

**JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE AND PÁDRAIC Ó CONAIRE:  
UNEXPECTED FELLOW TRAVELLERS  
BETWEEN ROMANTICISM, REALISM AND BEYOND**

RADVAN MARKUS

**ABSTRACT**

In common perception, the Irish Literary Revival and the Gaelic Revival often appear as essentially unrelated movements, divided by language and with little in common. The essay points to deeper similarities between them on the basis of two of their prominent representatives, the renowned playwright John Millington Synge (1871–1909) and the Irish-language prose writer Pádraic Ó Conaire (1882–1928). It takes into account instances of direct influence of Synge on Ó Conaire, but the main focus is on the reflection of various streams of European thought in the oeuvres of both authors. The most important are late legacies of Romanticism, which include the emphasis on artistic individuality, the celebration of wild nature, and an interest in people on the margins of society. Also the influences of realism, naturalism and incipient modernism are discussed. The correspondences between both prominent authors assume surprisingly concrete forms and testify to the need to study modern Irish literature in both languages side by side.

**Keywords:** Pádraic Ó Conaire; John Millington Synge; Irish Literary Revival; Gaelic Revival; Romanticism; Realism; Naturalism; Modernism; Tramps

In the first draft of his essay “The Old and New in Ireland,” the renowned playwright John Millington Synge described the Irish Literary Revival and its Gaelic counterpart as “two literary currents, which have nothing that is not antagonistic except a national feeling” (Kiberd 1993: 217). This attitude very much prefigured the subsequent critical treatment of the two movements in question – barring exceptions, they are rarely studied side by side. Yet, despite Synge’s supposition, there are obvious merits in such a comparative approach – after all, both revivals occurred at the same place and time and were shaped, albeit in different ways, by the same intellectual currents existing in Europe at the turn of the century.

Ironically, Synge himself, with his deep interest in the Irish language, is an obvious candidate for comparisons with Gaelic writers of the same period. Anne Markey has already explored the similarities between J. M. Synge and Pádraic Pearse, focusing on the Irish-language oeuvre of the latter. Despite the fact that Pearse initially denounced Synge

as “a sort of Evil Spirit” (Markey 2012: 208), Markey concludes that “the varying recourse of these two writers to Irish folklore reveals that they came to have more in common than has previously been acknowledged” (2012: 221).

While Markey’s conclusion is undoubtedly valid, there remain vast differences between the two authors, starting with their diverging world-views and ending with the obvious incommensurability of their writing in terms of literary quality. Yet there is another candidate whose proximity to Synge is so obvious that only the above-mentioned compartmentalization of scholarship can explain why it has not yet been picked up as a major theme by critics. The author in question is Pádraic Ó Conaire (1882–1928), generally regarded as the most accomplished Gaelic writer of the period in a similar way as Synge is considered the Irish Literary Revival’s best playwright. An author of, among other works, 473 short stories, Ó Conaire is today best remembered for his proto-modernist novel *Deoraíocht* (1910) and the short stories later republished in the collection *Scothscéalta* (1982). This essay aims to compare the lives and works of Ó Conaire and Synge in the context of the cultural milieu of the period.

### Direct Influences

Given their different family backgrounds – one a scion of the Protestant Ascendancy, the other the son of a Catholic publican in Galway – it is striking how many biographical parallels can be found. Both became alienated from their family, class and religion early in their lives. Synge famously admitted losing his faith after reading Darwin’s work at the age of fourteen (Synge 1982, II: 10); at the age of seventeen, Ó Conaire abandoned his studies for the priesthood, and any dreams of Catholic middle-class respectability along with them (Ní Chionnaith 1995: 64). The minds of both were shaped by prolonged sojourns abroad; both adopted broadly socialist views and had concerns about the well-being of Irish-speaking peasants in the West of Ireland. Both were proclaimed lovers of nature who frequently roamed the Wicklow countryside as well as travelling in Connemara and Mayo at various points of their lives. And last, but not least, both died young, albeit due to different causes, thus acquiring posthumous fame of youthful literary heroes akin to that of many Romantic poets before them.

Unlike the above-mentioned case with Pearse, Synge and Ó Conaire never got into direct contact or conflict. It is doubtful even whether Synge was aware of Ó Conaire’s writing, given the fact that during Synge’s life Ó Conaire’s short stories had appeared only in journals and much of his work was written or published later. Moreover, if we consider the opinions expressed in his scathing unpublished letter “Can We Go Back into our Mother’s Womb” (Synge 1982, II: 399–400),<sup>1</sup> Synge was not particularly inclined to read the work of authors associated with the Gaelic Revival, whatever their merit might have been.

On the other hand, Ó Conaire was certainly aware of the dramatic oeuvre of his more famous contemporary. There is direct evidence that he, similarly to most other Gaelic

---

<sup>1</sup> In the letter, the kind of Irish used by League members is referred to, among many other insults, as “gibberish” and “incoherent twaddle.”

