

SYNGE'S OLD MAURYA AND OLD IRISH *IMBAS FOROSNAI*

I

YEATS's visions and dealings in magic and other occult phenomena, which preoccupied him all his life, have been thoroughly analysed by critics. On the other hand, Synge's fascination with the invisible world and his interest in occult studies have attracted less attention, something that is perhaps understandable since Synge himself was very reticent about his own personal life.¹ Yet, when reading his prose works, you are struck by the light they throw on his attraction to the supernatural and to the invisible world.² Of particular value for the understanding of the impact of the occult world on Synge's mind are, apart from *The Aran Islands*,³ his *Autobiography* (constructed from some of his notebooks and manuscripts dating from 1896–8, with later revisions), and two other pieces, *Vita Vecchia* (1895–7, revised later) – a prose narrative with fourteen poems interspersed – and *Étude morbide or 'An imaginary portrait'* (c.1899, and partly revised later).⁴ All these works were written before any of his plays, but *The Aran Islands* did not appear in book form until 1907 and the others not at all during his lifetime.

This is hardly the place to probe deeply into Synge's interest in the supernatural and the occult, but as a background to old Maurya's vision by the spring well in *Riders to the sea*, two striking examples of psychic experience recorded by Synge may be quoted here, the first taken from his *Autobiography*, the second from *The Aran Islands*.

In his *Autobiography* Synge records a certain apparition he saw 'on the brow of a long valley in County Wicklow', when as a sixteen-year-old boy he was busy collecting moths and butterflies, one of his favourite occupations as a boy. We are told that

wreathes of white mist began to rise from the narrow bog beside the river. Before it was quite dark I looked round the edge of the field and saw two immense luminous eyes looking at me from the base of the valley. I dropped my net and caught hold of a gate in front of me. Behind the eyes there rose a black sinister forehead. I was fascinated. For a moment the eyes seemed to consume my personality, then the whole valley became filled with a pageant of movement and colour, and the opposite hillside covered itself with ancient doorways and spires and high turrets. I did not know where or when I was existing (*Prose*, 10).

¹In 1910, Yeats called him 'a drifting silent man full of hidden passion': 'J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his time', *Essays and introductions* (London 1961) 330.

²*J. M. Synge: collected works*: II. Prose (ed. A. Price, London 1966), hereafter *Prose*.

³*ibid.*, 45–184.

⁴*ibid.*, 3–15, 16–24, 25–38, respectively, for the prose works mentioned.

Suddenly a man's voice broke the spell of the apparition, which affected Synge so strongly as to make him feel transposed out of time and place: he was unaware of 'where or when' he was. Synge then goes on to explain the apparition as having been caused by 'two clearings in the wood lined with white mist divided again by a few trees which formed the eyeballs' (ibid.). He may have supplied what seemed to him a rational explanation, yet, as he adds, the terror continued to work on his mind for a long time afterwards, also in daylight. He also remarks that this is perhaps how local superstitions arise – 'not in some trivial accident of colour, but in the *genuine hypnotic influence such things possess upon the prepared personality*' [my emphasis], a phrase we will return to in connection with Maurya's vision by the spring well. Synge's vision as recorded above took place around 1887, and perhaps, as a teenager, he may, for all we know, have experienced other similar psychic phenomena, touching the edge of the unknown. During his time in Paris, he took up a study of spiritualism, encouraged by both Yeats and Stephen MacKenna, and the latter also advised him as to suitable literature.⁵ In his diary for 19 February 1897 he wrote, for example: 'Saw manifestations'.⁶

Suffice it to give one more striking example of Synge's strange psychic, or, as Robert O'Driscoll using a more recent term calls them, 'out of body' experiences.⁷ In a fairly long passage in *The Aran Islands*, Synge describes a dream of his, first published as 'A dream on Inishmaan' in *The Green Sheaf 2* (1903). He was staying in a cottage where he had had other dreams, but this particular one made him speculate as to whether 'a psychic memory [might not be] attached to certain neighbourhoods' (*Prose*, 99). Let us listen then to Synge's dream, which began as a day-dream set off by 'intense light' and 'a faint rhythm of music':

Last night, after walking in a dream among buildings with strangely intense light on them, I heard a faint rhythm of music beginning far away on some stringed instrument.

