Holloway on Synge's Last Days'

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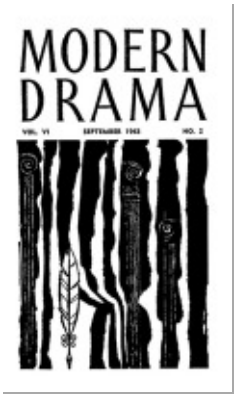

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HOLLOWAY ON SYNGE'S LAST DAYS[1]

THROUGHOUT MOST OF HIS LIFE J. M. Synge was afflicted with delicate health. His sickly state generated in him an intensified awareness of the irony, the mystery, and the tragedy of existence. Death above all haunted his brooding thoughts to become, as we know, a recurring motif in his writing. So in his poetry, for example, he saw death emerge as his "cruel personal foe" and "chase after him with huge strides leaving in its wake a great desolation."

During his youth the more stern aspects of his mother's Evangelical Protestant faith turned him away from religion to assume instead a mask of stoic resignation when dealing with life's enigmas. This attitude apparently served him as a satisfactory way for accepting the human condition, for being reconciled to his enemy, death; it aided him, he tells us, "to put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn and muddy."

Synge's recurring periods of ill-health ended with his premature death from cancer, a month before his 38th birthday, on March 24, 1909. While alive, he had seemingly achieved a tolerably fatalistic relationship for himself with "his cruel enemy." But regarding his ultimate direct confrontation with death one's curiosity is aroused. Did he continue to rely upon his stoical outlook, or did it crumble before the void? Did he, on the other hand, revert for consolation during his final agonizing hours of pain to the religious values of his mother?

The daily personal memoirs of the Dublin theatrical diarist, Joseph Holloway (1861-1944), throw helpful new light on these matters. His reminiscences, moreover, include his account of Synge's funeral, which he attended. Since Yeats's essay, "The Death of Synge,"[2] also briefly covers in diary form similar biographical background, Holloway's diary-entries thus offer as well a source of reference for interpreting or commenting on some of Yeats's kindred recollections.

At the outset of the modern Irish Literary Revival, Holloway, prompted by a deep love of the theater and his gregarious instincts, assumed the role of Pepys for this renaissance. His restless wander-

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[1] My source is the Holloway Diaries. I have received from the trustees of the National Library in Dublin permission to edit these diaries.

[2] *Dramatis Personae* (New York, 1936), pp. 125-154. Subsequent footnote references to Yeats's essay will be quoted from this source.

ings through Dublin seeking from his friends and numerous acquaintances material for his diaries, which he wrote for 50 years, made him one of that city's best known characters. As a practicing architect in Dublin, he was engaged by Miss Horniman, the generous English patron of Irish drama, to design what became the famous Abbey Theatre. This building he regarded as his private domain, his second home. Nearly every day he roamed there at will, back stage, out front, in and out of its dressing rooms and administrative offices, gathering grist for his mill from actors, writers, directors, and staff.

Among Holloway's best sources of material for his daily records were people with similar interests, such as his close friends, W. J. Lawrence, noted historian of the Elizabethan stage, D. J. O'Donoghue, editor and literary associate of Yeats in London and Joyce in Dublin, and W. A. Henderson, manager of the Abbey during its formative years.

Early in the first week of March, 1909, Henderson remarked to Holloway that Synge's health had become so bad he was unable to put the finishing touches to *Deirdre* despite his prompting. Furthermore, Synge's operation ten months earlier at the Elpis, a private nursing home in Dublin, had proven unsuccessful, although Synge had previously believed himself cured. The following week, on March 9, Henderson divulged to the diarist, who was concerned about the dramatist's welfare, that Synge had just returned to the Elpis and that "he did not wish it to be known he was back again for treatment."

One of the nurses at the Elpis was a friend of the diarist, and from her on one of his courtesy visits to Synge at the home, he regretfully found out about the dramatist's worsening condition. On Monday evening, March 22, she made known to him that Synge "was quite despondent and melancholy, and had called out to his favourite nurse, 'What is the use of giving me anything? All's up with me! It's better to die!' Synge, moreover, would not allow any nurse but this one to attend him, and she sat with him for hours at a time. She was a Roman Catholic. Synge knew she was and when she went to Mass he always asked her on her return, 'Well, have you been to Mass? And said a prayer for me?' 'Oh, yes,' she would answer, 'but you ought to say one for yourself sometimes.' On hearing this he used always to smile."

