

ALL THE OLYMPIANS

By FRANK O'CONNOR

NOBODY will ever understand much about modern Irish literature who does not grasp the fact that one cannot really deal with any of its three great writers—William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge, and Augusta Lady Gregory—in isolation. Synge and Lady Gregory are as much part of Yeats's life work as are Yeats's plays, and until his death he proudly linked their names with his own. They are converts, not imitators, and what they share with him is a religion as much as an esthetic. The death of Synge came very close to being the end of the others as writers: Yeats's work between 1909 and his marriage is the least important part of his output, and all Lady Gregory's best work was written during Synge's lifetime. In many ways she was temperamentally closer to him than she was to Yeats, and in a peculiar way he seems to have acted as a challenge to her.

It is because the relationship of the three was a conversion rather than a conspiracy that it does not really affect the originality of Synge and Lady Gregory. That it was a true conversion we can see if we consider what they were like about the year 1895. Lady Gregory was a London literary hostess who seemed to model herself on Queen Victoria. In 1886 the English poet Seawen Blunt wrote of her:

It is curious that she who could see so clearly in Egypt, when it was a case between the Circassian pashas and the Arab fellahin, should be so blind now that the case is between English landlords and Irish tenants in Galway. But property blinds all eyes, and it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for an Irish landlord to enter the kingdom of Home Rule. She comes of a family, too, who are bitter Protestants, and has surrounded herself with people of her class from Ireland, so that there is no longer room for me in her house.

Synge was a shy and sickly young man who was quietly starving in a Paris attic, producing badly written little articles that editors fought shy of. A couple of years later the London hostess was hard at work learning Irish, writing

down folk stories in the cottages of the poor peasants she had cut Blunt for trying to assist, and indeed was being restrained only by Yeats himself from turning Catholic as well. Synge, dressed in homespuns, was living a comfortless life on a barren island on the edge of Europe. The conversion was complete, but within, both remained very much what they had always been.

Not that I find Synge very easy to understand either before or after conversion. Yeats's autobiography, Lady Gregory's journals, George Moore's gossip, Professor Greene's *Life*, Dr. Henn's criticism—all leave him completely opaque to me. The only passage I can think of that suggests a real man is in Miss Walker's reminiscences:

At the first opportunity, he would lever his huge frame out of a chair and come up on the stage, a half-rolled cigarette in each hand. Then he would look inquiringly round and thrust the little paper cylinders forward towards whoever was going to smoke them. In later years he became the terror of fire-conscious Abbey stage managers. He used to sit timidly in the wings during plays, rolling cigarettes and handing them to the players as they made their exits.

At least, the shy man in that little sketch is alive, even if one cannot exactly see him as author of *The Playboy of the Western World*.

SO one must fall back on the work, and even here I find myself mystified. In every writer there are certain key words which give you some clue to what he is about. Words like *friend* and *friendship* are valuable when one is reading Yeats, but in Synge all I can find are words that suggest carrion:

Yet these are rotten—I ask their
pardon—
And we've the sun on rock and garden,
These are rotten, so you're the Queen
Of all are living, or have been.

If this is how he usually addressed girls it is hardly surprising that he had to spend so much time rolling cigarettes. When he escaped for a while from this carrion view of life it was into a sort of Wordsworthian pantheism. Clearly he was deeply influenced by Wordsworth, and Wordsworth need hardly have been ashamed of signing some of his poems.



Still south I went and west and south
again,
Through Wicklow from the morning
till the night,
And far from cities and the sites of
men,
Lived with the sunshine and the
moon's delight.

I knew the stars, the flowers and the
birds,
The grey and wintry sides of many
glens,
And did but half remember human
words
In converse with the mountains, moors
and fens.

How Yeats managed to persuade him at all is a mystery. Yeats had not a glimmer of carrion consciousness. I get the feeling that he carefully avoided the whole subject as being exaggerated, dull, and totally irrelevant. Where he may have managed to communicate with Synge is through Wordsworthianism. Not that Yeats had much time for Wordsworth—"the only great poet who was cut down and used for timber"—but when he preached about the Aran Islands, the necessity for writing about peasants and for adopting peasant speech, a student of Wordsworth could easily have caught what seemed to be echoes of the English poet:

Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended and are more durable; and lastly, because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the action of social vanity they convey their feelings and

This article was adapted from Mr. O'Connor's *A Short History of Irish Literature*, to be published by Putnam early next year.

notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.