Leaguers, disapproved of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, although in this particular case the evidence is characteristically colourful. According to his friend, the historian and activist P. S. Ó hÉigeartaigh, Ó Conaire enjoyed the language of the play, but regarded the characters as absurd and unrealistic. He became particularly enraged during the third act when Christy Mahon was tied and Pegeen Mike was goading the other characters against him. When watching the first London production of *The Playboy*, Ó Conaire loudly exclaimed, "cut the rope, Peig!" and expressed his disgust when she did not obey (de Bhaldraithe 1982: 48–49).

However, Ó Conaire's work clearly shows that he highly esteemed other Synge's plays, to the extent that he echoed them and developed their themes in his short stories. The central role of *The Shadow of the Glen* in Ó Conaire's story "M'Fhile Caol Dubh" [My Poet, Dark and Slender] has been already noted by Alan Titley (2009: 98–99),<sup>2</sup> and the description of the boat accident at the beginning of "An Bhean ar Leag Dia Lámh Uirthi" [The Woman on Whom God Laid His Hand] owes much to the influence of Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (Riggs 1994: 66). Despite Ó Conaire's initial negative reaction to *The Playboy*, it is therefore clear that he recognized his connection to the famous playwright, although he never acknowledged it publicly.<sup>3</sup>

### Late Romantics

Tracing direct influences always runs the danger of superficiality and an anecdotal approach, although the latter is hardly avoidable when discussing a writer with such a colourful life as Pádraig Ó Conaire. A deeper affinity between the authors can be discovered if we study their particular reflections of various streams of European literary thought influential at the time. An avid interest in European literature was, after all, another common feature of both authors. The wide scope of Synge's reading has been amply documented, with various critics stressing the importance of Ibsen or contemporary French literature (Ben Levitas 2009: 77–91; McGuinness 2000: 57–66). While the dramatist famously chose to use native material for his plays, its shaping was clearly mediated through a refined European consciousness. He directly stressed the importance of Europe, for example, in his criticism of the Gaelic League, whose members he denounced as people that "with their eyes glued on John Bull's navel, [...] dare not be Europeans for fear the huckster across the street might call them English" (Synge 1982, II: 400).

---

<sup>2</sup> Echoes of the tramp's final speech from *The Shadow of the Glen* (Synge 1982, I: 57) play a crucial role in the titular poet's seduction of the narrator/protagonist, Eibhlín. In the context of the Gaelic Revival, the story is remarkable due to its setting within Dublin Anglophone revivalist circles.

<sup>3</sup> And it is possible that even Ó Conaire's reaction to *The Playboy* eventually changed – consider, for example, the following threat made in a 1919 journal article aimed at the defence of workers' rights: "Rud dainséartha tua agus rud dainséartha pic, agus nach ndeir Seán M. Synge linn gur le láí a mharaigh 'Gaiscíoch an Domhain Thiar' a dhaid?" [The axe is a dangerous thing and so is a pickaxe, and doesn't John M. Synge tell us that the "*Playboy of the Western World*" killed his dad with a loy?] (Ó Conaire 1989: 49) Translation my own. After all, the anecdote about the London production implies that he was not only enraged, but engaged as well.

Ironically, in the light of such animosities, Synge's interweaving of Irish and European influences in his work was strikingly similar to Pádraig Pearse's programme that he set up against his more conservative colleagues in the language revival movement:

Irish literature, if it is to live and grow, must get into contact on the one hand with its own past and on the other, with the mind of contemporary Europe. It must draw the sap of its life from the soil of Ireland, but it must be open on every side to the free air of heaven. (1906: 6)

While Pearse arguably did not live up to his bold maxims in his own creative output, which is, for the most part, ridden with sentimentality, his plea for the inclusion of European thought into Gaelic literature was put into practice by his most diligent disciple in the field. This was no other than Pádraic Ó Conaire, one of the most avid readers of contemporaneous European literature in the language movement.<sup>4</sup> Although Ó Conaire always stressed the importance of Russian authors for his work (Ní Chionnaith 1995: 285), he was clearly inspired also by Norwegian and French literature. It therefore does not come as a surprise that there is a significant overlap in the lists of European authors that inspired, in some way or other, the work of Synge and Ó Conaire, including Henrik Ibsen, Anatole France and Maurice Maeterlinck (Synge 1982, II: 396; Riggs 1994: 70–71).

