disappointing but bad enough to be traumatising, having a causal effect akin to that of a famine. Irish people around the world flee as Irish literature approaches. In this respect, 'The Abbey Theatre Subsidy' anticipates the recurring theme of *An Béal Bocht* that literature has shaped Gaelic reality, and shaped it tragically.

It is notable that *Blather* cites *Professor Tim* alongside Synge. George Shiels's romantic comedy of Irish life was first staged by the Abbey in 1925: a different cultural moment from that when Synge's plays first appeared, and indeed Shiels's work has little in common with Synge's stark one-act tragedy *Riders to the Sea*. *Blather's* joke works as well as it does because its primary target, *Riders to the Sea*, is so culturally elevated. But it is evident that O'Nolan, in writing it, is not so much thinking of what Synge's play meant in 1904, as what it means as part of an Abbey canon in the 1930s, alongside a popular play from the mid-1920s.

¹⁵ J. M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1995]), 60, 64. Hereafter referred to as *Plays* followed by page number.

¹⁶ O'Brien, 'The Bog of Allen,' in *Myles Before Myles*, 41.

¹⁷ 'The Abbey Theatre Subsidy,' *Blather* 5 (January 1935), reprinted in O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles*, 143.

Galaxy of Fake: Cruiskeen Lawn 1942

Brian O’Nolan’s most direct public references to Synge, as to numerous other topics, appear in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. The directness even of these statements is strongly qualified by the persona of Myles na gCopaleen and the impulse for verbal play, and thus each one must be read carefully. The column’s fullest treatment of Synge appears in the column of 28 August 1942:

A lifetime of cogitation has convinced me that in this Anglo-Irish literature of ours (which for the most part is neither Anglo, Irish, or literature) (as the man said) nothing in the whole galaxy of fake is comparable with Synge. That comic ghoul with his wakes and mugs of porter should be destroyed finally and forever by having a drama festival at which all his plays should be revived for the benefit of the younger people of to-day. The younger generation should be shown what their fathers and grand-daddies went through for Ireland, and at a time when it was neither profitable nor popular.¹⁸

The claim that the best way to destroy Synge is not to suppress his plays, but to revive them, effects an inversion of values like the one seen in the *Blather* article. In both texts, the production of a play is presented as damaging, either to its audience or to its author’s reputation. In the last line quoted, Synge is associated with an earlier generation which, in suffering for Ireland, is implicitly tied to the Revival and the Revolution.

The column posits Synge as a crucial case in Anglo-Irish literary relations. On one hand, to be sure, ‘[w]e in this country had a bad time through the centuries when England did not like us.’ But things became still worse when England discovered the charm of Irish writing. As a result, Myles expounds, Irish writers have exhibited themselves to London publishers, and been too ready to play the desired part: ‘Playing up to the foreigner, putting up the witty celtic act, doing the erratic but lovable playboy, pretending to be morose and obsessed and thoughtful – all that is wearing so thin that we must put it aside soon in shame as one puts aside a threadbare suit.’¹⁹ Myles posits Samuels Lover and Lever as the start of this literary tradition. But he presents Synge as the worst offender:

Here is stuff that anybody who knows the Ireland referred to simply will not have. It is not that Synge made people less worthy or nastier, or even better than they

¹⁸ Myles na gCopaleen, ‘Cruiskeen Lawn,’ *The Irish Times* (28 August 1942): 3.

¹⁹ na gCopaleen, ‘Cruiskeen Lawn’ (28 August 1942): 3.

are, but he brought forward with the utmost solemnity amusing clowns talking a sub-language of their own and bade us take them very seriously.²⁰

England's admiration of this 'counterfeit bauble' has been transferred back to Ireland, in a case of sedulous colonial mimicry:

it soon became part of the literary credo here that Synge was a poet and a wild celtic god, a bit of a genius, indeed, like the brother. We, who knew the whole inside-outs of it, preferred to accept the ignorant valuations of outsiders on things Irish. And now the curse has come upon us, because I have personally met in the streets of Ireland persons who are clearly out of Synge's plays.²¹

Mirrored back to Ireland by the English, Synge then becomes reduplicated in real-life Ireland. His 'galaxy of fake' is made real. Accordingly, Carol Taaffe explains, 'the Irishman becomes a parody of himself, the caricature internalised and reproduced.'²²

Myles thus offers a post-colonial critique. Irish culture, he avows, should break the circuit in which it imitates the version of itself reflected by a charmed and amused Britain, in what Gerry Smyth terms 'the national bourgeoisie's continuing subservience to their former imperial masters.'²³ These issues of representation, authenticity, and identity were already vital ones in the modern history of colonialism and Irish nationalism, from Douglas Hyde's 1892 lecture 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland' to Daniel Corkery's lament that the Irish child was presented in literature with an alien mindset.²⁴ The notion of Anglicisation was well established. So too was the Irish practice of adapting to English stereotypes in order to facilitate life as colonial migrants to England. Declan Kiberd avers that 'many found it easier to don the mask of the Paddy than reshape a complex urban identity of their own.'²⁵ Myles posits a further stage in this process. The theatre which purports to be a key part of the process of de-Anglicisation has itself generated images of Ireland which are enthusiastically accepted by the English, and it is this imprimatur that then makes them accepted by the Irish themselves. The logic

²⁰ na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn' (28 August 1942): 3.

²¹ na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn' (28 August 1942): 3.

²² Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 104.

²³ Gerry Smyth, *Decolonisation and Criticism: The Construction of Irish Literature* (London: Pluto, 1998), 92.

²⁴ See Douglas Hyde, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland' (1892), <https://www.thefuture.ie/wp-content/uploads/1892/11/1892-11-25-The-Necessity-for-De-Anglicising-Ireland.pdf>, and Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, 14–5.

²⁵ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 29.

thus remains culturally colonial, even after the establishment of the Free State and the 1937 constitution.