It came closer to me. . . . When it was quite near the sound began to move in my nerves and blood, and to urge me to dance with them.

I knew that if I yielded I would be carried away to some moment of terrible agony, so I struggled to remain quiet. . . .

The music increased continually, sounding like the strings of harps, tuned to a forgotten scale. . . . Then the luring excitement

⁵D. Greene and E. M. Stephens, *J. M. Synge 1871–1909* (New York 1959) 69. Hereafter Greene/Stephens.

⁶ibid., 64.

⁷R. O'Driscoll, 'Continuity in loss: the Irish and Anglo-Irish traditions', in *Anglo-Irish and Irish literature: aspects of language and culture* (Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature held at Uppsala University, 4–7 August, 1986, I, ed. B. Bramsbäck, M. Croghan, Uppsala 1988) 143–57, esp. 150.

became more powerful than my will, and my limbs moved in spite of me. In a moment I was swept away in a whirlwind of notes. My breath and my thoughts and every impulse of my body, became a form of the dance, till I could not distinguish between the instruments and the rhythm and my own person or consciousness.⁸

For a while it seemed an excitement that was filled with joy, then it grew into an ecstasy where all existence was lost in a vortex of movement. I could not think that there had ever been a life beyond the whirling of the dance.

Then with a shock the ecstasy turned into an agony and rage. I struggled to free myself, but seemed only to increase the passion of the steps I moved to. When I shrieked I could only echo the notes of the rhythm.

At last with a moment of uncontrollable frenzy I broke back to consciousness and awoke (*Prose*, 99–110 [my ellipses]).

Synge ends by stating that he dragged himself to the window and saw the moon 'glittering across the bay', but heard no sound on the island.

Synge does not try to explain his dream as arising from fairy music or some such phenomenon of folk belief, although he had heard stories about fairy music both in the islands and elsewhere, as well as ghost stories told not only in Ireland but also, for example, once when he was staying in Finisterre. The thought that certain neighbourhoods could have a psychic memory he could have picked up in his spiritualistic reading, for example in the volumes of the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*.⁹ Stephen MacKenna also recommended him 'works on Magnetism and Hypnotism – Binet and Feré of the Salpêtrière, Moll of Nancy, Gregory (1851) of England (with much on clairvoyance by crystal-gazing, etc.) and a really good little book – a general non-self-committing study from the *Bibliothèque de Merveilles* (Paris)'.¹⁰

The above-quoted dream, which may be seen as an example of a very vivid intersensory experience, a kind of synaesthetic dream sequence in which intense light and stringed music produced, as it were, in Synge's unconscious a form of symbiosis so strong as to make the person who sees the light and hears the music – in this case Synge – lose control of his will-power and begin, against his will, moving to the rhythm of the music. It is well known that at one time Synge was almost possessed by his love for

⁸A similar experience is interpreted in Yeats's lines 'O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?' in 'Among school children', *Collected poems* 2nd ed. (London 1950) 242–5.

⁹Vol. I dated 1884–5. The London Society was instituted on 20 Feb. 1882, and an Oxford branch was founded in 1885. There was also a Dublin section. Lines of research were spontaneous phenomena, hypnotism, experimental telepathy, physical phenomena like poltergeist cases, etc. The history of the Society from its beginnings can be studied in W. H. Salter's work *The Society for Psychical Research: an outline of its history* (London 1948).

¹⁰Quoted from a letter to Synge from Stephen McKenna in Greene/Stephens, 64.

music, so perhaps it is not strange that his dream experience resulted in 'a vortex of movement' and a feeling of there being no existence 'beyond the whirling of the dance', which was controlled by the music. His mood of joy and ecstasy then turned into one of agony and rage, and finally into a state of frenzy which enabled him to return to reality. The music of his dream permeated – almost consumed – his whole personality, and there seemed to him to be no existence except in the music and the violent vortex of movement set up in his mind.

