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VERBAL GEOGRAPHIES: SYNGE’S PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

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J. M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, from title to final lines, is filled with some of the most extraordinary, extravagant, and evocative language ever to appear in a play. Through the telling of his story, Christy Mahon is transformed from “a dirty stuttering lout” to the “jewel of the world.” By the time his story is discovered to be a lie, it has become the truth. As the play explores the potentiality of words, it reveals their power to restructure the landscape. Private and communal interpretations of space continually shift and the boundaries of regions become dynamic. The plasticity of the private meanings given to space exposes fluctuating worlds which are alternatingly intimate and alien, meaningful and insignificant, ordered and chaotic, full of possibility and painfully restrictive.

The *Playboy* reflects characteristics of all the regions of Ireland: east, west, north, and south. Each region is given a meaning, which alters according to the emotional state of the characters. Beyond Ireland’s compass points are the kingdoms of wonder: the vast “western world” and the exotic “eastern world.” Through the play’s dialogue, the areas change and contract into one another. And the inspiration for these shape-changing words is love: a love implicit within the possible meanings of the landscape.

Although the play mirrors a variety of areas, Synge apparently chose to set it in Mayo for specific reasons. He told his friend Stephen MacKenna that the outlandish plot was not so “foreign” as its detractors had claimed: “The story—in its *essence*—is probable given the psychic state of the locality.”¹ Not only in its essence, but in nearly every phrase of its dialogue, the play is thoroughly Gaelic, as Declan Kiberd documents in *Synge and the Irish Language*, an examination of Synge’s profound debt to traditional literature in Irish.² Beyong being wholly Irish, the play is most specifically reflective of County Mayo, where, in Synge’s assessment, the “psychic state” exhibited an even greater tendency toward extreme and oppugnant emotions and contrariety of speech than Synge had seen elsewhere in Ireland. After a trip through the region with Jack Yeats in 1905, he wrote to MacKenna that “as we had a purse to pull on we pushed into out-of-the-way corners in Mayo and Galway that were more strange and marvelous than anything I’ve dreamed of.”³ Edward Stephens and David Greene comment on the
chaotic quality of Mayo life and reveal that Synge’s most brutal poem, “Danny,” is based on a Mayo tale. When Synge came to write The Playboy, they note, he removed the story from Aran, where he had first heard it, to what he must have felt to be a more appropriate setting. Stephens and Greene conclude that “the potentiality for violence which Synge must have sensed in the people he met and in their stories found a response in his own love of violence.” The expression “love of violence” is somewhat misleading; Synge was neither a brute nor a devotee of common criminal brutality. Yet repeatedly he finds himself simultaneously appalled and attracted by the violence of the rural poor, and his own misgivings are echoed by those of his contemporaries and who accused him of viewing peasant life as a freak show.

His fascination with violent behaviors is clearly related to his creation of harsh, oppositional dialogue. In her study of Synge’s adaptation of medieval literary forms, Toni O’Brien Johnson suggests that verbal incongruity is disturbing because it reflects moral incongruity, as is true in The Playboy and much traditional Gaelic literature. As Declan Kiberd demonstrates, the traditional literature is resplendent with intricate oppositions and provides the base for Synge’s linguistic performance in The Playboy. Ardently drawn to this language of incongruity, Synge—unlike his contemporaries—felt no compulsion to alter or apologize for it. The romantic frenzy of Christy Mahon depends upon Christy’s ability to change the outlines of the mundane world through straining the fabric of language into nearly unrecognizable shapes.