Myles on Synge: *Cruiskeen Lawn* 1944–47

Later *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns show a continuing readiness to refer to Synge as part of modern Irish cultural history. They suggest a somewhat more changeable, provisional, or even generous attitude to the playwright. This reflects the protean persona of Myles, whose moods and views can change at will and who could be genially droll, despite his great capacity for sarcasm and critique. It also suggests that O'Nolan did not at this stage have a uniformly hostile view of the playwright. Synge remained useful to O'Nolan as ready subject matter, given that he could rely on most of his middle-class Irish readership to have a rough acquaintance with Synge's work.

On 1 November 1945, Myles issued a significant column on Synge, commencing with a characteristic droll formula as though in mid-conversation already: 'Synge I knew well and indeed I was always welcome in the house where he was born (on Shaw Street, of course).'²⁶ (The parenthesis is an inverted reference to Bernard Shaw's upbringing on Synge Street.) Myles plays the seasoned man of letters, claiming to have joined a group visiting Synge at 'his house in Glendalough where he read us that thing of his "The Play, boy, of the Wet, Stern World".'²⁷ Myles affects to have inadvertently offended Synge during the visit: 'I made absolutely no comment, and I've often wondered *what* it was I did. Because he never spoke to me again!' This fantasy is the prelude to a reflection arising from a discussion that took place at the 'Royal Queen's University College Hist. Club,' where a speaker stated that 'J. M. Synge heralded the death-knell of the stage Irishman and portrayed for the first time in Irish drama Irishmen as they were and not as previous Anglo-Irish dramatists saw, or failed to see them.'²⁸

A characteristic tactic of Myles is to fix pedantically upon verbal formulas and, in taking their slight errors at face value, pull them apart. In seeking a definition of 'knell' (and noticing that a knell is itself a kind of a herald, not something to be heralded), Myles also wilfully lights on the past participle 'rung' for a bell, rereading the verb as a noun – the 'rung' of a ladder. Thus a statement about 'heralding the death-knell' comes to mean, chaotically: 'Synge proclaimed the approach of the sound of a bell on one rung

²⁶ Myles na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *The Irish Times* (1 November 1945): 2.

²⁷ Characteristically, Myles adapts the title into an elaborate pun. His stylistic impulse here recalls the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber, 1975 [1939]), whose plays on *The Playboy* had actually been less ambitious: thus 'plaidboy' (27), 'our western playboyish world' (183), 'Such a boyplay!' (569).

²⁸ Quoted in na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn' (1 November 1945): 2.

below the death of the stage Irishman.²⁹ A rather carelessly grand critical statement has thus been rendered foolish and unstable. A similarly pedantic scrutiny inheres in Myles's claim not to understand the assertion that 'Synge portrayed Irishmen not as previous Anglo-Irish dramatists had failed to see them.' The double negative drains conviction from this statement. Alongside this stands another Mylesian motif, the destabilising insertion of himself into every statement or controversy. As the headline of the article under scrutiny is 'SYNGE PORTRAYED TRUE IRISHMAN,' Myles affects to assume that the Irishman portrayed must have been himself.

The substance of Myles's disagreement here is not so much that Synge himself created stage-Irishmen, but that '[t]he stage Irishman is most un-dead as is his chosen literary organ, *The Belle*, heaven bless them both.' The tone is light, especially because the liberal journal *The Bell* – naturally misnamed by Myles in the column – hardly specialised in the representation of stage-Irishmen.³⁰ But Myles here does not, as before, pursue the critique of the stage Irishman, but appears to dissolve the category. Rather than emphasising the stage Irishman's damaging divergence from the real Irishman, he now conflates the two: 'But what is this stage Irishman and how is he to be distinguished from you, sorry from the ordinary Irishman?' Myles claims that he has never seen on stage 'a man purporting to be an Irishman who was not obviously an Irishman.'³¹ Where he has previously focused on a gap between representation and reality, Myles now implies that such a gap is almost logically impossible. In effect, he takes 'stage Irishman' disingenuously at face value, understanding it to mean any Irishman seen on a stage, and thus a harmless phenomenon. The shift from one position to another allows him to undermine Synge from a new direction. If the concept of the stage Irishman is cancelled, then the claim that Synge transcended it and showed the Irish as they really were loses force.

The notion that one depiction of the Irish cannot be found wanting against another is developed more ambitiously, as Myles goes on to submit that

the Irishman is of so ... so universal a nature that you cannot portray him accurately. No matter how extravagant your invention I will guarantee to produce just the Irishman to fit it. Proof of this is that persons who paid the most casual and minimum visits to this island were able to portray Ireland with unmatched fidelity.³²

²⁹ na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn' (1 November 1945): 2.

³⁰ O'Nolan's articles for *The Bell*, written under the name Flann O'Brien between October 1940 and February 1941, are reprinted in O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles*, 227–49.

³¹ na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn' (1 November 1945): 2.

³² na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn' (1 November 1945): 2.

Irish identity, here, is so open-ended that it is no longer possible to misrepresent it. Any depiction will turn out to be faithful to such a 'universal' category. 'Poor Jack Synge' is left behind along the way, but with less contempt and more pity than before. The charge, this time, is no longer that he misrepresented Ireland but that nobody could.

In the *Cruiskeen Lawn* instalment of 15 May 1946, Myles demonstrates bibliographical familiarity with Synge's work, in a way that again suggests Synge's continued prominence in Irish letters. Myles quotes the poet Roibeárd Ó Faracháin's claim that Synge and James Stephens did not publish contemporaneously, and disagrees on the basis that '*the first edition of poor Synge's poems and translations was published in April, 1909!*'³³ Reprising the motif of fictionalising his own close involvement in past events, Myles claims to have written the preface to this volume (in fact produced by the Yeatses' Cuala Press). What follows is an engagement with Synge which is noteworthy in its use of factual detail as well as its imaginative and playful character. 'Synge was my friend,' Myles once again declares: a rhetorical move that takes him away from the attacks on Synge seen before and into a different kind of affectionate fiction. It becomes apparent that Myles is recounting the first night of *The Playboy* as though he were W. B. Yeats, though without ever mentioning Yeats's name. The role of founder and leader of the Revival has been assumed by Myles na gCopaleen.