II

Turning now to old Maurya in *Riders to the sea*, it might be observed that the vision seen by her at the spring well in Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands, also consumed her whole personality. In Maurya, Synge created a superb dramatic character, not only the archetype of a suffering mother, but also, as I will try to argue, a prophetess, a sybil or seer in the ancient Irish mode.

Before looking in more detail at the apparition seen by Maurya, let us glance briefly at the play, its motif, its themes and its setting. One might say that death by drowning is both motif and theme, and so is waiting for this death. Minor themes are the identification of the bundle of clothes and the neglect of important personal duties, such as giving bread and your blessing to a person going out to sea. The setting is a fisherman's cottage in Inishmore and the sea around.¹¹ An important exterior setting which the audience does not really see but hears much about is the spring well, situated some distance from the cottage and visible from the cottage window. (There are at least two holy wells in Inishmore, one of which is called St Kieran's Well.)

At the centre of the play is old Maurya's vision by the spring well which may be said to be closely interwoven with the main theme, death by drowning. When the play begins, Maurya is asleep in the inner room but just about to wake up, as her two daughters, Nora and Cathleen, are about to examine the bundle of clothes believed to be Michael's and handed over to them by the young priest. Michael's body has been found after nine days, off the Donegal coast, and his sisters are surprised that he could have floated so far. In *The Aran Islands*, Synge describes a similar identification of clothes which had belonged to a drowned man, Mike (see *Prose*, 136). Afraid to let their old mother know about the clothes, her daughters hide them in the turf loft. Michael's drowning does not make Bartley, the only son left, hesitate one moment to go to the Galway fair to sell his horses – he only has the good price in mind – and this in spite of many warnings from his mother to wait for better weather. As a halter Bartley takes the new rope Maurya has bought for the lowering of Michael's coffin into the grave, should his body be washed up. The rope is doubly touched by death, for the pig with the black feet

¹¹The stage direction just says: 'An Island off the West of Ireland'.

has gnawed it. When Bartley says that he will ride the red mare and let the grey pony run behind, Maurya, in her grief not to be able to prevent his going, forgets to give him the newly-baked bread, and although he blesses her twice, she does not return his blessing, two forbidding evil omens. Her daughters ask her to hurry out after Bartley and in order to overtake him she cuts across the cliffs. At the spring well she sees Bartley coming riding by, and he gives her his blessing a third time, but, as if petrified, Maurya can say nothing – although she wanted to return the blessing – and stands there with the fresh bread in her hand. This particular moment is the turning-point of the play, its peripety. The audience expects Maurya to come back and say that she has succeeded in her purpose, but her re-entrance marks a development towards a more profound tragedy. She enters the cottage keening softly to herself as if completely unaware of her surroundings and her daughters. She is possessed by a sight she has seen, a sight it would seem her whole life had prepared her for. As the above-quoted apparition described by Synge had consumed the sixteen-year-old boy, Maurya's apparition worked upon her mind and personality like hypnotism, and she re-enters the cottage as if in a trance. What has she seen? This is revealed gradually. At first she says in a weak voice: 'My heart is broken from this day'.¹² And when Cathleen asks her a second time about Bartley, the bread and the blessing, she replies: 'I seen the fearfulest thing', still without giving any explanation. It might be observed in passing that 'fearfulest' is an Elizabethan form of the superlative also found in *Richard III*. Hastings when about to be beheaded says:

O bloody Richard! Miserable England!
I prophesy the fearfull'st thing to thee [my emphasis]
 That ever wretched age hath looked upon.
 Come lead me to the block . . . (*Richard III* 3:4.103–5).

As is seen, also in *Richard III*, 'fearfull'st thing' occurs in a prophetic speech. As he mentions in *The Aran Islands*, Synge is well aware of the survival of Elizabethan forms in the English spoken in the West of Ireland.