In what ways, then, did various European influences shape the work of the two authors? Starting with the oldest and most prominent stream of thought, both Synge and Ó Conaire have been described, for various reasons, as late Romantics. This may be taken as a platitude, given their involvement in nationalist revival movements, whose rationale can be derived from the thoughts of Johann Gottfried Herder, significantly developed in the Romantic period proper (Leerssen 2006: 97–101). However, Synge and Ó Conaire differed from their contemporaries by espousing more specific, and often more radical, legacies of Romanticism.<sup>5</sup>

One of the distinctively Romantic features of Synge's and Ó Conaire's work is the emphasis on the individuality and subjectivity of the author. The importance of the author's life and personal vision is stated in poetic words at the beginning of Synge's "Autobiography": "it is this almost cosmic element in the person which gives great art, as that of Michelangelo or Beethoven, the dignity of nature. [...] art is the expression of the essential or abstract beauty of the person" (Synge 1982, II: 3). Comparable is Ó Conaire's insistence on subjective artistic truth, expressed in a number of his essays, such as "An Fhírinne agus an Bhréag sa Litríocht" [Truth and Falsehood in Literature]: "If the author reveals the world according to his mind and heart, regardless of the praise or criticism of others, there will be truth in that person's work" (Ní Chionnaith 1995: 284).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Ó Conaire's opinions about contemporaneous European literature are most clearly expressed in his essay "Seanlitríocht na nGael agus Nualitríocht na hEorpa" [Old Gaelic and New European Literature] (Ó Conaire 1978: 42–52).

<sup>5</sup> It is not necessary to trace the precise origin of these Romantic influences – the overall milieu of the revivals played its role, as well as the ready availability of the work of English Romantics. Some of the Romantic influences were mediated by contemporaneous authors featuring aspects of both Romanticism and modernism, such as Henrik Ibsen and the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun (1859–1952), whose *Sult* [Hunger] (1890) very probably inspired Ó Conaire's *Deoraíocht*.

<sup>6</sup> Translation my own. In the original: "Má nochtann an t-údar an saol de réir a éirime aigne agus a chroí féin, gan beann aige ar mholadh ná ar cháineadh aon duine eile, beidh an fhírinne i saothar an duine sin."

It is not surprising that this insistence on subjectivity and reluctance to conform to opinions of the crowd resulted in both authors getting involved in controversies. The turbulent reactions following the staging of Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Playboy of the Western World* are well documented; it is not so well known that also Ó Conaire's work, far less renowned, attracted objections on the account of its immorality and indecency. The most famous instance happened in 1917, when Ó Conaire's novel *Deoraíocht* and his short story "Nóra Mharcais Bhig" were removed from courses of National University of Ireland following a letter of complaint written by another novelist, Peadar Ó Laoghaire (Ní Chionnaith 1995: 369–73). One of the passages that Ó Laoghaire objected to was then cut out of all subsequent editions of Ó Conaire's novel both in the original and in the English translation, and, almost unbelievably, first reappeared in a Czech edition published as late as 2004 (Ó Conaire 2004: 47).

### Synge's Tramps

The Romantic emphasis on subjectivity implied a certain dividing line between the artist and the rest of humankind. Connected to it was, both in Romanticism and in the case of our authors, a definite sympathy to other people separated from society, usually perceived as outcasts – tramps, beggars, madmen and the like.<sup>7</sup> The similarity between tramps and artists was explicitly noted by Synge in his essay "The Vagrants of Wicklow":

In the middle classes the gifted son of a family is always the poorest – usually a writer or artist with no sense of speculation – and in a family of peasants, where the average comfort is just over penury, the gifted son sinks also, and is soon a tramp on the roadside. (Synge 1982, II: 202)

Accordingly, Synge's most poetic characters are usually, in one way or the other, society's outcasts: the tramp in *The Shadow of the Glen*, the blind Martin Doul in *The Well of the Saints*, or the supposed parricide Christy Mahon in *The Playboy*.<sup>8</sup>

Allied to the artistic/poetic faculty of the vagrants is their ability to perceive the sublime beauty of wild nature. Consider the tramp's speech at the end of *The Shadow of the Glen* or the following quotation from Synge's essay "People and Places":

Man is naturally a nomad [...] and all wanderers have finer intellectual and physical perceptions than men who are condemned to local habitations. [...] But the vagrant, I think, along with perhaps the sailor, has preserved the dignity of motion with its whole sensation of strange colours in the clouds [...], affections and lonely songs that rest for a whole life time with the perfume of spring evenings or the first autumnal smoulder on the leaves. (Synge 1982 II: 195–6)

---

<sup>7</sup> Famous examples from English Romanticism include William Wordsworth's poems "The Female Vagrant" or "The Old Cumberland Beggar" from *Lyrical Ballads* (2009: 314–22; 442–7).

<sup>8</sup> All of this, of course, chimes not only with European Romanticism, but also with the Irish tradition of the itinerant rake poet of the 18th century, epitomized in the semi-folklore character of Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin.