Myles narrates the events with precision. The date of *The Playboy*'s first performance, Yeats's trip to Aberdeen, and the contents of Augusta Gregory's telegram announcing disturbances in the audience are all intact.³⁴ Admittedly, these facts are not obscure in the annals of the Revival, but they demonstrate that O'Nolan has taken a specific interest in the movement's history. Gregory's telegram about the opening night stated: 'Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift.'³⁵ Myles glosses this with wilful bemusement: 'I remember wondering at the time who could have been so mean as to order an audience to shift in the middle of my friend's play – or had the Third Act finished?' The wilful misconstrual of the notorious noun 'shift,' heard as a verb, anticipates by almost 70 years a play on words from Ben Levitas: 'it would have been more accurate had [Gregory] left "word" out of the sentence: Synge's shift is between the performed and the performative, as the play is arrested and the event begun.'³⁶ Therefore, without necessarily paying the Revival any reverence, Myles briefly engages with it in a manner that resembles a cultural historian's.

³³ Myles na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *The Irish Times* (15 May 1946): 4.

³⁴ See R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life. I: The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 360.

³⁵ Quoted in Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life. I: The Apprentice Mage*, 360. See also McCormack, *Fool of the Family*, 311.

³⁶ Ben Levitas, 'Modernist Experiments in Irish Theatre,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 116.

In the column of 2 April 1947, Myles responds to Austin Clarke's eulogy of the late writer Caradoc Evans. He pretends to have introduced Clarke and Evans to each other, and states:

The man [Caradoc Evans] did not know English and, cute enough, made a virtue of the slang he had learnt from his mother. This is, of course, a peculiarly Irish perversion, which Austin [Clarke] affirms Evans learned from Synge. (By the way, Synge was also a great friend of mine and people tell me that I appear in several of his books. He was a delicate man and died in my Arms. That is years ago, of course, when I owned the Enniskerry Arms.)³⁷

Synge's ill health ('a delicate man') was indeed a defining feature of his later life and gives Myles the excuse for a pun ('Arms'). Most thematically significant in the passage is Myles's reference to a 'peculiarly Irish perversion,' learning slang from the mother, but the assertion is garbled. It was Irish that Synge needed to make an effort to learn, and lower-class Irish people to whom he keenly listened to gain idiomatic inspiration. However, the three columns just surveyed, from 1945, 1946, and 1947, together provide a different aspect to O'Nolan's commentary on Synge. In all three, Synge is a starting point for humour and entertainment, but is not attacked as he has previously been. The recurring sense is that Synge's centrality to modern Ireland's literary culture makes him a useful reference, the details of whose career are likely to be familiar to the readers of *The Irish Times*. In this mood, O'Nolan treats Synge less as ideological antagonist than as comic foil, and as a predecessor whose status makes him ideal for good-humoured engagement.

Myles on Synge: *Cruiskeen Lawn* in the 1950s

More *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns refer to Synge in the 1950s than in the 1940s, but often at less great length. It is plausible to posit that O'Nolan's need to confront the great precursors of the Revival diminishes during this period, as the pre-revolutionary period recedes further into history and as O'Nolan himself, in the character of Myles, becomes a long-standing fixture of Dublin's world of letters. In this period, he becomes much preoccupied with new and long-running controversies like his campaign of jibes against the Lord Mayor Andy Clerkin or his verbal joust with Alfred O'Rahilly, both in 1951.³⁸ At the same time, we shall see that Myles's tone in this period can become more rancorous than in previous decades. This shift is characteristic of O'Nolan in the period,

³⁷ Myles na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *The Irish Times* (2 April 1947): 4.

³⁸ See Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989), 178–9, 184.

as he is increasingly affected by excessive drinking and poor health. Anthony Cronin perceives 'an obsessional element and a more undisguised contempt in Myles's attacks than hitherto.'³⁹ The writers of the Revival, when they rise to the attention of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, are not spared this tone.

One column shows Myles na gCopaleen in exceptionally bilious mood. On 3 October 1951 Myles attacks Sean O'Casey over a performance of *The Silver Tassie*, staged by the Abbey at the Queen's Theatre premises. Quoting another reviewer at length, Myles dismisses the play as offensive to 'ordinary Christian persons' and suggests that the Abbey should be discontinued. Here he compares O'Casey to Synge: 'his stuff is strictly for export,' a matter of Irish stereotypes popular in London that an Irish audience should be able to see through.⁴⁰ What had contained the seed of an insightful postcolonial critique in 1942 has now become a conservative diatribe.

On 30 July 1954 *Cruiskeen Lawn* jibes at Ernest Blythe and the Abbey Theatre, mentioning Synge in a reference to 'the unrealistic theatre of Willie Yeats, Willie Fay, and Willie Synge.'⁴¹ The joke here is merely that the first two 'Williams' of the Abbey create a semantic momentum that envelops Synge, turning him into yet another Abbey playwright. The more substantial charge is that Synge, taken as part of the early Abbey milieu as a whole, is 'unrealistic.' This will remain central to O'Nolan's view of the Revival. The second half of the column of 4 October 1954 returns substantially to Synge, in the course of an attack on the stereotypical cultivation of Irishness in literature. Myles cites the contemporary author Bryan McMahon from Kerry, who lists potential topics that become a parade of kitsch Irishness.⁴² Seeking its source, the appalled Myles runs from William Carleton through Samuel Lover and Somerville and Ross: 'perverted Carletons, showing the natives and their ways in a canon of amiable cawboguery.'⁴³

This leads him in a separate section to describe the moment of the Revival: 'Synge-George Moore-Gregory-Martyn, with Yeats in the background.' This school 'persisted in the belief that poverty and savage existence on remote rocks was a most poetical way for people to be, provided they were other people.'⁴⁴ Like Myles's 'galaxy of fake' column of 1942, this statement contains the potential for a serious political critique, which could also illuminate the significance of *An Béal Bocht*, and which has much in common with O'Nolan's unpublished document now known as 'The Pathology of

³⁹ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 181.

⁴⁰ Myles na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *The Irish Times* (3 October 1951): 4.

⁴¹ Myles na Gopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *The Irish Times* (30 July 1954): 4.

⁴² Myles na Gopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *The Irish Times* (4 October 1954): 4.