It seems to me possible that when we read Synge's prefaces, which so often seem to echo Yeats, we may find that they are really—saving the syntax—echoing Wordsworth.

The material of Synge's plays is slight, and for the most part, according to Yeats's formula. What is extraordinary is the impact the plays themselves made by comparison with Yeats's and Lady Gregory's. *The Shadow of the Glen*, for instance, is a folk story about a flighty wife whose husband pretends to be dead so as to expose her. At the end of the play she goes off with a tramp who, as so often in these plays, represents the Wordsworthian compromise. It is a harmless little play that barely holds interest on the stage, but Arthur Griffith screamed his head off about it, as about everything else Synge wrote: "His play is not a work of genius, Irish or otherwise. It is a foul echo from degenerate Greece."

It is hard to understand the ferocity of the Catholic reaction to Synge—so much fiercer than the reaction to Joyce. Though it is doubtful if Yeats himself understood it, instinct seems to have warned him that his theories stood or fell by Synge's work.

It must have been instinct, too, that warned Arthur Griffith what to attack. Essentially, Synge seems to have been, as everyone describes him, gentle and, I should say, with little self-confidence. He was willing to write folk plays, mystery plays, or mythological plays to order, though they always turned out to be much the same play. Yeats describes him somewhere as the most "unpolitical" man who ever lived, but he was anti-political rather than unpolitical.

Once a group of patriotic people persuaded him to write a really patriotic play about the heroes of 1798 and the wickedness of the English soldiery. In his obliging way Synge came back with a most extraordinary scenario. The characters are two girls—one Protestant, the other Catholic—who, in fear of being raped, take shelter in a mountain cave. During the play they discuss the cruel and immoral behavior of both sides, the Catholic girl defending the rebels and the Protestant the military, till they begin to pull one another's hair out. Finally they separate, the Catholic declaring that she would prefer to be raped by an Englishman than listen to further heresy, and the Protestant that she would prefer to be raped by a rebel than listen to Catholic lies.

Much chance there was that a man like that would write a play to reunite everybody!

In the Shadow of the Glen fails because the story on which it is based is farcical while the play itself is serious.

Riders to the Sea succeeds brilliantly because, though it is a Yeatsian miracle, one can watch it without even being aware that a miracle is involved. We can perceive its originality best if we study Lawrence's imitation of it in *Odor of Chrysanthemums*. A fisherman's death and a miner's death represent the whole of life concentrated in a limited society. Both are anti-political, and in neither is there any reference to the price of fish or coal, or any demand for safety regulations. In these two worlds there is no safety except a clean burial. "What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied."

The Tinker's Wedding fails as a play because it has no Synge in it; *The Well of the Saints* because it has too much. The truth is that neither Yeats himself nor any of his followers ever really mastered the problems of extended form, and once they went beyond the one-act play they made the most extraordinary mistakes. In a play dealing with a miracle, the miracle itself automatically establishes itself as the crisis, the point toward which a playwright must build and then work away from; but in *The Well of the Saints* there are two miracles, neither of which is the real crisis.

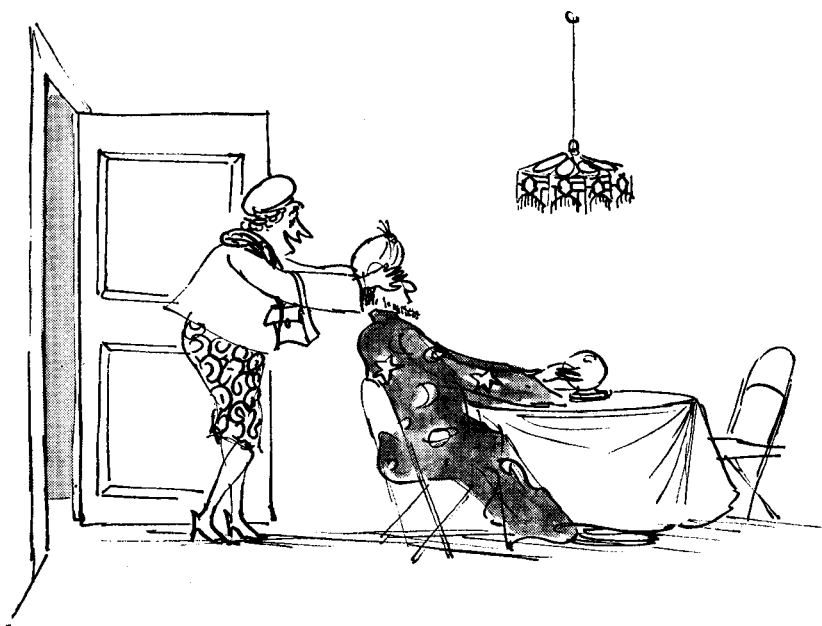
The Playboy of the Western World is Synge's masterpiece because it contains more of the real Synge than anything else he wrote, and naturally, it created a greater storm. Synge himself is the shy and sickly young man who scandalizes the world by a crime he has not committed at all, but he remains a hero even when he is shown up because he has at last learned to live with his image of himself. Unfortunately, he discovered what life was like only as death caught up with him. When *The Playboy* ap-