This is, needless to say, entirely in tune with Romantic aesthetics. What betrays the later provenance of Synge's work, written after Karl Marx and William Morris, is his explicit endorsement of the vagrants' and beggars' right to refuse paid work.<sup>9</sup> In the era of industrial mass-production, Synge saw such work as alienating, and in a way, implying a sell-out of a person's authenticity for money. In "People and Places," he argues:

The slave and the beggar are wiser than the man who works for recompense, for all our moments are divine and above all price though their sacrifice is paid with a measure of fine gold. Every industrious worker has sold his birthright for a mess of pottage, perhaps served him in chalices of gold. (Synge 1982, II: 196)

The same dynamic can be observed in *The Well of the Saints*, where Martin and Mary Doul finally refuse the gift of sight partly because it would force them to participate in the alienating economy of mainstream society. Rather than sacrificing their internal poetic vision, the pair opts for a life of blind itinerant beggars, although it implies most probably a premature death. Elsewhere in Synge's oeuvre, the venality of modern wage-labour is contrasted, in a way reminiscent of William Morris, with the "primitive," pre-industrial life in the Aran Islands, where "every article [...] has an almost personal character" and "gives this simple life [...] something of the artistic beauty of mediaeval life" (Synge 1982 II: 58–59).

### Ó Conaire's Outcasts

The treatment of the social outcast in Ó Conaire's oeuvre is strikingly similar. The separation between the artist and society, as well as the importance of wild nature is related in explicit terms in his short story "Ná Lig Sinn i gCathú" [Lead Us Not Into Temptation]. In this allegory, set in a fictional oriental world, a sculptor leaves the city and chooses a hermit's life in the wilderness in order to fully concentrate on his work. A mysterious woman appears, who acts as the sculptor's muse for a while – but when the muse turns into a woman of flesh and blood, demanding gold and jewels, the effort to satisfy her eventually leads to the sculptor's compromising of his art by submitting to popular taste and the king's wishes (Ó Conaire 1982: 44–51). Significantly for Ó Conaire, the story concentrates not only on the value of the artist's seclusion in nature, but on its limits as well – the mysterious muse represents the real human world, without which the sculptor would never get his inspiration, but which, nevertheless, mars his work in the end.

Like Synge's, Ó Conaire's work also swarms with characters living on the margins of society – the blind prominently appear in the short stories "Páidín Mháire," "Ceoltóirí," or "Beirt Bhan Mhisniúil," the eponymous main character of "Nóra Mharcais Bhig" is a prostitute, and the protagonist/narrator of the novel *Deoraíocht* is a one-armed, one-

---

<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, one has to bear in mind that this tendency appeared in Romanticism from its very beginning. Consider, for example, the following lines from Wordsworth's "The Old Cumberland Beggar": "May never House, misnamed of industry / Make him a captive; for that pent-up din / Those life-consuming sounds that clog the air / Be his the natural silence of old age!" (2009: 447).

legged cripple, exiled in London. These characters are often gifted with a poetic vision drawing its strength from the world of wild nature, such as when the eponymous protagonist of “Páidín Máire,” just before his death, envisions an imaginary underwater world where he would live among the seals (Ó Conaire 1982: 144–5). The greatest poet among all Ó Conaire’s characters is perhaps Micil Ó Maoláin, the protagonist of *Deoraíocht*. In famous passages, full of intriguing shades of colour, he contemplates the sublime beauty of Galway Bay at night, oscillating between calmness and anger, and the change that comes on it with dawn (Ó Conaire 1994: 52–53). The sublime quality of the sea and sky is a given of Romantic aesthetics, as, according to Edmund Burke, they evoke terror and awe with their vastness (Burke 1792: 107). Ó Conaire, as a late Romantic and early Modernist, however, was able to transfer the sublime feeling to industrial sights connected to the city, so that the terror and awe increases. One of the most memorable passages in *Deoraíocht* is the scene of the burning factory, which, particularly in its colour imagery, echoes the earlier scene of the sea and sky in Galway Bay:

In the direction they were going, the lower part of the sky was red and a great torch of light was rising up into the firmament, like a long narrow tongue trying to suck blood. [...] As the flames made contact with the chemical products in the building, they kept changing colour. They were every colour of the rainbow. White here, yellow there. Blood-red in another corner. It was like magic, how the different colours kept interchanging, and at one stage combined into one great blaze of crimson glory. “The blood of the poisoned women,” I shouted. (Ó Conaire 1994: 96, 99)

The scene has a definite socialist tinge to it, and therefore it does not come as a surprise that we can also find in Ó Conaire the rejection of alienating work, noted already with Synge. In the story “Páidín Mháire,” the “organic,” pre-modern life of a fisherman is, in the mind of the central character, contrasted unfavourably with the better paid, but entirely dull and unpoetic employment at road construction (Ó Conaire 1982: 134), as well as the oppressive environment of the workhouse. This rejection reaches its apex in *Deoraíocht*, if we allow for an allegorical reading of Micil Ó Maoláin’s engagement in Alf Trott’s side-show. Micil’s performance, admittedly well paid, involves a rejection of his poetic, idealistic self in order to impersonate an inarticulate German madman, wielding a blood-stained knife and emitting terrifying roars. The allegory can, as in “Ná Lig Sinn i gCathú,” signify the sell-out of art for the market, but can be even more generalised – the circus may serve as a metaphor of any paid work that implies a sacrifice of the self, perceived as authentic. In this light, Ó Maoláin’s subsequent destruction of the show is understandable, notwithstanding the fact that it means his relapse into penury.