⁴³ na Gopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn' (4 October 1954): 4.

⁴⁴ na Gopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn' (4 October 1954): 4.

Revivalism.⁴⁵ Cronin, on these lines, proposes that 'the Gaeltachts remained ghettos,' and that O'Nolan, knowing the Gaeltacht from childhood, was able to perceive 'how romantics, conservationists and racialists can combine to stultify and degrade the objects of their enthusiasm.'⁴⁶

In this context Myles proceeds into a dedicated attack on Synge, which is his last substantial statement on his precursor:

Of that bunch, the worst was Synge. Here we had a moneyed dilettante coming straight from Paris to study the peasants of Aran, not knowing a syllable of their language, then coming back to pour forth a deluge of home-made jargon all over the Abbey stage and on top of the head of the young Dr Larchet at the piano. Noggins of porter, the white boards, the long nights after Samhain, surely. The irony of it!

When in the West, Synge considered himself (read his own account) that he was an accomplished *savant* and artist examining primitive communities and penetrating to their hearts through the crucible of poesy, but making sure to wear a strong bodycoat against the chill winds when engaged at his sacred tasks out of doors; whereas he was an ignorant and affected interloper in a uniquely decent, stable, and civilised community.⁴⁷

Just as the polemic against O'Casey and the Abbey in 1951 carries a more rancorous tone than anything from the previous decade, so this invective against Synge is less humorous and more bitter than the critique proffered twelve years earlier. The Gaeltacht is now idealised as 'uniquely decent, stable, and civilised' in a way that consorts oddly with the analysis from Cronin just cited. In one paragraph Myles accuses the Revivalists of wishing others to maintain a 'savage existence on remote rocks' – rather than, perhaps, experience economic development. In another paragraph, this savage existence has become a utopian community spoiled by Revivalist 'interlopers.' In being torn between primitivism ('savagery') and idealisation ('uniquely decent'), Myles's description of island life strangely replays the very Revivalist ideology that he has posited as a target of disdain. We shall shortly see that his criticism of the Revival was not always reliable.

Subsequent references to Synge in *Cruiskeen Lawn* are briefer. On 22 September 1955, a sustained complaint about the quality of the Abbey Theatre quotes ill-advised praise of 'the poetical speech of the West,' and warns that the worst of it can be found in 'the

⁴⁵ For discussion of this document see Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass*, 119–25.

⁴⁶ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 125.

⁴⁷ na Gopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn' (4 October 1954): 4.

shameless blather of the greatest ruffian of them all – Synge.⁴⁸ On 6 December 1957, Synge appears in a list of Irish writers that Sean O'Faolain suggests may not be worth reading; in this context Myles does not endorse the dismissal, but characteristically asks why he is not also on the list.⁴⁹ On 28 March 1958, an ingenious alphabet of Irish items includes, under many items commencing with 'S,' 'shrill synge-songs': an elementary pun, tending towards disdain.⁵⁰

In the 1940s, wit is typically a paramount consideration in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and this is reflected in the verbal play that often marks its engagements with Synge in that decade. The polemical manner that takes up more of the column in the 1950s is likewise exercised on Synge and the Revival. The furious attack on O'Casey, and Synge along with him, in 1951, is made in the name of orthodox Catholic values in a way that would have been unlikely a decade earlier. In briefer references, Myles sometimes maintains the tone of contempt ('the greatest ruffian of them all'), sometimes (in the 1940s, but not later) maintains a gentler note in which Synge is enlisted in a fantasy of friendship. Most significant, though, is the critical identification of Synge as a central member of the Revival. We shall now consider the merits of O'Nolan's critique.

Distortions: O'Nolan and the Irish Revival

How reliable is O'Nolan's portrayal of Synge? We have seen that he can be precise, for instance about *The Playboy's* opening night. Elsewhere his facts can be more contestable. In scrutinising these, we will find that O'Nolan's distortions are not isolated errors, but typically bespeak a political attitude to the Irish Revival that had preceded his literary generation. It also becomes clear that O'Nolan is not always responding directly to Synge himself, the man of the 1900s, so much as to Synge's reputation and influence in later decades.

For instance, in his original 1942 column Myles castigates 'That comic ghoul with his wakes and mugs of porter.' Porter is surely served in *The Playboy*, set in a shebeen, but it does not otherwise saturate Synge's drama. A wake is mentioned as a past event in *The Playboy*,⁵¹ but the closest thing to a wake on stage in any of Synge's drama is the consumption of tea and whiskey in the presence of Dan Burke, the living man who pretends to be dead in *The Shadow of the Glen*. The visiting tramp, keen on a refill of whiskey, fancifully describes Nora as 'having a wake,' but the scene lacks the communal

⁴⁸ Myles na Gopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *The Irish Times* (22 September 1955): 6.

⁴⁹ Myles na Gopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *The Irish Times* (6 December 1957): 8.

⁵⁰ Myles na Gopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *The Irish Times* (28 March 1958): 6.

⁵¹ Synge, *Plays*, 138.

conviviality associated with that ritual.⁵² O’Nolan, therefore, was not always precisely referring to the text, or even the production, of Synge, so much as to a generalised memory of his work. We may also infer that his memory of Synge is admixed with his memory of other modern playwrights generically influenced by and associated with Synge.

In his 1954 attack, Myles states that Synge came ‘to study the peasants of Aran, not knowing a syllable of their language.’ It is true that Synge came to the Gaeltacht as a relative outsider to the language. He studied Irish with locals such as the boy Martin McDonough, who became a friend and was clear that Synge’s aim was ‘to learn [his] native language.’⁵³ Kiberd’s authoritative study of Synge and Irish makes clear that Synge’s acquisition of the language was sustained and extensive. O’Nolan could not read Kiberd’s research, but he could have gained the same impression simply from reading *The Aran Islands*. It would be more logical for O’Nolan to commend Synge’s deep commitment to learning Irish than to dismiss him for, by definition, having limited competence at the outset.