Only in this crazy world of extreme emotions could a play be set which so depends upon massive flights of imagination, for common morality is inverted and maps of value must be recast again and again. The story itself contains surprises and contradictions. One night, a frightened, ragged man appears at a lonely pub supervised by the publican’s spirited daughter, Pegeen Mike, who is engaged to the snivelling Shawn Keogh. The stranger, Christ Mahon, tremulously reveals that he had murdered his own father by a blow to the head. Throughout the night and the following day, the local people regard his deed with increasing awe and fascination, and proclaim him “a fine lad with the great savagery to destroy your da.” In spite of his admission that he is slow, shy, and clumsy, he gradually rises to his reputation as a daring, fearless character. Under the power of the townspeople’s adulation and the inspiration of his new love for Pegeen, he wins at sports, drives off Shawn Keogh, and makes a conquest of Pegeen. Unfortunately, Christy’s father appears—quite alive. Despite the maneuverings of his ally, the Widow Quinn, Christ is found out and all turn against him. In anguish and rage, he strikes out and kills his
father once again; but now Pegeen and the villagers bind him and prepare to deliver him to the police. When his father reappears—once again, quite alive—Christy takes hold of the situation with new boldness. Humbling his surprised father with sharp words, he leaves the town claiming, "I'm master of all fights now." Pegeen is left to lament the loss of the one man who has proven to be her match.

If conventional values are turned topsy-turvy in this play, the boundaries between various worlds are equally malleable. Mental maps are not rationally arguable, but made valid or invalid through their psychic function. In the play, three sets of worlds are thus changed according the moods of their human inhabitants. Mayo—as seen by residents—intersects with the grand world outside, made accessible through Christy's grand presence. Christy's own sense of Mayo—as a refuge and intimate place—changes his previous perception of the big world outside as a terrifying and lonely place. Finally, Christy's heroic world—the one the villagers have made for him and dubbed him ruler of as "playboy of the western world"—supplants the formerly frightening world outside. Mayo is left a poor place full of fools and villains, as Christy returns to a changed universe.

The Mayo residents regard their home with a complex blend of satisfaction and cynicism. Pegeen describes it as

this place where you'll meet none but Red Linahan, has a squint in his eye, and Patcheen is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulranies were driven from California and they lost in their wits....Where now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked in the eye from a peeler, or Marcus Quinn, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrent to tell stories of holy Ireland till he's have the old women shedding down tears about their feet. Where will you find the like of them, I'm saying? (CW, 4: 59)

According to Declan Kiberd, such details mock the list of attractive traits and noble feats which are characteristic of the medieval Cuchulain saga, and, he adds, this mockery is itself typical of later Gaelic literature's tendency to combine the heroic with the banal. He notes that in such mockery, "the irony goes both ways, mocking also the portentous bearing and blind violence of the ancient protagonists."8 Kiberd's commentary may help to explain the curious pride which Pegeen's list reflects. While pointing to the deficiencies of the men around her, she makes veiled criticism of the rigid propriety of the outside world. Even Shawn Keogh is extravagant—and thus at least mildly interesting—in the fanaticism of his inhibitions.
Yet none of the local men can fulfill any dream of heroism or virtue. When Shawn Keogh runs out of the pub in fear that Father Riley might later appear and find him alone with Pegeen, her father sarcastically snorts, “Oh, there’s sainted glory in this day in the lonesome west.” Shawn’s priggishness is as close to sainthood or glory as the residents will come. Even the Widow Quinn’s inadvertent murder of her husband was “a sneaky sort of murder did win small glory with the boys itself.” Christy’s murderous deed is thus certain to win admiration, for as one local man remarks, “Bravery’s a treasure in a lonesome place, and a lad would kill his father, I’m thinking, would face a foxy divil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell” (CW 4: 75).