Such a sharp division between “authentic” and alienating work might be seen as too exalted and distinctively impractical, yet it is clearly shared by Synge and Ó Conaire. Its main value lies in the effect on the reader – both Synge’s *The Well of the Saints* and Ó Conaire’s *Deoraíocht* are able, more than a hundred years later, to evoke deep sympathy with the marginalized members of society, even if they clearly refuse to adapt to the work ethic of the majority. Needless to say, this sympathy can have considerable political impact in the twenty-first century, given the frequent vicious attacks against such “unadaptable” individuals and groups in the public discourse of many countries.

## Ó Conaire as Synge's Tramp?

The Romantic motifs of seclusion from society and nomadism powerfully resonate also in the lives of both Synge and Ó Conaire. There is, however, an important difference between the two authors. Unlike J. M. Synge, whose numerous wanderings were, in the manner of many Romantic poets of the nineteenth century, always ventures of a reasonably well-off member of the upper classes into the enticing realm of the wild and “primitive,” Ó Conaire, especially in the last ten years of his life, periodically lived the life of a real tramp with all its hardships. In contrast to Synge, who arguably overcame his puritan upbringing only in his work (Mattar 2004: 136), Ó Conaire was known for his personal disrespect for any social conventions whatsoever. It is therefore tempting to explore parallels between Ó Conaire as a person and Synge's characters, notably the tramp from *The Shadow of the Glen* – after all, Ó Conaire often spent whole summers wandering and sleeping rough in the Wicklow countryside where the play is set (Ní Chionnaith 1995: 147). The tramp's speech at the end of Synge's play is echoed not only in Ó Conaire's short story “M'Fhile Caol Dubh,” mentioned earlier, but also in another story, entitled “Cuireadh” [An Invitation], in which he, rhetorically, invites the reader to accompany him on his wanderings: “Come with me, o friend of my heart, and let us enjoy the sight of majestic mountain peaks and dark pine forests [...] come along for Spring is at hand, and fresh blood is flowing through your veins and mine” (Ó Conaire 1966: 14).

And just like Synge's tramp, Ó Conaire was successful, even at that stage of life, in convincing respectable members of the opposite sex to share his life, if only for a short while. One of the numerous interesting stories to be gleaned from his biography is that of his elopement in 1925 with the wife of Thomas Brown Rudmose-Brown, the Professor of Romance languages at Trinity College Dublin and the mentor of Samuel Beckett – here was at least one Irish woman to elope with the tramp, to contradict Arthur Griffith's scathing critique of *The Shadow of the Glen*.<sup>10</sup> The incident led to the rejection of Ó Conaire's later work by the Gaelic League and the composition of an irreverent poem quoted by the poet Oliver St. John Gogarty, with the refrain “She's away with the gaberlunzie man!” (Ní Chionnaith 1995: 387; Gogarty 1954: 55–56). There is no doubt that this effort to live up in full to his maxims of Romantic individualism resulted in numerous hardships, as well as hastening Ó Conaire's premature death in the paupers' ward of the Dublin hospital in 1928, with his only possessions famously consisting of an ounce of tobacco, an apple and a pipe (Ní Chionnaith 1995: 453). This personal intimacy with the downside of Romantic subjectivity is one possible explanation why in Ó Conaire's best stories the individualism of the characters leads to explicitly tragic consequences – very much in contrast to the endings of Synge's plays such as *The Shadow of the Glen* or *The Well of the Saints*, which, despite the forebodings of hardship, contain a liberating momentum.

---

<sup>10</sup> Sinn Féin's founder Arthur Griffith famously objected to the denouement of the play, stating that while loveless marriages in Ireland occur, and women “die of a broken heart,” they never “go away with the Tramp” (Griffith 1903: 1).



## Social Realism

For all their Romanticism, neither Synge nor Ó Conaire would endorse the resigned sentiments of Wordsworth's "The Old Cumberland Beggar": "As in the eye of Nature he has lived / So in the eye of Nature let him die!" (Wordsworth 2009: 447). Both displayed a lively interest in the social conditions that made "artistic souls" end in penury and did not hesitate to criticise these circumstances in their work. In other words, both our late Romantics were, in many aspects of their oeuvre, uncompromising realists, unlike most of their contemporaries in the revival movements.

