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classicists and excellent poets';¹ but as we have seen from the annotations, Pope found them open to attack both as classicists who had not taken the trouble to be accurate, and as poets who were unable to translate poetry by poetry. In spite of his own desire to be irreproachable on the grounds of scholarship, it was the creation of an English poem that preoccupied Pope most, and it is as an English epic that Tickell's translation seemed to him most open to objection, for its failure to maintain a consistent tone, for its lack of delicacy in excluding the mock-epic from the epic, and for its use of a wide and prosaic vocabulary. He assesses what is due to the epic as *genre*, and insists on the style appropriate to it, with as severely discriminating a taste in these annotations as he does in his translation.

FELICITY ROSSLYN

J. M. SYNGE: 'A FAKER OF PEASANT SPEECH'?

It was St. John Ervine who made the notorious allegation that John Millington Synge was 'a faker of peasant speech'.² Synge's dialect was, he claimed, 'contrived literary stuff, entirely unrepresentative of peasant speech'.³ The dramatist must have anticipated such criticism, for he wrote in his Preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* on 21 January 1907: 'I have used one or two words only, that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland.'⁴ There is a direct contradiction between these two statements, yet there is a sense in which both men were telling the truth. No countryman ever talked consistently in the cadenced prose employed by Synge's peasants. The playwright may have used few words that he had not actually heard, but this does not mean that he wrote down *all* that he heard in a truly representative way. Nor does it mean that the speech of an average Synge character is that of an average Irish countryman. W. B. Yeats brilliantly captured the difference, as well as the basic similarity, when he wrote: 'Perhaps no Irish countryman had ever that exact rhythm in his voice, but certainly if Mr. Synge had been born a countryman, he would have spoken like that.'⁵

Synge relied very greatly on the striking words and phrases which he collected in notebooks during his sojourns in the west of Ireland. This was only natural in a writer on the look-out for a colourful sentence. He had an interest, characteristic of a mind formed in the 1890s, in the creation

¹ Sherburn, *The Early Career of Alexander Pope*, p. 132.

² St. John Ervine, *Some Impressions of My Elders* (London, 1922), p. 201.

³ St. John Ervine, *How to Write a Play* (London, 1928), p. 20.

⁴ J. M. Synge, *Collected Works: Plays 2*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Oxford, 1968), p. 53.

⁵ W. B. Yeats, 'Preface to *The Well of the Saints*', *Essays and Introductions* (London 1961), p. 300.

of 'an art more beautiful than nature,'¹ as he phrased it in a private notebook kept late in that decade. His language is a heightened version of natural peasant speech. This heightening is achieved by emphasizing those aspects of peasant dialect which have their source in Gaelic speech and syntax. Because Irish country people had, in the main, learned English from each other—rather than from English people—the influence of the Irish language on their acquired idiom was immense. It has recently been noted that 'even in those areas where Irish has long ceased to be spoken its influence on pronunciation, on vocabulary, and above all, on syntax, is paramount'.² In the remoter parts of the county of Wicklow, where the young Synge first heard the Hiberno-English dialect, the Irish language had been spoken within living memory just forty years earlier.³ The native Irish *substratum* in the English of the folk was what really excited and inspired the dramatist.

The language of Synge's plays is often a direct translation from the Irish of the Aran Islands, rather than a representation of the English spoken by the Wicklow peasantry. After all, the young artist had heard the dialect of the Wicklow folk from earliest boyhood, but this had no immediate effect on his writing in the 1890s. It was only when he went to learn Irish on the islands in 1898 that he developed the idiom of his major plays; and that idiom often owes more to the Irish of Aran than to the English spoken by the folk of Wicklow. A simple example will serve to make this clear.

The crucial lines of *Riders to the Sea* are spoken by Old Maurya at the close of the play:

Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. . . . What more can we want than that? . . . No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.⁴

This stoic utterance has been repeatedly traced to Sophocles by many critics.⁵ In fact, the precise words of this sentence were used in a letter written in Irish by Martin McDonough, a young boy who was Synge's particular friend on Inishmaan. The letter to the dramatist was written on 1 February 1902 and the play was written later in that year. Here are Martin's words:

¹ Synge Manuscripts, T.C.D., MS. 4382, f. 69^v.

² Alan Bliss, 'The Language of Synge', *J. M. Synge Centenary Papers 1971*, ed. Maurice Harmon (Dublin, 1972), p. 36.

³ David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, *J. M. Synge: 1871-1909* (New York, 1959), p. 7.

⁴ J. M. Synge, *Collected Works: Plays 1*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Oxford, 1968), p. 27.

⁵ For example, Donna Gerstenberger wrote of the 'echo of the conclusion of Sophocles' *Oedipus* in Maurya's final words . . .', *John Millington Synge* (New York, 1964), p. 46.

. . . do thit amach go bhfuair bean mo dhearbhráthair Seaghan bás, agus bhí sí curtha an domhnaigh déinach do mhí na nodlag agus féuc gurab brónach an sgéul é le rádh, acht má sadh féin caithfidh muid a bheith sásta mar nac féidir le aon nduine a bheith beo go deo.