In contrast, all the inhabitants imagine a glorious world outside of Mayo and describe it in the most exalted terms. The eastern world is indeed a rich place, for Pegeen tells Christy she was “thinking of you should have been living the like of a king of Norway or the Eastern World.” In an early draft of the play, she frets that “I’m thinking a lad the like of you would win the queen princesses of the Eastern world.” In one ironic scene, a local girl finds that eastern glamour in Christy’s worn boots. Responding to another girl’s breathless question, “Is that blood there, Sara Tansey?” she replies,

That’s bog water, I’m thinking, but it’s his own they are surely, for I never seen the like of them for whity mud, and red mud, and turf on them, and the fine sands of the sea.
That man’s been walking, I’m telling you. (CW 4: 97)

Something as dramatic as blood is revealed to be bog water, but within Sara’s imagination, even bog water is reflective of the glamorous outside world. Like the mythic heroes of the past, Christy brings the exoticism of far-away lands. While Pegeen has earlier said she was “tempted often to go sailing the seas till I’d marry a Jew-man with ten kegs of gold,” Christy now brings with him from Kerry the strangeness of the “Jew-man,” the remoteness of the sea, and the imaginative riches of “the kegs of gold.” Mayo has become superior to the seas and the eastern world because it contains their wealth in addition to its own intimacy. Christy even seems to hold the heavens, and alarms Father Riley who calls him “that young gaffer who’d capsizze the stars.” When he is later dubbed “the champion playboy of the western world,” the west takes on the romance of the east while retaining its domestic appeal.

The region from which Christy really comes, Munster, is as remote to the townspeople as Asia or Norway. They live as if at the center of some ancient map, in which the home country is magnified beyond its actual size, and in the nearby harbors, as well as the distant
corners, swim sea monsters and impossible creatures. So Pegeen can
tell Shawn to find himself "a radiant lady with droves of bullocks on
the plains of Meath, and herself bedizened in the diamond jewelleries of
Pharoh’s ma" (CW 4: 155). Meath, Egypt, and timorous Shawn
Keogh from Mayo are conjoined through sheer imaginative language,
bred by the enclosure and isolation which enables Pegeen to imagine all
remote places as one.

The play is filled with references to other parts of Ireland: most as
fanciful and uninformed as Pegeen’s, while also strangely accurate.
There are evidences of what has been called “the Irish language’s special
affection for compass directions often connected with purely associative
geography.” Leslie Foster has diagrammed these references and
discovers that the play is full of “tribal rivalries” and associations of
wonder, wandering, and insanity with the west; remoteness and riches
with the east; wealth and fertility with the south; imprisonment and
Protestantism with the north. Foster remarks that

Mayo is eager to think Munster as a breeder of liars; Kerry
is pleased to mock the fools of Mayo; both ridicule the
timidity and sterility of Dublin and Meath; and all (except
the village girls) scorn the prison-making preachers of the
north. Travellers are suspect and the highways are lonely
and dangerous places.

Here is the insularity Synge finds at the heart of the rural world. While
not as stark as the landscapes of The Aran Islands, this place is
similarly empty and removed from converse with outsiders. At the
same time, it is less homelike and intimate than the glens of Synge’s
Wicklow; it appears more vulnerable to dangerous intrusions. In spite
of the threats implicit in the highways connecting to unknown places,
those highways and seas remain alluring. And so, the outsider is both
threat and object of fascination, for a traveller from Munster is as exotic
as a king of Norway or as erotic as the dream of the Widow Quinn
when she is “looking out on the schooners, hookers, trawlers, is sailing
the sea, and I thinking on the gallant hairy fellows are drifting beyond,
and myself long years living alone” (CW 4: 127).

If the world outside seems so marvelous to those who do not
wander from a particular place, it is not so to the wanderer himself. For
Christy, the wandering placelessness of his recent life has been as
debilitating as the lack of mobility he earlier felt on his father’s farm.
On neither his father’s farm nor the road could he be “at home.” He
feels distinctly outside life and the small Mayo town seems to him a
perfect home: unlike the farm of his father, a home made of love.
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The outside world is the "shadow" of this play, and like that which hangs over Synge's first play, The Shadow of the Glen, it is loveless and lonely. Geographer Edward Relph suggests that the differences between being "inside" or "outside" are like "the difference between safety and danger, cosmos and chaos, enclosure and exposure." Nomadic life places Christy in a world outside human feelings and concern. Without love, he is in psychological danger, his internal maps of meaning are in chaos, and he is exposed to the attacks of the hostile environment.