In the above-quoted essay "About Literature," Pádraig Pearse set out a realist programme for his fellow writers:

We want no Gothic Revival. We would have the problems of today fearlessly dealt with in Irish: the loves and hates and desires and doubts of modern men and women; [...] the tragedy of the emigration mania; [...] the drink evil; the increase of lunacy; such social problems as (say) the loveless marriage. (Pearse 1906: 6)

Again, rather than finding expression in Pearse's own work, the main short-term effect of the outlined programme was that it inspired Pádraic Ó Conaire, who was able to connect it with his wide reading of the Russian realists. He praised the audacity of authors such as Gogol, Turgenev or Gorki to reject false mythologies and get to grips with the more sinister aspects of human nature and society. This is clear from the following passage where, again, the word "truth" denotes subjective philosophy or vision:

Some of them dug deep in the earth looking for truth, for they were in earnest. They had faith and they were not satisfied with the false legends that were presented to them. When they emerged from the hole where they were searching, they carried a dirty, stained thing with human form and cried out at the top of their voices: This is a human! This is a man! This is the truth!<sup>11</sup> (Ó Conaire 1978: 47–8)

Interestingly, Pearse's and Ó Conaire's rejection of the "Gothic Revival" and "false legends" in Irish-language literature calls to mind Synge's rejection of "a purely fantastic unmodern breezy springdayish Cuchulanoid national theatre" (Kiberd 1993: 111) in favour of treating social problems of contemporaneous Ireland. In the playwright's oeuvre, social criticism is the most pronounced in the series of essays "In Connemara." These articles, illustrated by Jack B. Yeats, were originally commissioned by the *Manchester Guardian* as a report from Connemara's "congested districts," one of the poorest areas of Ireland at the time. While most of the critical comments on Irish society from nationalist quarters in the period contented themselves by laying all the blame firmly at the English door, Synge was quite perceptive in uncovering also local causes of the hardships – such as the manipulations of small landholders and shopkeepers, who constituted much

---

<sup>11</sup> Translation my own. In the original: "Chuaigh cuid acu ag rómhar go domhain i dtalamh ar lorg na firinne, mar bhí siad i ndáiríre. Bhí creideamh acu agus ní raibh siad sásta leis na finscéalta bréagacha a bhí curtha os a gcomhair. Nuair a tháinig siad aníos as an bpoll ina raibh siad ag cuartú bhí rud salach smeartha a raibh dealbh duine air acu agus ghlaoigh siad amach in ard a ngutha: 'Seo é an duine! Seo é an fear! Seo í an Fhírinne!'"

of the rising Catholic middle class in the rural areas (Synge 1982 II: 129–30). Neither do Synge's plays shrink from portraying social problems that abounded in their rural settings, and some of the themes treated are strikingly, and ironically, similar to those outlined by Pearse above. The refusal of the widespread tendency to idealize the Gaelic-speaking West of Ireland significantly contributed to the plays' turbulent reception – the unending parade of the West's vices such as greed, loveless marriage, madness or cruelty to animals was certainly difficult to accept.

Interestingly, Ó Conaire spent the formative years of his life in the “congested districts” that Synge wrote about in 1905 – being brought up, since the age of six, by his uncle, who ran a shop in Connemara's Ros Muc. From that position he had a unique opportunity to observe both the plight of the poor and the greed of the middle classes. Moreover, he did not share the hypocritical approach of many revivalists who saw the poverty of the Irish-speaking areas as a virtue that guarded the language and the pastoral simplicity of the inhabitants against foreign pollution. The exact opposite is true – Ó Conaire was a lifelong advocate of economic improvement of the Gaeltacht as the only way to ensure the continuation of Irish as a living language (Ó Conaire 1989: 162–4; Ní Chionnaith 1995: 176).

Ó Conaire's stories that have a rural realistic setting point to similar social problems as the realistic features of Synge's oeuvre. The most important point of contact, perhaps, is the above-mentioned short story “Páidín Mháire,” being a rare literary reflection of the relief works organized by the Congested District Board, reported upon by Synge. As Páidrigín Riggs has noted, the road that the central character helps to build at the beginning of the story belongs to the project in Connemara's Ceantar na nOileán district described at length by Synge in his essay “Among the Relief Works” (Synge 1982, II: 296–301; Riggs 1994: 135). As discussed earlier, the attitude of both authors to such alienating work is shared. Other examples can be easily found. The short story “An Bhean ar Leag Dia Lámh Uirthi,” apart from bearing the direct influence of Synge as mentioned above, combines a touching description of the development of madness in the protagonist's mother with the criticism of her sister Máire, who runs a prosperous public house with her husband in Mayo, but bluntly refuses to help (Ó Conaire 1982: 52–65). In her greed and hypocrisy, Máire may serve (patriotism and gender excepted) as a good representation of the abominable groggy-patriot-publican-general-shopman type noted with disgust by Synge in his letter to McKenna (Murray 2000: 82). Another story, “An Bhean a Ciapadh,” is a merciless and tragic study of an arranged marriage between a middle-aged man and a young woman entirely based on economic considerations. Moreover, it features aspects of sexual violence, rarely represented at the time (Ó Conaire 1982: 119–132).