Back to Maurya's vision. When Cathleen, looking out of the window, remarks that she can see Bartley 'riding the red mare now over the green head, and the grey pony behind him', Maurya, certain of what is going to happen, repeats Cathleen's words in a frightened tone: 'The grey pony behind him . . .' (*Plays* I, 19). Then we understand that her purpose in going out after Bartley has been baffled by some kind of fearful sight which has taken her in a hypnotic grip. She seems to be transposed out of time and place – for the rest of her life fixed to her spring well vision. She now stands out as a sybil-like, imperious figure from the

¹² *J. M. Synge: collected works*: III. Plays bk I (ed. A. Saddlemyer, London 1968) 19; hereafter *Plays* I.

past, symbolizing the Aran Islands and the doomed life there. *Speaking very slowly*, she says: 'I've seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen, since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arms' (*Plays I*, 19).

When linking her own vision to another vision of Death come to fetch Mike Dara's child (probably a local ghost story Synge had heard), she really frightens her daughters, who crouch down beside her to listen to the rest of her vision beside the spring well:

I went down to the spring well, and I stood there saying a prayer to myself. Then Bartley came along, and he riding on the red mare with the grey pony behind him [*she puts up her hands, as if to hide something from her eyes*]. The Son of God spare us, Nora! (*Plays I*, 19).

A little impatiently Cathleen repeats her question 'What is it you seen?' and we finally learn that Maurya has seen Michael himself, something that Cathleen declares to be impossible since Michael has been 'found in the far north'. Her mother goes on rather defiantly:

I'm after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare; and I tried to say 'God speed you', but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly, and 'the blessing of God on you', says he, and I could say nothing. I looked up then, and I crying, at the grey pony, and there was Michael upon it – with fine clothes on him and new shoes on his feet (*Plays I*, 19).

Maurya has seen a spectral rider, her own dead son Michael, riding a grey pony. As is well known, in Irish folklore grey often signifies death. Moreover, as pointed out by a number of critics, Synge's riders call to mind two of the apocalyptic horsemen in Rev. 6, one riding a red horse and being capable of taking peace from Man, the other riding a pale horse and given the name 'Death' (Rev. 6:4 and 8 respectively).¹³ Synge does not introduce the other two apocalyptic horses, one black (Rev. 6:5), one white (Rev. 6:2), which would have complicated his play too much. We may, however, in this connection, also mention Swedenborg's *The White Horse* (a summary from his *Arcana caelestia*) appearing in Rev. 19 and standing for the Word of God.¹⁴ In Irish folklore, supernatural horsemen and supernatural horses are quite common, and Yeats, for example, often used this romantic image (common also in German Romanticism, as witness Bürger's 'Lenore', a poem translated

¹³See e.g. G. A. Plunka, 'Synge's homage to paganism in *Riders to the sea*', *Éire-Ireland* 23/3 (1988) 128–42.

¹⁴On the *White Horse* mentioned in the *Apocalypse chap. xix*, etc., from the Latin of Emanuel Swedenborg (London: The Swedenborg Society, British and Foreign, 1871). It is hardly likely that Synge had read this tract.

by Walter Scott). Yeats's early story 'The Curse of the Fires and the Shadows', first published in the *National Observer* 5 August 1893, then included in *The secret rose* (1897), tells how, as a punishment for their cruelty, five troopers are lured by a fairy piper down an abyss at whose feet men and horses are crushed. Or we might recall the ghostly hoof beats in *Purgatory* (1938), Yeats's last play but one.

Synge's version of the spectral rider as seen by Maurya is indeed Biblical, and, like so many stories in the Bible, also pictorial: the two riders are seen by Maurya against the horizon as they are riding to the sea, and Bartley is drowned even before reaching the Galway boat. His body does not have to float for days in the sea and 'be battered naked against the rocks' like Michael's (*Prose*, 162). Maurya's seeing Michael in fine clothes and new shoes, symbolical of his life hereafter, is diametrically opposed to the bundle of old clothes, stiff from sea water, and identified by his sisters through the number of stitches dropped in one of the stockings.