Christy has felt outside of human contact since beginning his travels. He tells Pegeen,

I've seen none the like of you the eleven days I am walking the world, looking over a low ditch or a high ditch on my north or south, into stony scattered fields, or scribes of bog, where you'd see young limber girls, and fine prancing women making laughter with the men. (CW 4: 81)

Pegeen does not understand his genuine despair, and her admiration leads her to interpret his remark as the complaint of a daring, yet sensitive, world adventurer. Since he is not yet cognizant of her love, her perspective has yet to transform the way he sees travelled landscape. Instead, Christy feels like a voyeur who looks over a barrier to scenes of intimacy enclosed within the space whose exterior borders he must walk. He feels too that he has vaulted that barrier since meeting Pegeen, and should he be forced to leave again, he would be "wandering like Esau or Cain or Abel on the sides of the Neiffin or the Erris Plain." He tries to explain,

...it's a lonesome thing to be passing small towns with the lights shining sideways when the night is down, or going in strange places with a dog nosing before you and a dog nosing behind, or drawn to cities where you'd hear a voice kissing and talking deep love in every shadow of the ditch, and you passing on with an empty hungry stomach failing from you heart. (CW 4: 109)

Christy can hear the world animated around him, the rich landscape full of motion, noise, and love, but has no part in it. It is a world of odd light and deep shadows which magnify his sense of solitary pain. Again, Pegeen cannot entirely understand what he is saying. But in a speech Synge chose to omit from his final version of The Playboy, Pegeen answers, "it is the whole world is lacking decent company and not poor men only would be lonesome and they great thousands in
north Mayo now...I've heard the poets to say the heart itself is lonesome in the lover's kiss" (CW 4: 108). Pegeen knows that what passes for genuine love rarely has the power to transform the environment.

We can begin to see just how love does transform the landscape by comparing a set of exchanges, one from Act I and another from Act III, after Christy and Pegeen have expressed their mutual love. The phrases are drawn from Gaelic tradition, but fully integrated into the process of verbal shape-changing which characterizes the play. When Pegeen tells him that she imagines his life to have been like some king of the eastern world's, he laughs piteously,

...And I after toiling, moiling, digging, dodging, from the dawn till dusk with never a sight of joy or sport saving only when I'd be abroad in the dark night poaching rabbits on hills... (CW 4: 83)

In an early draft of the play, Christy's desolation is even more pronounced:

There's many a night I was out poaching on the hills beyond...and I looking up at the stars and moon the time there'd be a white fog spread on the bog and you wouldn't see a thing but a bit of chimney maybe in this or the bough of an old ash tree beyond in another and I'd hear a rabbit beginning to scream God help it and I hard set to know what kind of walking sinner I was at all. (CW 4: 82)

Here again, Christy's awareness of himself is heightened until it becomes painful. He is cut off from all other life and lost in the midst of an inexplicable sense of his doom and foresakeness.

However, in the exchange of the courtship scene of Act III, we see a very different potential realized in the outside world. Sensory stimuli are as strong as in Christy's speeches of isolation, but affect the participants differently as they imagine themselves amid the wild mountains of Neifin. Christy suggests,

...when the airs is warming in four months or five, it's then yourself and me should be pacing Neifin in the dews of night, the times sweet smells do be rising, and you'd see a little shiny new moon maybe sinking on the hills. (CW 4: 147)
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As Pegeen teasingly reminds him, these are the same kinds of woods in which he once poached animals in his isolation. He responds that she won’t care if his is a poacher’s love or an earl’s when she’ll feel his embrace and “I squeezing kisses on your puckered lips till I’d feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in his golden chair.” Christy, as playboy of the western world, now located in Mayo, rules a domain that even God might envy. The empty, broad spaces and disturbing shadows of Christy’s lonely world are transformed into well-lighted, intimate, and pleasingly small spaces:

Let you wait to hear me talking till we’re astray in Erris when Good Friday’s by, drinking a sup from a well, and making mighty kisses with our wetted mouths, or gaming in a gap of sunshine with yourself stretched back unto your necklace in the flowers of the earth. (CW 4: 149)

When he imagines poaching again, it is in utterly different terms. Instead of remembering having served “six months for going with a dung-fork and stabbing a fish,” he imagines a noble life of spearing salmon with Pegeen. Christy then ascribes this sense of intimacy out-of-doors to the emplacement he feels within the circle of Pegeen’s “poor thatched place.” When she worries that he will return without her to his world, he tells her that nothing is as important as “every jackstraw roofing your head, and every stony pebble is paving the laneway to your door.” Christy has brought fully together the grandeur of the eastern world, the domain of the western world, and the region of Mayo. Finally, he has contracted all these worlds into the small household of Pegeen Mike.

Synge considers the question of how love changes a landscape in several of his late poems. “In Kerry,” for example, directly asks just this question:

We heard the thrushes by the shore and sea,  
And saw the golden stars’ nativity,  
Then round we went the lane by Thomas Flynn,  
Across the church where bones lie out and in;  
And there I asked beneath a lonely cloud  
Of strange delight, with one bird singing loud,  
What change you’d wrought in graveyard, rock, and sea,  
This new wild paradise to wake for me...  
Yet knew no more than knew these merry sins  
Had built this stack of thigh-bones, jaws, and shins.  
(CW 1: 55)
The obscurity of the last lines is clarified by earlier versions of the poem. Version XII asks, “what paradise what merry sins/ Had left this little stack of jaws and shins” (CW 1: 118). Version XIV wonders “if our happiness and merry sins/ Would build like these a stack of jaws and shins” (CW 1: 119). In his final draft, Synge apparently tried to draw together two ideas: the unknown and mysterious history of the dead and the eventual disintegration into which lovers must fall. While the last lines reflect the lover’s presentiment of mortality, the lover’s experience is so strong as to transform even a graveyard into a “new wild paradise,” where thrushes, stars, clouds of delight, and singing birds prevail.

As Synge’s last lines suggest, the threat of decay always hovers at the rim of consciousness. And with intimacy and alienation, there is always the threat of inversion: in The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard warns, “outside and inside form a dialect of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us...Outside and inside are both intimate—they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility.”¹³ When Christy is discredited by his father’s appearance, love—“insidedness”—is withdrawn from the landscape and he is left bewildered and horrified. He, the champion playboy of the western world, becomes just a “Munster liar” in Pegeen’s eyes. When the potentiality of his words is denied, his dominion shrinks. The people now clamor that he is only “the lad thought he’d rule the roost in Mayo.” He is, again, an outsider:

And I must go back into my torment is it, or run off like a vagabond straying through the Unions with the dust of August making mudstains in the gullet of my throat, or the winds of March blowing on me till I’d take an oath I felt them making whistles of my ribs within. (CW 4: 163)

In spite of Pegeen’s rejection, Christy still yearns after one particular home. Although the Widow Quinn attempts to console him with thoughts of sweethearts “in every parish public, from Binghamstown unto the plain of Meath,” he refuses to be consoled, saying, “It’s Pegeen I’m seeking only and what’d I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts maybe, from this place to the Eastern World.” Christy, having been the innocent inspiration for the myth of the glorified Mayo, now cannot escape it.