(. . . it fell out that the wife of my brother Sean died, and she was buried the last Sunday of the month of December and look! that it is a sad story to tell, but if it is itself, we must be satisfied because nobody can be living forever . . .)¹

These closing words have an epigrammatic thrust—so much so that Synge might seem to have taken his own final sentence from some related proverb in the west of Ireland. No such proverb exists, however, and the source can only be Martin's letter. Far from composing an idiom unrepresentative of peasant speech, Synge has here translated into English the simple idiom of an island boy for the climactic scene of his most tense play. In lines such as these, he allowed the islanders to speak directly for themselves. This gives an unexpected point to George Moore's flippant observation that Synge was responsible for the discovery that if anyone translated Irish word-for-word into English, then the inevitable result was poetry.² Moore, who knew no Irish, could not have known just how closely his jibe described Synge's actual mode of composition.

A certain amount of confusion has surrounded that letter of Martin McDonough. A version was given in a poor English translation in the official biography of Synge by David H. Greene and Edward Stephens: 'But at the same time we have to be satisfied because a person cannot live always.'³ 'At the same time' is incorrect as a translation of 'má sadh féin'; and 'always' is less satisfactory a rendition of 'go deo' than Synge's 'for ever'. However, the flaws of this version in broken English are of no long-term concern. What is important—and disturbing—is the implication that these are the actual words written by Martin in the original letter. How did this mistake come to happen? The most plausible explanation is that Edward Stephens, who had access to the letter in the papers inherited from his uncle John, translated it into English as literally as he could. His Irish was clearly defective—like his uncle John, this Ascendancy solicitor had no schooling in the subject—but his version caught the gist of the sentences. After Stephens died, his wife gave all the Synge papers over to David Greene, who wrote the final version of the biography from her husband's notes and papers. Greene probably saw Stephens's translation and mistook it—understandably enough, because of its broken English—for Martin's actual letter. He reproduced it as such in the biography.

¹ Synge Manuscripts, T.C.D., Letter 109. Translation into English by the present author.

² George Moore, *Vale* (London, 1914), p. 250.

³ Greene and Stephens, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

These unfortunate mistakes have led scholars to construct ostensibly intelligent arguments on a false basis. For example, Nicholas Grene, in an otherwise exemplary study, has praised Synge's 'poetic re-ordering of the words' in Maurya's speech, in which the last sentence ends on the word 'satisfied'.¹ According to Grene, this closing statement of resignation, reinforced by the use of 'satisfied' as the last word of the play, cuts dramatically against the dominant mood of despair induced by the action. This plausible argument is based on the misconception that Martin's own use of 'satisfied' occurred only in the middle of the sentence quoted above. In fact, Martin repeated the sentiment at the close of the paragraph about his brother's bereavement, concluding on this occasion with the word 'satisfied':

. . . Atá Seaghan go rímhaith acht deirim leat go bhfuil sé bronach go leor act mar deir mé chana caithfidh sé a bheith sásta.

(Sean is exceptionally well, but let me tell you that he is unhappy enough. However, as I said before, he must be satisfied.)²

It was more likely this moving repetition of the word by Martin at the end of the paragraph, rather than any desire for a poetic re-ordering of the earlier sentence, which led the dramatist to close his play on the past participle 'satisfied'. This is not to deny Grene's point about its dramatic effect in undercutting the mood of despair which dominates the play. Martin had already used the word in just that manner on two occasions in the letter, as he strove to suppress his despair after his brother's tragedy.

There are other clear examples of how the letters from Aran helped Synge to forge his dialect. John McDonough, for instance, could not write his native language, so he dictated a letter in English to Martin, who then turned it into Irish. This John was the elder brother 'Seaghan' of whose tragedy Martin had written in the previous letter. If Synge could use a sentence of Martin's to conclude *Riders to the Sea*, then he had no qualms about using a sentence from John's letter at a lyrical moment in *The Shadow of the Glen*. Here are John's words to Synge:

. . . is ógnach a bhí muid an t-am a d'imigh tú, ar fead tamal maith, acht anois atá muid ag faghail as, anuair atá muid cleachta anois a bheith ógnach. . . .

(it is lonely we were the time you left, for a long while, but now we are getting out of it, when we are used to being lonely).³

¹ Nicholas Grene, 'A Critical Study of the Comedies of J. M. Synge' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1972), p. 119.

² Synge Manuscripts, T.C.D., Letter 109.

³ Ibid., Letter 120.

This becomes the voice of Nora Burke lamenting the loss of Patch Darcy:

... and it's very lonesome I was after him a long while ... and then I got happy again—if it's ever happy we are, stranger—for I got used to being lonesome.¹

Through the use of such translations, Synge forged the bilingual style which exploded upon the theatrical world in 1903.

In shaping this dialect, the playwright fulfilled an aim which had been outlined by Yeats as early as 1892 in *United Ireland*. Yeats had politely questioned the realism of Douglas Hyde's ideal of a national literature in Irish and had gone on to ask: 'Can we not keep the continuity of the nation's life, not by trying to do what Dr Hyde has practically pronounced impossible (i.e. saving Gaelic), but by translating and retelling in English, which shall have an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm and style, all that is best in the ancient literature?'² Through his use of dialect, no less than his use of themes from native Irish literature, Synge succeeded in translating the elements of Gaelic life into a language which many regarded as being at odds with the native culture. He is one of those rare writers who forged a distinctive personal style on the translation from one language to another.

DECLAN KIBERD

¹ Synge, *Collected Works: Plays* 1, p. 39.

² W. B. Yeats, Letter to the Editor of *United Ireland*, 17 December 1892; reproduced in *Uncollected Prose* 1, ed. John P. Frayne (London, 1970), p. 255.