When Maurya reveals her vision of Michael riding on the grey pony behind Bartley, Cathleen at last grasps the full meaning of her words: the vision is a foretelling of Bartley's death, but still we do not know *how* he is to die. Nora, on the other hand, is trying to console her mother with the priest's words that God will not leave her mother 'destitute with no son living' (*Plays* I, 21), words rejected with scorn by Maurya: 'It's little the like of him knows of the sea . . .', and she goes on: 'Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Eamon and make a good coffin, for I won't live after them' [her sons] (*Plays* I, 21).

The implacable sea has taken all the men of the house, and with the words just quoted, Maurya begins her keen, lament or elegy, on the eight dead men, her husband, her father-in-law, and her six sons. She confirms the loss of Bartley seen by her in her vision by the spring well, before the entrance of the keening women and the men carrying a body on a plank with a bit of sail covering it.

Thus the conclusion that Bartley is lost ends Maurya's vision and begins the great elegy which reveals her whole life pattern from the day of her marriage to the time when she feels her own impending death:

I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house – six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world – and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they are gone now the lot of them. . . . There were Stephen, and Shawn, were lost in the great wind, and found after in the Bay of Gregory of the Golden Mouth, and carried up the two of them on one plank, and in by that door (*Plays* I, 21).

Just at this point in her elegy, Nora and Cathleen hear a crying out on the sea-shore, but Old Maurya is going on with her keen as if hearing

nothing, telling how her other sons had been lost, Sheamus together with his father and grandfather, and Patch 'drowned out of a curagh that turned over' (ibid.). On that occasion, Maurya herself had been sitting with Bartley, then only a baby, on her lap, and, suddenly, keening women had come in followed by men, 'and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it – it was a dry day, Nora – and leaving a track to the door' (ibid.).

Now the tragic story repeats itself for the last time to old Maurya: women are coming in, keening, followed by men carrying Bartley's body in and placing it on the table. And then one of the keening women explains *how* Bartley died: '*The grey pony knocked him over into the sea* [my emphasis], and he was washed out where there is a great surf on the white rocks' (*Plays* I, 23).

Without crying out or keening loudly, Maurya just continues her calm elegy, for she had had foreknowledge of Bartley's death:

They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. . . . I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south. . . . It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain . . . (*Plays* I, 25 [my ellipses]).

At long last Maurya can give up thinking of the sea and its hunger for her men: her mind can be at ease. You might say that Bartley, who blessed her three times, twice at home, once at the spring well, did not take peace from her, but gave it to her. It is as if Synge had reverted the meaning of the red horse and its rider, who in Rev. 6:4 is said to take peace from Man. As a sign that she will have no more need of Holy Water, Maurya turns the empty cup upside-down on the table, and, placing her hands on Bartley's feet, she is coming to the end of her elegy, the final part beginning: 'They are all together this time, and the end has come'. She calls down a blessing on the souls of her six sons, Bartley and Michael, Sheamus and Patch, Stephen and Shawn, and asks for mercy on her own soul and on everybody's soul. Kneeling down, she refers to Michael's 'clean burial in the far north' and Bartley's 'deep grave', the former received by the sea, the latter by the earth. But Michael's bits of clothes are spread out beside Bartley's body, a sign that they will symbolically be buried together. Maurya finishes her elegy and the play with the famous lines: '. . . No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied', thus marking her own stoic resignation and acceptance of fate.¹⁵

Her elegy has grown out of her spring well vision and her experience of so many drownings. Superbly linking the spring well vision to Michael's and Bartley's deaths, Synge could hardly have chosen a better

¹⁵See e.g. D. S. Neff, 'Synge's stoic tragedy in *Riders to the sea*', *Éire-Ireland* 23/3 (1988) 117–27.

title for his play than *Riders to the sea*, which reminds us of Yeats's Rilke-inspired epitaph:

*Cast a cold eye
On life, on death
Horseman, pass by!*

Life is seen as a brief ride, with Death riding behind you. There is but a short step across to the other world – Bartley might be said to be literally kicked into the beyond, whether it be a pagan Celtic Otherworld or the Christian Paradise.