peared he was world-famous and dying.

His greatest achievement as a writer was his elaboration of a style. It was he who really came to grips with the problems posed by Hyde in *Beside the Fire*—the problems of adapting folk speech to literary ends. Yet Synge's own ear for folk speech cannot have been very good. Though he describes his recording the conversation in the kitchen below his bedroom in Wicklow he never seems to have studied Hyde's introduction to *Beside the Fire*, where Hyde points out the most obvious fact about English spoken in Ireland: the absence of the pluperfect. In Modern Irish, unlike Old Irish, there are no perfect tenses, so they rarely occur in spoken English. We do not normally say, "He had been there an hour," or, "I shall have discussed it with him." If we need to supply the missing tense we use the adverb *after* with the verbal noun: "He was after being there an hour" or "I'll be after discussing it with him."

SYNGE could never get this quite straight. In the lines I quoted earlier, he dropped the relative pronoun, "Of all are living or have been"—which in my experience does not occur at all—and rounded it off with a past perfect; and twice at the climax of *Riders to the Sea* he uses improbable tenses: "It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying." Even in the very opening scene he gives us the English use of *shall* in "Shall I open it now?"

What he did succeed in was giving Anglo-Irish speech a strong cadence structure. The dialogue in Lady Gregory's *Spreading the News* is enchanting,



"Guess who?"

but it is prose, and in the passionate moments of real drama there is no reserve of language upon which to draw. Lady Gregory herself must have been keenly aware of what he had achieved, because in a play that she obviously intended as a rival to *Riders to the Sea—The Gaol Gate*—she used an irregular ballad meter which she then concealed by writing it as prose; but this is a clumsy device because if the actor becomes aware of the meter he can scarcely avoid falling into sing-song, while if he does not, he is just as liable to break up the cadences as though they were nothing but prose. Hyde had given Irish prose writers a medium by which they could keep their distance from English writers; Synge went one better and invented a medium which enabled them to keep the whole modern prose theater at a distance.

Nobody that I know of has analyzed this cadence structure. One obvious cadence fades out on an unimportant word like *only* or *surely*. Another of the same sort ends on a temporal clause which in modern English would be placed at the beginning of the phrase, and this is emphasized by the modern Irish use of the conjunction *and* as an adverb. Thus, where an English speaker would be inclined to say, "When I was coming home it was dark," we tend to say, "It was dark and I coming home," and Synge tends to use it for its slightly melancholy color.

MAURYA: Isn't it a hard and cruel man won't hear a word from an old woman and she holding him from the sea?

CATHLEEN: It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?

A notable cadence seems to end on a single accented long vowel, often a monosyllable which is preceded by another long and a short—cretics alternating with choriambes is perhaps how it might be described—and Synge makes very effective use of it in the great love scene in *The Playboy*: "in the heat of noon," "when our banns is called," "in four months or five," and "in his golden chair."

IF Synge remains a mysterious figure, there is nothing whatever mysterious about Lady Gregory. If there is one word that sums her up it is complacency—Victorian complacency, at that. To please Yeats she rewrote the early sagas and romances that had been edited by famous scholars in English, French, and German, but when she came to a line like "Will we ask her to sleep with you?" in *The Voyage of Mael Dúin*, Lady Gregory, remembering what the Dear Queen would have felt, turned it into

"Will we ask her would she maybe be your wife?"

Yet I think the critic in the *Times Literary Supplement* who not so long ago told us that there would be no Lady Gregory revival was probably wrong. I expect more revivals of *Spreading the News*, *The Rising of the Moon*, *The Traveling Man* and *The Gaol Gate* than of *Riders to the Sea* or *On Baile's Strand*. We have to learn to appreciate the work of Yeats and Synge, and in doing so lose something of its original freshness, but anyone can appreciate a Lady Gregory play just as anyone can enjoy watching a children's game. Under the Victorian complacency is the Victorian innocence, and this is a quality that does not easily date.