What Myles derives from *The Aran Islands* is highly tendentious. Nowhere does Synge claim to be ‘an accomplished *savant* and artist.’ The complaint about Synge ‘making sure to wear a strong bodycoat against the chill winds’ is in poor taste, given that Synge died of cancer barely a decade after his first visit to Aran; even O’Nolan in his 1947 skit had called him ‘delicate.’ More fundamentally, O’Nolan’s contrast between ‘examining primitive communities and penetrating to the hearts’ and being ‘an ignorant and affected interloper in a uniquely decent, stable, and civilised community’ lacks clear demarcation. Synge did find Aran ‘primitive’; he also found it, just as Myles describes, ‘a uniquely decent, stable, and civilised community.’ *The Aran Islands* tends to value the life of the islands over modernised life in the East of Ireland, but not merely by sentimentalising them. Sinéad Garrigan Mattar argues that Synge’s primitivism, influenced by his continental studies, was of a modern rather than a romantic cast, embracing the challenge of alterity rather than merely projecting onto it a conveniently reassuring unity.⁵⁴ In this vein, for instance, the islanders’ anarchistic political ethics, refusing the legitimacy of mainland law, appealed to Synge.⁵⁵ Synge’s political assessment here consorts well with Seán Hewitt’s recent redescription of him

⁵² Synge, *Plays*, 20.

⁵³ Quoted in Kiberd, *Synge and the Irish Language*, 39.

⁵⁴ Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 131, and see chapter four as a whole.

⁵⁵ J. M. Synge, *Four Plays and ‘The Aran Islands,’* ed. Robin Skelton (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 216–8. On the anarchistic tint of *The Aran Islands* see also Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000), chapter 24.

as a writer who remained committed to the socialist ideas he had encountered in late nineteenth century Paris, forging 'a rebellious modernism that remained rooted in left-wing politics through an awareness of the importance of economic and industrial reforms.'⁵⁶

O'Nolan has subsumed Synge's very particular experience of Aran into a generic notion of the Revival. The Revival, by these lights, consists of Anglo-Irish 'interlopers' dallying briefly with peasants, not troubling to learn the language, then retreating to Dublin or London to profit financially from the experience. This does not accurately describe Synge's project, which involved a sustained attachment to the islands, a successful commitment to learning Irish, and indeed a dramatic oeuvre which only rarely represented island life (in *Riders to the Sea*, a tragedy which mocked no-one – though the stories that seeded *The Playboy* and *The Well of the Saints* are transplanted by Synge from Aran to the mainland). Yet precisely because his travels were so extensive and well-documented, Synge becomes the exemplar for a 'dilettante' Revivalist attitude which is part of the ideological inventory of Myles's Ireland. Ronan Crowley has shown that in recent criticism, the Revival – in reality a diverse and broad-based movement – is often stereotyped as an affair of 'Protestant Anglo-Irish landlordism.'⁵⁷ Decades earlier, O'Nolan also encourages such pejorative narrowing.

The pattern that emerges is that the particularity of Synge is often enveloped by a more general notion: Revivalism, the Anglo-Irish, and peasant drama at the Abbey, not merely that of Synge in the 1900s but as a more general phenomenon in the decades after independence. Synge, for O'Nolan, conveniently signifies the acme of these phenomena.

Position-Taking: O'Nolan's Motives

In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, O'Nolan's statements are an act of 'position-taking' within the cultural field. To scorn a writer who had already gained an unofficial role as the national playwright was a significant rhetorical gesture. In Bourdieu's words: 'Structurally "young" writers, i.e. those less advanced in the process of consecration [...] will refuse everything their "elders" (in terms of legitimacy) are and do [...] starting with the signs of consecration, internal (academies, etc.), or external (success).'⁵⁸ In the present case, the most evident measure of 'consecration' is extensive and acclaimed

⁵⁶ Seán Hewitt, *J. M. Synge: Nature, Politics, Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 5.

⁵⁷ Ronan Crowley, 'Phwat's in a nam? Brian O'Nolan as a Late Revivalist,' in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority* eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan and John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 124.

⁵⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 59.

staging by the Abbey Theatre. O’Nolan attacked this institution even as, in the 1940s, he aimed his own work at it.

Drawing on Bourdieu, Crowley writes of ‘the space of positions and position-takings that constitutes the Irish literary field.’⁵⁹ In this context Myles’s positions clear a space for his own status: a fact comically registered in his repeated, mock-indignant demands that others should cite him as central to Irish letters. His repeated attacks on Synge are one element in this activity, particularly because they also stand in for a larger disdain for the Revival of four or five decades earlier.

This polemic has sociological content: Synge was an Anglo-Irish Protestant, O’Nolan a Catholic. O’Nolan’s literary generation was certainly capable of sectarian attitudes. These are visible, for instance, in the critical writings of Patrick Kavanagh, who in 1952 declared that ‘the dominant note in Synge’ is ‘bitterly non-Irish.’⁶⁰ But inter-denominational hostility is difficult to disentangle from differences of social and economic class. O’Nolan’s scorn for the ‘moneyed dilettante coming straight from Paris’ typifies a broader hostility to a Revival conceived as wealthy.

A further motive for O’Nolan’s critiques should be considered. When Myles talks dismissively of the performance of Irishness, one may wonder whether the allegation applies also to its author. Synge was a comic (and sometimes tragic) dramatist at the Abbey. O’Nolan, in 1943, also briefly became a comic dramatist at the Abbey. To write *Faustus Kelly* was to place himself in a lineage of which Synge was the most celebrated member. O’Nolan’s correspondence shows that a few months after his major public critique of Synge’s drama, he attended a production of *The Playboy* and asked one of the actors to appear in *Faustus Kelly*.⁶¹ Even Synge’s European travels in the 1890s, which increased his status as a cosmopolitan interloper, were echoed by O’Nolan’s travels in Germany in the 1930s. On the model of his reaction to James Joyce, it would be characteristic enough of O’Nolan to unleash the anxiety and frustration that he felt about a more celebrated, direct predecessor in this way.

Reviewing Flann O’Brien’s *Stories and Plays* in 1976, Niall Montgomery perceived a comparison:

Synge presented as reported speech a language of his own invention. Reported speech in Joyce has more verisimilitude: the parameters are different, the controls

⁵⁹ Crowley, ‘Phwat’s in a nam?’, 134.