Synge did not make dramatic use of some of the wild graveyard scenes he himself witnessed in the Aran Islands. To show what he refrained from turning old Maurya's grief into, let us recall the frightful description of an Aran burial (*Prose*, 160–62), 'one of the strangest scenes', Synge says, '[he had] met with'. He depicts how a young man's coffin was left lying in front of the cottage door – with a crowd keening over it – and finally tied up between two oars with bits of rope and then carried to the graveyard. The women were walking behind it followed by Synge and the island men. The keening in the graveyard expressed much more personal grief than usual, since it was a young man who was to be buried. The grave had not been opened beforehand, but was dug there and then, and an old coffin broken up to make room for the new one. Among the bones thrown up was a skull, which was placed upon a gravestone and seized by an old woman who cried out that it was her mother's skull. She took it on her lap and 'began keening and shrieking with wild lamentations'. When finally the coffin was about to be lowered, the old woman in a last moment of wild grief began beating upon the coffin. All the young men and women were quite worn out 'with their passion of grief', keening, and beating upon the coffin. The young men's voices 'cracked continually in the wail of the keen'. No priest seems to have been present – for an old man sprinkled holy water on those present with 'a wisp of bracken'. After watching the grave being half filled in, Synge walked out to the sea where he saw some men putting out a net. They gave him some poteen and bread and Synge then states: 'I could not help feeling that I was talking with men who were under a judgement of death. I knew that everyone of them would be drowned in the sea in a few years, and battered naked on the rocks – or would die in his own cottage and be buried with another fearful scene in the graveyard I had come from' (*Prose*, 162).

In *Riders to the sea* there is no display of wild, uncontrolled grief, for in old Maurya, Synge created a character quite different from the old Aran woman shrieking with grief when her mother's skull was thrown up. Methodically, and as if in a trance, old Maurya performs the last rites, ending with the turning of the cup upside-down. Her grief becomes infinitely more moving than if she had been screaming and tearing her

white hair. The only disorder in her dress is 'her shawl [having fallen] back from her head and [showing] her white tossed hair' (*Plays* I, 19).

III

Being one of Synge's great poetic characters, old Maurya after her vision appears as a prophetess, a sybil-like figure, a seer, who foretells the death of her last son, Bartley. She could be compared to the druid Cathbad, who, on Deirdre's screaming out in her mother's womb, foretold her tragic fate. But she could also be placed beside the woman poet and prophetess Fedelm, who appears in one of the first key scenes in the *Táin*.¹⁶ Maurya is old, not young like Fedelm, and she is the mother of six sons and two daughters. We do not know what she looks like, except for her white hair, yet she is the archetype of an old Aran woman sorely tried by life. Fedelm, on the other hand, is striking in her beauty – she has triple-irised eyes, probably symbolizing her prophetic gift, she has three tresses of hair, two plaited around her head, and a third hanging down her back all the way down to her calves, she bears arms and has a chariot drawn by black horses. She appears before Queen Medb of Connacht before her march against Ulster in search of the Brown Bull of Cooley. The druids and sages have been waiting a fortnight for a good sign for the safe return of Medb's army, and finally Fedelm appears. On Medb's question who she is, she replies: 'I am Fedelm, and I am a woman poet of Connacht'. Like Cú Chulainn she has learned verse, vision and magic from Scáthach in Alba. She also tells Medb that she has *imbas forosnai* 'the Light of Foresight', i.e. the poetic gift of prophecy, the most important gift of the ancient Irish poet or *file*.¹⁷ She does not encourage Medb in her war project. Four times, Medb asks her how she sees her army, and four times her answer is: 'I see it crimson, I see it red' (Kinsella, *Tain*, 61). Medb does not believe Fedelm, for she knows that she has chosen what she thinks the best time possible for her war, the time when all the Ulstermen, on account of a curse, are lying in a state of debility, or *couvade*, i.e. suffering the pangs of a woman in child labour. Besides, Fergus and 3,000 Ulstermen are in exile in Connacht after having burnt Emain Macha to revenge the death of Naoise, his two brothers and Deirdre. In spite of Fedelm's warning, Medb marches against Ulster, and all her men, including Cú Chulainn's foster-brother Fer Diad, are killed by Cú Chulainn in single combat. Medb herself is spared, and so is Fergus, who has made a secret pact with Cú Chulainn to yield to him,