I DO not mean that she is unsophisticated. If Yeats had his Corneille for master and Synge his Racine, she has her Molière, and anyone who knows Molière will notice his little tricks in her comedies; as, for instance, the slow passages of elaborate exposition that suddenly give place to the slapstick stichomythia:

MR. QUIRKE: The man that preserved me!

HYACINTH: That preserved you?

MR. QUIRKE: That kept me from ruin!

HYACINTH: From ruin?

MR. QUIRKE: That saved me from disgrace!

HYACINTH: (To Mrs. Delane) What is he saying at all?

MR. QUIRKE: From the Inspector!

HYACINTH: What is he talking about?

But in spite of the Victorian complacency she had a genuine tragic sense. Naturally, it was a very limited one. She had a tendency to repeat a phrase of Yeats's, "Tragedy must be a joy to the man that dies." Even as stated it is a very doubtful critical principle because we do not go to the theater to see Oedipus enjoy himself, but as she applied it it was even more restricting because it tended to turn into "Tragedy must be a pleasure to the man who dies," which is a very Victorian notion indeed and somewhat reminiscent of the Father of All putting his creatures across his knee and saying, "This hurts me more than it hurts you."

But within that Victorian framework she achieves remarkable results, as she does, for instance, in *The Gaol Gate*. When the play opens we see two poor countrywomen—mother and daughter-in-law—at the gate of Galway Gaol, waiting for the release of a young man who is supposed to have betrayed his comrades in some agrarian outrage. Instead, when the gaol gate opens they are informed that his comrades have

been released and that he has been hanged; and as they walk back through the streets of the town the old mother bursts into a great song of praise. Lady Gregory had been studying *Riders to the Sea* and old Maurya's great tragic tirade at the curtain, and to make certain of a poetic effect had deliberately chosen to write in a loose and ungainly meter. But even more striking is the contrast between the two climaxes, Synge's haunted by the imminence of death, Lady Gregory's by the triumph of life.

MARY CAHEL: (Holding out her hands) Are there any people in the streets at all till I call on them to come hither? Did they ever hear in Galway such a thing to be done, a man to die for his neighbor?

Tell it out in the streets for the people to hear, Denis Cahel from Slieve Echtge is dead. It was Denis Cahel from Daire Caol that died in the place of his neighbor.

Gather up; Mary Cushin, the clothes for your child; they'll be wanted by this one and that one. The boys crossing the sea in the springtime will be craving a thread for a memory.

The child he left in the house that is shook, it is great will be his boast of his father. All Ireland will have a welcome before him, and all the people in Boston.

I to stoop on a stick through half a hundred years, I will never be tired with praising. Come hither, Mary Cushin, till we'll shout it through the roads, Denis Cahel died for his neighbor.

Apart from the fact that this is as great as anything in classical tragedy, it is also one of the most astonishing things in the Irish Literary Revival, for it is the work of a Protestant landowner whose own son would die as an officer in the British Air Force and who had broken off an old friendship with Scawen Blunt because he himself had occupied a cell in Galway Gaol with the Denis Cahels of his day. It makes everything else written in Ireland in our time seem like the work of a foreigner.

THERE is an even more haunting tragic climax in *Dervorgilla* of the following year, 1908. *Dervorgilla* has kept attracting romantic writers since Thomas Moore called her "falsest of women," and in *The Dreaming of the Bones* even Yeats denies her forgiveness for her imaginary crime. According to the chestnut, which is served up even in the most recent histories and guidebooks, she was the wife of O'Rourke of Breany and eloped with MacMurrough of Leinster, thus precipitating the Norman invasion. The writers have most peculiar notions of Irish dynastic marriages: *Dervorgilla* was a woman famous for her piety whose "marriages" to two unmitigated ruffians

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WERE THE POLLS WRONG?

Why the press must begin asking: whose surveys?

By ELMO ROPER

POLITICAL POLLS have probably never been used more abundantly than they are in America today. They play a major role in pre-nomination scrambles and pre-election campaigns. They are quoted in newspapers, leaked to reporters by candidates, and closely watched by those in high office. Yet they have probably never contributed less to public understanding of elections. What is the reason for this odd state of affairs?