### **Naturalism and Beyond**

Romanticism and realism are, of course, not the only elements in Synge's and Ó Conaire's oeuvre, despite the fact that they undoubtedly constitute the biggest area of contact. Speaking about later influences, both authors, for instance, display a certain naturalist slant, ultimately traceable to the effect of Darwinism on European thought. This strand of thought combines a belief in a fundamental affinity between people and

animals, with certain anxieties connected to the effect of natural selection on humans. Darwin's profound influence on Synge is well documented, starting with the vivid description of his encounter with evolutionary theory in the playwright's *Autobiography* (Synge 1982 II: 10–11). Refractions of Darwinism are then traceable from ubiquitous comparisons between people and animals in *The Aran Islands* to the fears of the decline of Synge's own aristocratic class expressed in the essay "A Landlord's Garden in County Wicklow" (Synge 1982 II: 230–3).<sup>12</sup> Similar *fin-de-siècle* sentiments are present also in Ó Conaire's work, best exemplified by the description of the degeneration of Irish immigrants in London in *Deoraíocht* (Ó Conaire 1994: 105) – a description that is, however, quite conventional in the context of the Gaelic Revival.<sup>13</sup> The animal theme is explored in Ó Conaire's later stories with animal protagonists, in which shared features with humans are foregrounded. While these stories lack the quality of Ó Conaire's previous work, they can be credited for introducing animal protagonists into modern Irish literature, as they seem to have inspired Ó Conaire's friend Liam O'Flaherty.<sup>14</sup>

It is, however, in the most modernist layer of their works that the two authors differ the most. While Synge's ironic use of the Oedipal and Cuchulain myth in *The Playboy of the Western World* prefigured much more elaborate uses of this method by James Joyce (as well as Irish-language authors such as Eoghan Ó Tuairisc), Ó Conaire's brand of modernism, as displayed in *Deoraíocht*, reminds us more of the earlier works of Knut Hamsun or later works by Franz Kafka. Its main feature is the tracing of the disintegration of personal identity in the anonymous and hostile environment of the city. Certain parallels may be found in Irish-language literature of the second half of the century, such as the later stories and novellas of Máirtín Ó Cadhain, or the poetry of Máirtín Ó Direáin. Despite the differences in the brand of modernism they represented, both Synge and Ó Conaire may be thus credited for pointing the way to later, more pronouncedly modernist authors.

## Conclusion

The exploration of numerous parallels between J. M. Synge and Pádraic Ó Conaire in this essay has uncovered a deep affinity between the two authors. Synge's denial of any similarity between the two revivals in "The Old and the New in Ireland," noted at the beginning, thus acquires not a small touch of irony. Synge's mistake, of course, was that he simply could not envision literatures in both languages flourishing in Ireland side by side – rather, as a reader of Darwin, he imagined them as two species competing for the same resources, a process which inevitably had to end in the survival of one and the extinction of the other.<sup>15</sup> This is clear from "Shall We Go Back to our Mother's Womb,"

---

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed assessment of the influence of Darwin on Synge see Mattar 2004: 130–184 and Burke 2011: 55–71.

<sup>13</sup> The importance of the fears of degeneration in the overall mentality of the Gaelic revival has been traced by Brian Ó Conchubhair (2009).

<sup>14</sup> Much about the friendship of the two writers can be gleaned from O'Flaherty's account in *De Bhaldráithe* 1982: 51–57.

<sup>15</sup> As noted by Mattar (2004: 154) and Burke (2011: 63). Not surprisingly, Synge does not mention the possibilities of symbiosis or inter-species cooperation, more prominent in later evolutionary thought. Arguably, these could serve as more fruitful models for the coexistence of languages.

where he prophesies the death of Irish a few years after the demise of its last monoglot speaker (Synge 1982: 399). Interestingly, Ó Conaire shared the same attitude, with the important difference that he would do anything short of murder to prevent this from happening: “When only people who speak both languages are left in Ireland, Gaelic will be finished. [...] We have to expel [...] English or suppress it and restore the old tongue [...] to the top” (Ó Conaire 1989: 143).<sup>16</sup>

These prophecies were clearly not fulfilled – Irish is still spoken in Ireland and its use seems to be on the increase in traditionally English-speaking areas in spite of the fact that monoglot speakers are a rare species indeed. Bilingualism therefore seems to be the only viable path for the future existence of Irish on the island. The problems related to the tremendous pressure of English as the world *lingua franca* on a small minority language such as Irish have been long recognized. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the continuing existence of both languages and literatures side by side has also considerable advantages and has always been a major source of cultural richness. One definite proof of the positive effects of bilingualism is the very existence and quality of the work of J. M. Synge and Pádraic Ó Conaire.