¹⁶ *The Tain*, transl. Thomas Kinsella from the ancient Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (London 1969, 1970) 60–63.

¹⁷ In *Cormac's Glossary* Y-756 the rites are described: K. Meyer, 'Sanas Cormaic an Old-Irish glossary', in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* IV (ed. O. J. Bergin et al., Halle and Dublin 1912) 64. See also *Ancient laws of Ireland* I (ed. J. O'Donovan et al., Dublin 1865) 44. See R. Thurneysen, 'Imbas for-osndai', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 19 (1933) 163–4; N. K. Chadwick, 'Imbas forosnai', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 4 (1935) 97–135; and T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology* (Dublin 1946) 323–5, where further references are to be found.

should that be necessary. The two bulls have their own struggle in which the Brown Bull tears the White Bull of Crúachain (Medb's fortress) to pieces and scatters them across Ireland. The mythological character of the bulls is obvious.

As Medb disobeys Fedelm and disregards her prophecy, Bartley disobeys his mother's warnings. He does not even argue with her, just leaves the house with the new rope he intends to use as a halter. He is riding straight to his death; likewise Medb is leading her army straight to disaster and death. Old Maurya is concerned with the individual lives of her sons, and her prophecy concerns her youngest son. Fedelm's prophecy, spoken in an epic, concerns a whole army and foretells in a poem the great heroic deeds of Cú Chulainn, the greatest heroic figure in Irish saga. But Maurya has one gift in common with Fedelm, i.e. *imbas forosnai*, that is, the knowledge that illuminates, the poetic prophetic gift, the special gift of clairvoyance or foreknowledge possessed by the ancient poets of Ireland. If Fedelm ends her prophecy with a long poem about the future deeds of Cú Chulainn, Maurya lets her prophetic vision be followed by her poetic elegy for her eight dead men, her six sons and their father and grandfather. It is also significant that she sees her vision or apparition by the spring well, a sacred place from which, of old, great knowledge was believed to issue. We may recall the Otherworld Well of Segais, a source of great mystic wisdom. Synge does not refer to this or to any tradition of the kind, but it is significant that he makes Maurya see her vision by a well, and a spring well at that, from which divine inspiration may have come to the seer. Maurya, an old woman, a poor fisherman's widow, is a poetic character – like the Tramp in *The shadow of the glen*, or like Christy Mahon in *The Playboy of the Western World* – whom we may see as linked with the visionaries of ancient Irish literature, for example Cathbad, Scáthach, Fedelm, or Deirdre herself, at least the later romantic Deirdre, who foretells the future by means of dreams and visions. Synge was not only well read in ancient Irish literature – he made a special study of it in Paris, for example – he was also a good judge of it as can be seen from his reviews (see *Prose*, 352–70). In endowing the major character of *Riders to the sea* with *imbas forosnai*, or to use a simpler, later term, second sight, Synge created a figure who could have sprung from Irish saga, a representative of the ancient Gaelic world. Here it is apt to recall that Maurice Bourgeois, Synge's first critical biographer, stressed both 'Synge's close relation to Gaelic literature'¹⁸ and the fact that 'his solely artistic preoccupations led him to take an interest in the modern Irishman almost only in so far as he typifies a survival of the dateless Irishman of the sagas'.¹⁹

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¹⁸ *John Millington Synge and the Irish theatre* (London 1913) 222.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 91.