Take November's election. Discussion before the election centered on how great a loss the Democrats would sustain in Congress. Opinion seemed to vary as to whether the loss would be below forty seats (the expectation of President Johnson) or about forty (the prediction of former Vice President Nixon), or twenty-nine, which was *The New York Times's* estimate of the probable results. The day of the election the *Times* also mentioned, in passing, the latest Gallup Poll results, which recorded a national percentage increase in support for the Republicans since 1964 of 5.5 points, indicating to the Gallup organization a probable Republican gain of from thirty-five to fifty-five seats. Apparently this was considered an odd statistic, strangely out of joint with what "most analysts" had forecast. It was mentioned simply as one opinion among many. As a result of this prevalent expectation that the Republican gain would be forty House seats or considerably less, there was general surprise the next day when the GOP picked up forty-seven House seats and sent three new members to the Senate. (*The New York Times* headlined: REPUBLICANS STRONGER THAN EXPECTED IN OFF-YEAR VOTE.)

"Stronger than expected" by whom? This shouldn't have been a surprise to anyone. It was certainly not a surprise to me. A week before the election I concluded that the probable GOP gain in the House and Senate combined would be between forty-five and fifty-five seats, and I so stated publicly in a speech on November 2. Let me hasten to say that my prediction was not based on results of surveys done by our firm, since we have never done national polls in off-year elections. It was based on my own analysis of the Gallup figures, which required no mastery of advanced calculus,

but simply an awareness of the relationship between those figures and past Congressional election results—and a respect for George Gallup.

Nothing is more publicly available than the Gallup figures, and nothing has been more reliable over the years. There is, naturally, no perfect correlation between the percentage of voters in the nation planning to vote Democratic for Congress and the actual seats gained or lost, but the relationship is remarkably close and remarkably predictable. The Gallup Poll's published interpretation of its figures was slightly on the conservative side, but the basic message was clear, and a telephone call to Dr. Gallup convinced me he agreed with my forty-five to fifty-five seat gain: Republicans would do considerably better than most out-of-power parties in most off-year elections, and certainly better than most political "analysts" expected this year.

THEN there were the individual election contests. In the same speech I gave a week before the election, I also made rather flat predictions of victory on twenty-one races for governor and senator, including not only such widely expected victories as those by Reagan in California, Percy in Illinois, Cooper in Kentucky, and Case in New Jersey, but also such "close" races as those involving Nelson and Winthrop Rockefeller, Edward Brooke, and Shafer, Tower, Metcalf, Hatfield, and Levander. A really close race cannot be predicted, but none of these races was as close as the newspapers had believed they would be. Again, the accuracy of these predictions is no credit to the research of our own organization, which polled none of the races I have mentioned. It is simply a question of getting the best available information from *reliable* public polls, such as the California, Iowa, Minnesota, and Denver *Post* polls, and from reputable private polls (when available), such as those by John Kraft (except in New York this year) and Archibald Crossley. When polls give conflicting readings on a contest—and this election was no exception—it is simply a question of believing the one with the better reputation for accuracy and integrity.

Why do the newspapers—and I should add, the television networks as well—fail to take full advantage of this expert and reliable information when



they make their pre-election analyses? I can only speculate. I suspect that the central reason is an inability or an unwillingness to discriminate between the available polls. To too many members of the press, a poll is a poll is a poll. Such an attitude leads, for example, to the publishing—on page 1—of a poll of a Congressman's constituents conducted by mail, while the usually reliable Gallup results are buried in the back pages. It leads to treating such polls as that run by the *New York Daily News* as seriously as polls that are much more highly thought of by professionals. And it also leads to a general skepticism toward polls, which are often assumed to be as likely to miss as to hit election results on the nose.

If the record of all polls of all types done over the years is examined, it is likely to confirm this skepticism. But the record of the scientifically conducted polls done by the organizations generally respected in the field is another thing entirely. Such polls have a record of high and consistent accuracy, and are the best available source of pre-election prescience.

It is not really necessary to predict elections at all. Election forecasts have no particular social utility, although an understanding of the mood and movement of the electorate is valuable both to candidates and to elected officials. But such forecasting is clearly here to stay. And if the press is going to continue to devote considerable time and space and money to analyzing the voters' intentions, it has an intellectual responsibility to do it with the best tools available. What is needed is a more sophisticated understanding of the polls, which will enable the press to discriminate between polls and between pollsters—learning which to trust and which to disregard—and so to be in a position to better inform the public.