Since Christy cannot have the intimate home space he desires, he reemerges into an outside world that he proceeds to transform through the bold assumption of authority. After he “kills” his father again and Pegeen declares her disdain for his “dirty deeds” by branding him with a burning sod, Christy loses all inhibition. The stage directions suggest
that he speak with “his voice rising and growing stronger,” “almost
gaily,” and “delighted with himself.” He finally taunts the crowd by
claiming that “I’m thinking Satan hasn’t many have killed their da in
Kerry and in Mayo too.” He is now the champion criminal of all
Ireland. His sphere of rule and concern move out and away from Mayo.
Mayo is reduced to nothing and as his father tells the townspeople, “My
son and myself will be going out own way and we’ll have great times
from this out telling stories of villainy of Mayo and the fools is here”
(CW 4: 173). Only Pegeen is aware of what has happened, not only to
herself, but to her community. It is her last lament which closes the
play: “Oh my grief, I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only playboy of
the western world.”

The potentiality of landscape to change as a person changes is
illimitable in *The Playboy*. Christy Mahon and the residents of Mayo
have transformed their environment through their dream of a heroic
place. In his study, *A Colder Eye*, Hugh Kenner explores what he
claims is a characteristically Irish belief that speech can alter
environments, transform the accepted meanings of English words, and
make anything true just by the saying of it, so that even “a tale itself,
once told, is no longer there either; and as recent a past as yesterday
afternoon is no more than what the speaker of the moment says it was,
and only so long as he’s talking.”14 Because of this verbal agility,
Kenner appears to be saying, the Irish make superb poets but dangerous
politicians.

Kenner’s controversial argument brings to mind *The Playboy’s*
finale; Christy has fully reshaped his world through speech. But
whereas Kenner argues that a government by mob rumor may result
when the verbal act is supreme, the play concludes with the triumph of
private statement over group consensus. Christy continues to define
his environment long after Mayo has ceased to confirm his authority.
In spite of the nationalist pressure brought to bear upon the Abbey
Theatre, the play rejects any positive portrayal of group consciousness.
When Mayo shrinks again at the end of the play and the world
maintains its new glamour for the changed Christy, his outsider’s
knowledge is gained at the town’s expense and Mayo is left to
wither.15

Synge might have argued that community life in Ireland was so
repressive that the private imagination could flourish only in
opposition. Without exception, his major characters are outsiders:
tramps, isolated women, tinkers. On the other hand, the power of rural
communities had been shrinking as the old way of life changed. By the
early twentieth century, rural life in Ireland had so altered that the
commonly held meaning of places ceased to be definitive. Particularly
for a man like Synge—urban, landless, modern—“place” was a
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repository of personal significances rather than traditional territories. While The Playboy does deny the fundamental truth that an individual lives, inexorably, within a group, the play presents a radical alternative to "government by rumor" in its elevation of the private conscience. The play articulates the premise that the barbed-wire boundaries of past meaning can become more fluid, more adventurous, through the shape-changing powers of verbal geographies.

NOTES


2Declan Kiberd, Synge and the Irish Language (Totowa, 1979).


4Stephens and Greene, p. 174.


6See Kiberd, pp. 106-162. He details numerous rhetorical oppositions in early Irish literature: heroic and banal actions, localities and appearances; elevated and vulgar speech; classical and Celtic allusions; literary and folk traditions; religious and sexual connotations.

7Quotations from Synge's works are from the four-volume J. M. Synge: Collected Works (London, 1962-68), hereafter cited in the text as CW.

8Kiberd, p. 109.

9In an essay on the Gaelic meanings of the words "playboy" and "western world," Arthur H. Nethercott reports that the term "western world" usually suggests the everyday world as contrasted with a mythological or fanciful east. See Arthur H. Nethercott, "The Playboy of the Western World," Erie-Ireland 8, No. 2 (1977), pp. 114-20.


15 Brenna Katz Clarke notes that almost every Abbey “peasant play” involves an outsider who initiates the action within a small community and leaves at the play’s end. She concludes, “...the playwright saw the peasant as repeatedly disturbed by outside forces and that, in some cases, it was desirable to shake up peasant life which tends to be fixed and conservative.” See Brenna Katz Clarke, *The Emergence of the Peasant Play at the Abbey Theatre* (Ann Arbor, 1982).