⁶⁰ Patrick Kavanagh, ‘Paris in Aran,’ *Kavanagh’s Weekly: A Journal of Literature and Politics* 1, no. 9 (7 June 1952): 7, quoted in Smyth, *Decolonisation and Criticism*, 111.

⁶¹ See Flann O’Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive, 2018), 129–30.

more 'scientific.' Reading O'Nolan's 'vulgar' speech, one is constantly reminded of Joyce. In fact, the method is rather that of Synge.⁶²

Montgomery suggests that O'Nolan tended not to record speech as Joyce did, but to invent and elaborate it as Synge did. Myles's 1942 allegation that 'nothing in the whole galaxy of fake is comparable with Synge' registers this despite itself. Synge's writing was not merely intuitive but was crafted with immense self-consciousness.⁶³

Like O'Nolan, Synge's original critics such as the *Playboy* rioters accused him of falsehood, in misrepresenting Ireland.⁶⁴ O'Nolan's dismissal is thus in one way very traditional. But those activists from Sinn Féin and the Gaelic League were intent on authenticity. Myles na gCopaleen, whose very name is taken from a 19th-century stage-Irish character, has a rather different relation to the authentic. The 'galaxy of fake' that he conjures in complaining of Synge sounds rather like his own oeuvre. As Montgomery points out, Synge's speech is not merely a transcription of the real but a transfiguration of it, and the same goes for O'Nolan.

Barry McCrea has insightfully described the artistry of Synge's writing, in which 'language-learning' became 'language-creating.'⁶⁵ Synge formed a Hiberno-English idiom that gains strangeness by cleaving to the syntax and sounds of the Irish that he had learned. No wonder, McCrea writes, that Synge 'attracted accusations of inauthenticity' such as we have observed throughout the present article. Yet, McCrea explains, in line with Mattar and Hewitt, that Synge's idiom must be understood as 'modernist and not Romantic':

Not only is his dialect something he himself never spoke naturally, it was a language no one ever spoke in real life either: his is an English haunted by a knowledge of and longing for Irish rather than an attempt to represent faithfully an Irish version of

⁶² Niall Montgomery, *Dublinman: Selected Writings*, ed. Christine O'Neill (Dublin: Ashfield Press, 2015), 191–2.

⁶³ What Ben Levitas calls Synge's 'influence in European modernism' is well indicated, for instance, by Susan Cannon Harris's demonstration of the influence of *Riders to the Sea* on Bertolt Brecht's *Señora Carrar's Rifles* (1937). See Levitas, 'Modernist Experiments in Irish Theatre,' 115–6, and Susan Cannon Harris, *Irish Drama and the Other Revolutions: Playwrights, Sexual Politics and the International Left, 1892–1964* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), chapter 4. Brecht's interest in Synge was further demonstrated when the last Berliner Ensemble production he supervised, in 1956, was *The Playboy of the Western World*. See Stephen Parker, *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 590. Anne Fogarty, meanwhile, has demonstrated textual affinities between Synge and his sometime friend the exemplary modernist Joyce: see Anne Fogarty, 'Ghostly Intertexts: James Joyce and the Legacy of Synge,' in *Synge and Edwardian England*, eds. Brian Cliff and Nicholas Grene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25–44.

⁶⁴ For a sophisticated treatment of the *Playboy* controversy, as partially typical of an Irish public culture characterised by spectacle and polemic, see Paige Reynolds, *Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chapter one.

⁶⁵ Barry McCrea, 'Style and Idiom,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Cleary, 66.

spoken English. It is this elaborate inauthenticity that makes Synge's work so modernist in inclination.⁶⁶

Elaborate inauthenticity is a fair description of much of Brian O'Nolan's project. He was unable or unwilling to view this as a positive quality in Synge's writing. As we have seen, he held to a position in which major figures of the Irish Literary Revival were frequently conflated as a misguided, 'unrealistic' response to Ireland on behalf of a privileged minority. His own later rendition of Ireland, while often fantastic, was thus positioned as being based on a more authentic understanding of the country. This position echoed Daniel Corkery's fierce stance in relation to the Revival. Yet Corkery, studying Synge's life and writing with what was then state-of-the-art meticulousness, had been able to arrive at a more nuanced appreciation of Synge's achievement. O'Nolan, increasingly polemical in his column, was reluctant to demonstrate such judicious discrimination. Yet in the last sections of this article, we shall observe two ways in which his writing and Synge's came closer than he openly admitted.

The Spade and The Loy: Repeating *The Playboy*

The first of these resonances is the connection between *The Third Policeman* and *The Playboy of the Western World*. This is primarily evident in the assaults that drive the plot of both works. The narrator of *The Third Policeman* beats Old Mathers to death by 'smashing his jaw in with my spade': after John Divney has knocked Mathers down with his bicycle pump, the narrator recounts: 'I went forward mechanically, swung the spade over my shoulder and smashed the blade of it with all my strength against the protruding chin. I felt and almost heard the fabric of his skull crumple up crisply like an empty eggshell.'⁶⁷ In *The Playboy*, Christy Mahon claims to have killed his father with a similar agricultural implement, a loy: 'I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull, and he went down at my feet like an empty sack, and never let a grunt or groan from him at all.'⁶⁸

Critics have concurred in seeing a resemblance between the two works in this regard. Stefan Solomon proposes that 'there is certainly a lineage' between the two texts at these moments.⁶⁹ Keith Hopper's extensive reading of *The Third Policeman*, noting the

⁶⁶ McCrea, 'Style and Idiom,' 67. For a historical account of Synge's dynamic relation with modern poetics see also Dobbins, 'Synge and Irish Modernism,' 132–46. See also Seán Hewitt's argument that Synge was 'a Romantic in temperament but a modernist in practice,' in *J. M. Synge: Nature, Politics, Modernism*, 19.

⁶⁷ Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Paladin, 1988 [1967]), 7, 17.

⁶⁸ Synge, *Plays*, 106.