---

#### WORKS CITED

- Burke, Edmund (1792) *A Philosophical Inquiry into the origin of our ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful with an introductory discourse concerning Taste, and several other additions*. Basil: J.J. Tourneisen.
- Burke, Mary (2011) “Synge, Evolutionary Theory, and the Irish Language,” in *Synge and His Influences: Centenary Essays from the Synge Summer School*, ed. Patrick Lonergan. Dublin: Carysfort Press Limited, 55–71.
- de Bhaldraithe, Tomás (1982) *Pádraic Ó Conaire: Clocha ar a Charn*. Dublin: An Clóchomhar.
- Gogarty, Oliver St. John (1954) *It isn't this Time of Year at All: An Unpremeditated Autobiography*. London: Macgibbon and Kee.
- Griffith, Arthur (1903) “All Ireland,” *United Irishman*, 10.242 (17 October): 1.
- Kiberd, Declan (1993) *Synge and the Irish Language*. London: Macmillan.
- Leerssen, Joep (2006) *National Thought in Europe*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Levitas, Ben (2009) “J. M. Synge: European Encounters,” in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, ed. P. J. Mathews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 77–91.
- Markey, Anne (2012) “The Price of Kelp in Connemara: Synge, Pearse and the Idealization of Folk Culture,” in *Synge and Edwardian Ireland*, ed. Brian Cliff and Nicholas Grene. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 208–224.
- Mattar, Sinéad Garrigan (2004) *Primitivism, Science and the Irish Revival*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- McGuinness, Frank (2000) “J. M. Synge and the King of Norway,” in *Interpreting Synge: Essays from the Synge Summer School, 1991–2000*. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 57–66.
- Ní Chionnaith, Eibhlín (1995) *Pádraic Ó Conaire: Scéal a Bheatha*. Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta.
- Ó Conaire, Pádraic (1966) *Field and Fair*, trans. Cormac Breathnach. Cork: Mercier Press.
- Ó Conaire, Pádraic (1978) *Aistí Pádraic Uí Chonaire*, ed. Gearóid Denvir. Indreabhán: Cló Chois Fharraige.
- Ó Conaire, Pádraic (1982) *Scothscéalta*. Dublin: Sairséal Ó Marcaigh.
- Ó Conaire, Pádraic (1989) “Ár gCuid Gluaisteán” (1919), in *Iriseoireacht Uí Chonaire*, ed. Eibhlín Ní Chionnaith. Béal an Daingin: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 49.

---

<sup>16</sup> Translation my own. In the original: “Tá fúinn [...] an Béarla, a ruaigeadh nó a chur faoi chois agus seanteanga [...] a chur in uachtar.”

- Ó Conaire, Pádraic (1994) *Exile* (1910), trans. Gearailt Mac Eoin. Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta.
- Ó Conaire, Pádraic (2004) *Vyhnanství*, trans. Daniela Fürthnerová. Prague: Fraktály.
- Ó Conaire, Pádraic (2008) *Rogha Scéalta*, ed. Diarmuid de Faoite. Indreabhán, Cló Iar-Chonnachta.
- Ó Conchubhair, Brian (2009) *Fin de Siècle na Gaeilge: Darwin, an Athbheochan agus Smaointeoireacht na hEorpa*. Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta.
- Pearse, Pádraig (1906) "About Literature," *An Claidheamh Soluis* (26 May): 6.
- Riggs, Pádraigín (1994) *Pádraic Ó Conaire, Deoraí*. Dublin: An Clóchomhar.
- Synge, John Millington (1982) *Collected Works*, 3 Volumes. Gerards Cross: Smythe.
- Titley, Alan (2009) "Synge and the Irish Language," in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, ed. P. J. Mathews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 92–103.
- Wordsworth, William (2009) *Poems of William Wordsworth, Volume 1: Collected Reading Texts from The Cornell Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis. Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks LLP.

---

**JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE A PÁDRAIC Ó CONAIRE:  
NEČEKANÍ SOUPUTNÍCI MEZI ROMANTISMEM, REALISMEM  
A DALŠÍMI SMĚRY**

Resumé

Irské literární obrození, jehož výsledkem byla díla v angličtině, a obrození jazykové, jež oživovalo literaturu v irštině, se i přes časovou a místní souvislost obecně považují za dvě antagonistická hnutí s málo styčnými body. Článek poukazuje na hlubší souvislosti mezi oběma směry na příkladu srovnání životů a děl dvou jejich významných představitelů – světoznámého dramatika Johna Millingtona Synge (1871–1909) a nejlepšího prozaika jazykového obrození Pádraica Ó Conaireho (1882–1928). Všímá si příkladů Syngova vlivu na Ó Conaireho, ale jeho hlavním těžištěm je zpracování odrazů evropských myšlenkových směrů v díle obou autorů. Jako nejdůležitější se jeví pozdní vliv romantismu, který oba vedl k důrazu na individualitu autora, k oslavě krásy divoké přírody i k zájmu o lidi na okraji společnosti, jako jsou tuláci, slepci či šilenci. Oba literáti byli také nekompromisní realisté, kteří si všímali stinných stránek častokrát idealizovaného života na západě Irska a neváhali poukázat na jeho lokální příčiny. Mezi další vlivy se pak řadí naturalismus a počínající modernismus, jejichž zpracováním Synge a Ó Conaire ukázali cestu pozdějším spisovatelům. Souvislosti mezi oběma významnými autory nabývají překvapivě konkrétních forem a poukazují na potřebu studovat moderní irskou literaturu v irštině a angličtině společně.

*Radvan Markus*  
*Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures*  
*Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague*  
*markus.radvan@gmail.com*