⁶⁹ Stefan Solomon, "'The Outward Accidents of Illusion': O'Brien and the Theatrical," in *Flann O'Brien and Modernism*, eds. Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald, and Sascha Morrell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 45.

relevance of *The Playboy*, also points out the echo of Synge's heroine Pegeen Mike in John Divney's love interest Pegeen Meers.⁷⁰ Samuel Whybrow states that the murder 'derives from *The Playboy of the Western World*,' and suggests a longer intertextual lineage by adding that the play 'borrows its own murder scene from *King Oedipus*.'⁷¹ Dieter Fuchs has developed this view at length, positing a number of resemblances between Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, Synge's *Playboy*, and *The Third Policeman*. These include not only the act of parricide, but such details as the protagonist's lameness, the echo of 'Old Mahon' in 'Old Mathers,' and the fact that both Christy and O'Nolan's narrator take refuge in ditches during cross-country journeys.⁷²

As Fuchs's reading suggests, what is at stake here is not only a single textual connection but a larger theme of recurrence. In *The Playboy*, Christy's father, Old Mahon, will catch up with his son, alive and only bruised. This image of return is shared by both stories, for Mathers also turns up again, mysteriously revived, after the narrator of *The Third Policeman* enters the novel's second ontological zone. Mathers has bandaged 'the gaping wounds which covered his body,' and Old Mahon's head, on his first entrance in *The Playboy*, is 'in a mass of bandages and plaster.'⁷³ Indeed, both characters make a second return. Old Mahon, on finding Christy in *The Playboy*'s third act, is struck and seemingly killed again, before re-entering the fray, alive, a second time.⁷⁴ Old Mathers makes another kind of return, as Policeman Fox, encountered in *The Third Policeman*'s eleventh chapter, has both the voice and the face of Mathers: the face 'now red and gross as if gallons of hot thick blood had been pumped into it.'⁷⁵ The narrator parts from a humble Policeman Fox on good terms, and Christy leaves his play in the ascendancy over his father, 'like a gallant captain with his heathen slave.'⁷⁶

In replaying elements of Synge's story, O'Nolan's work gains intertextual resonance, and sounds an uncanny note in the modern tradition of rural Ireland. Repetition is central here. Mahon and Mathers are both seemingly reanimated, once if not twice. Bewildering return marks both stories, and *The Third Policeman* – a novel to which repetitive circularity is fundamental – also repeats Synge's scenario, which Fuchs and

⁷⁰ Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist*, 2nd edn (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), 79, 187.

⁷¹ Samuel Whybrow, 'Flann O'Brien's Science Fiction: An "illusion of progression" in *The Third Policeman*,' in Jennika Baines (ed), *'Is it about a bicycle?' Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 138.

⁷² Dieter Fuchs, 'The Return of the Father and the Dispossessed Son: Shakespearean Rewritings of the Oedipus Myth via Synge in *The Third Policeman*,' in *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*, eds. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), 66–79.

⁷³ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 26; Synge, *Plays*, 125.

⁷⁴ Synge, *Plays*, 143.

⁷⁵ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 189.

⁷⁶ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 198; Synge, *Plays*, 146.

Whybrow claim is itself a repetition of an ancient narrative. O’Nolan’s repetition of the motif stands as an unusual instance in his work of a reference to the literature of the Revival which respectfully builds on the original, rather than being blatant parody. Yet the long invisibility of *The Third Policeman* prevented this from becoming known in his lifetime. Had the novel been published in the early 1940s, it would have been more difficult for O’Nolan to sustain the rhetoric of distance from Synge that we have repeatedly observed in this inquiry. The fact that his second novel pivots on an incident strongly reminiscent of Synge’s most famous work could have prompted, at an earlier stage, a recognition of the resemblance perceived by Montgomery, and the more nuanced understanding of his relation to the literature of the Revival which Crowley’s work has recently encouraged.

2000AD: The Unknown Synge

While O’Nolan’s long unpublished second novel performs an implicit negotiation with Synge’s legacy, he would have perceived a more direct literary kinship had he been able to see writings by Synge that, like *The Third Policeman*, were only published after his death. In 1968 Oxford University Press’s *Collected Works* of Synge included a set of ‘Unpublished Material,’ containing unfinished plays and unrealised sketches. A few show Synge in a new light. ‘National Drama: A Farce’ (1905) is the five-page fragment of what Yeats called ‘the Satire of your enemies.’⁷⁷ It is remarkable among Synge’s drama in being set in Dublin, where middle-class and educated nationalists are debating cultural policy in ‘a national club room.’⁷⁸ The men struggle to define Irish drama (‘a drama in short which contains the manifold and fine qualities of the Irish race’⁷⁹) against other European traditions, in what amounts to a parody of contemporary discussions among cultural nationalists, at once proud and anxious about the identity they seek to promote. In its bureaucratic, committee-room setting, the sketch may be likened to the first act of *Faustus Kelly* almost forty years later.

Still more telling is a ‘Scenario’ that Synge had sketched shortly before, in late 1904 or early 1905, which editor Ann Saddlemyer gives the title *Deaf Mutes for Ireland*.

The Gaels have conquered. A Pan Celtic congress is being held in Dublin. A large prize is offered for any Irishman who can be proved to know no English. A committee is sitting to try them. They bring in each man in turn, throw a light on him and say ‘God

⁷⁷ J. M. Synge, ‘National Drama: A Farce,’ in *Collected Works, Volume III: Plays. Book I*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 220.

⁷⁸ Synge, ‘National Drama,’ 221.

⁷⁹ Synge, ‘National Drama,’ 222.

save Ireland' and 'To Hell with the Pope.' Men are detected again and again. One is found at last who baffles all tests. In delight the congress is called in in glorious robes; the victor is put up to make a speech in Irish, he begins talking on his fingers – he is deaf mute and advocates a deaf mute society as the only safeguard against encroaching Anglo-Saxon vulgarity!⁸⁰

The scenario somewhat anticipates the *feis* that is held in *An Béal Bocht*, in which the Gaeligeoirs insist on their impeccably Gaelic credentials.⁸¹ The level of critical satire in Myles's scenario is hardly higher than what Synge had privately imagined almost forty years earlier. Synge follows his scenario with a further development:

Gaelic having proved useless to withstand English vulgarity Ireland does not know whether to choose to be deaf mute or blind.

An American Nerve Doctor is investigating an epidemic of deaf-muteness in Ireland 2000 A.D. He reads out a tract which he has found:

About the year 1920 it was discovered that the efforts of the Gaelic League to withstand the inroads of Anglo-Saxon vulgarity, American commercialism, French morals and German free-thought <had been unsuccessful, therefore> the executive of the Gaelic League and the United Irish League decided that drastic measures must be taken without delay if the sacred entity of the Irish and Celtic soul was to be saved from corruption. At a crowded meeting it was resolved that as Ireland could not speak Irish rather <than> us<ing> the filthy accents <of> England she would be speechless. Young and intelligent organisers were at once secured, and before long they had touched the saintly and patriotic hearts of the sweet-minded Irish mother<s>. From their cradles the future hopes of the Gaels – and indeed of Europe and the civilized world – heard no more dirty English stories, no more profane swearing, and their innocent <hearts were> delighted only by the inarticulation of those divine melodies which are the wonder and envy of all nations. A sympathetic conservative secretary was easily induced to force deaf-muteness on the Board of National Schools and in a few years the harsh voice of the National Schoolmaster was heard no more. In a little while the degrading tourist traffic ceased entering. A gang of cattle-maimers from Athenry broke into Trinity College on <St> Patrick's Day and cut out the tongues of all the professors, fellows and scholars, the students had become so engrossed

⁸⁰ J. M. Synge, '<Deaf Mutes for Ireland>,' in *Collected Works, Volume III*, ed. Saddlemyer, 218.

⁸¹ Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth (An Béal Bocht)*, trans. Patrick C. Power (London: Flamingo, 1993), 54.

with football that they were not regarded as human enough to require this mark of Nationality.⁸²

Synge's sketch deserves this full quotation because it shows us an aspect of his work that is unsuspected, and that bears comparison with O'Nolan in three ways. First its subject: the obsessive focus on the promotion of Irish, and corresponding demotion of English, not least on the part of the Gaelic League. Second its method, a *reductio ad absurdum*: not only is Irish promoted, but English must be eradicated, and it turns out that the safest method to stop people speaking English is to prevent any chance of people speaking at all. Of course, though Synge does not make the point, this would also prevent them speaking Irish, so here is a case of cutting off the nose, or cutting out the tongue, to spite the face. Third is the extravagant projection into the future. In 1905, Synge sets his scenario in 2000AD, with a retrospect to 1920 which was still a future that Synge would not live to see. This resembles the early O'Nolan's future scenarios, notably one written in Irish in 1932 and translated by Jack Fennell as 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!'⁸³ Like O'Nolan after him, Synge uses the scale of future projection as a space in which to generate absurdity that is extrapolated semi-logically from the present. In both cases national identity and language are at stake. Indeed, the two texts are even comparable in being rescued from obscurity and added to the authorial corpus only decades after their respective authors' deaths. In sum, whatever O'Nolan's views on the well-known and canonised Synge, there was an unknown Synge that he might have found uncannily close to his own imagination.

Conclusion

For both J. M. Synge and Brian O'Nolan, writing persistently flared into political significance and controversy. For O'Nolan to address Synge is in the first place a matter of literature and drama, but it quickly also becomes a discussion of social matters: Irish identity, authenticity, the legacy of colonialism.

O'Nolan's attacks on Synge raise important issues, but they are not always scrupulous with facts. Kiberd's post-colonialist account of Synge would suggest that O'Nolan misunderstood Synge's version of stage-Irishness. Kiberd's feminist reading of Synge has been strongly echoed by Susan Cannon Harris, who shows how Synge rejected the nationalist and Catholic emphases on women's obligation to reproduce and

⁸² Synge, '<Deaf Mutes for Ireland>', 218–9. <> brackets in the text are Saddlemyer's editorial insertions.

⁸³ Flann O'Brien, 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!', in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2013), 23–8.

emphasised instead their agency in sexual pleasure.⁸⁴ It is unsurprising that O'Nolan was incapable of seeing this liberating play with gender, which is hardly matched in his own writing.

In attacking Synge, O'Nolan was in part attacking something close to himself: a comic playwright whose work centred on the creative reworking of Irish speech. That Synge had not merely recorded but transfigured Irish speech, and in doing so had created new models for speech which could then influence others, was in fact uncannily close to the achievement of O'Nolan himself. We have also observed, in reviewing some of Synge's least known unpublished works, that the proximity between their visions and tones was far greater than O'Nolan himself, or most readers, suspected. While an enthusiastic learner of Irish, Synge was also capable of slashing, satirical attacks on linguistic fundamentalists that took fantastical, extrapolative form, much like O'Nolan's own. O'Nolan was unaware of this: the Synge that he saw appeared to have a different tone, more suffused with bonhomie than with satirical cunning.

As this article has argued, O'Nolan's vexed relation to Synge is in part a relation to the Revival more generally, revealed in his tendency to conflate the supposed attitudes of Synge, Gregory, and Yeats towards the Western peasantry. We have repeatedly seen that Synge for O'Nolan stands less as a precise target than as a representative of a milieu and a generation. Synge's early death meant that even more than Yeats and Joyce he was not, for O'Nolan, a current rival with whom to skirmish, but rather a legacy. Synge, by the 1940s, was not so much a man as a pervasive influence on Irish life.

O'Nolan himself achieved such status via *The Irish Times*. What he could not achieve was the conquest of the theatrical domain accomplished by Synge's craft. From the Palace Bar or D'Olier Street – not to mention the Custom House – it was not far to Abbey Street. But despite his hopes for *Faustus Kelly*, the Abbey Theatre largely remained, for O'Nolan, a target of detached satire: not an enduring home for his talent as it had become for Synge. In this context it became all the more convenient to proclaim disdain for the Abbey, and for the generation that had done much to create the literary culture of modern Dublin.

⁸⁴ For Kiberd's reading of gender in Synge see *Inventing Ireland*, chapter 10; and see Susan Cannon Harris, 'Synge and Gender' in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, ed. Mathews, 104–16.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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