Immediately upon receiving the news of Synge's death on Wednesday morning, March 24, Holloway went to the Abbey to inquire about the burial plans. Backstage he talked with Kerrigan, one of the principal Abbey actors, who told him, "Yeats had supplied the 'Herald' man with copy about Synge. Synge's people had a horror for

the stage; his brother had never been inside a theatre until some time ago when he came to see a performance at the Abbey."

Later that day, Holloway chatted at length with his nurse-confidante at the Elpis on the manner of Synge's dying. Her informative talk with him, as chronicled in his diaries, unfolds a scene of dramatic poignancy that Synge himself might have considered worthy to use in one of his own plays. Sympathetically she acquainted the diarist with Synge's distress prior to his end: "Poor fellow! He kept murmuring, 'God forgive me! God have mercy on me!' in his delirium just before his death. He was told by his surgeon, Sir Robert Ball, the Sunday before he died, that he would not recover and begged of him to help him as he had done before. But the doctor only shook his head in answer to his piteous appeals. Synge suffered great pain and used to walk up and down the corridor outside his room to get a little relief.[3] His people used to call to inquire but never went to see him. Every day he used to ask were any of his 'affectionate' relatives there that day."

Holloway's curiosity then prompted him to question his friend about her associate, Synge's favorite nurse, whom she had previously mentioned as having a kindly interest in Synge's spiritual life. Her recollections for the diarist of what her colleague had related to her about Synge's attractive qualities reveal the innately religious instincts of the dramatist: "She used to make him say his prayers each morning and night. She also used to pray for him, and he thanked God he had someone to pray for such a sinner. Synge called her his 'tidy nurse' because she was always in apple-pie order. Sometimes he was full of fun and called Dr. Parson's attention to her; and in a spirit of mischief to tease her, said he never heard the Dr. praise her for her tidiness. She thought him the best and gentlest of creatures and always found him a perfect gentleman in every way."

The diarist next inquired from his informant how Synge had spent his time at the home during the two weeks he was a patient there. She replied that Synge had tried to keep abreast of current affairs and had made clandestine efforts to work on his unfinished play. In particular, Synge was friendly with "the matron, Mrs. Huxley (a relative of T. H. Huxley), who had chats with him each day. To her he often spoke of Woman Suffrage and problems of the day. He invariably was writing when she went in, and she would say, 'There you are, tiring yourself again.' And he would plead, 'Stay and talk with me.

[3] Yeats for March 28 writes, "Stephens (Synge's brother-in-law) said he suffered no pain but only weakness. On Sunday he questioned the doctor and convinced himself he was dying. He told his brother-in-law next day and was quite cheerful, even making jokes." (p. 134)

I won't write any more.' He read a portion of the Bible each day, but did not care to see a minister or priest."

The matron, however, being conscious of Synge's fast approaching end, decided a few days before his death to send for a minister. But when he came, the diarist's informant continued, "Synge chatted with him about the weather and such up-to-date matters. On Tuesday morning, he expressed the wish to be moved to another room with the sun on it. His request was granted. He was not moved down the lift but was only changed from No. 27 to No. 32 on the same landing. Synge entered his room, saying, 'This is a nice little room and I feel better already in it. Now I will see the sun shine.' But, alas, he never did for he died that night."

The diarist's confidante also went on to speak about the daily emotional visits and prayers of Miss Molly Allgood (Marie O'Neill), the talented Abbey actress to whom Synge was engaged, and to describe what happened as death closed in on the dramatist: "He was very contrite and docile during his last hours. When he was getting weak he said to his nurse, 'Nurse, hold my hand, I am sinking through the bed.' Nurse whispered prayers in his ears the while he remained conscious. Before he lost consciousness she sprinkled holy water over him; he opened his eyes and asked was she baptizing him, and he added, 'Perhaps it's best so—but not being sure of Heaven, I'd like to remain here as long as I can.'"

In concluding her conversation with the diarist she told him that Synge made his last request to his nurse "about one o'clock on Wednesday morning. 'Where is that clergyman you promised to send?' he asked, while he strummed on the counterpane with his fingers as if playing music; then dozing off he never became conscious again.[4] He died at 5 o'clock in the morning. His nurse was of the opinion that he had much more religion than many who pretended far more."

Two days following Synge's death he was buried quietly and simply in the unpretentious family plot at the Protestant cemetery of Mount Jerome in suburban Dublin. Thus unlike many a famous Irish Protestant, he was not granted the honor of being buried with Dean Swift in St. Patrick's Cathedral, the Irish counterpart of Westminster Abbey.

The funeral proceeded from the dramatist's home in south suburban Dublin about five blocks from the Martello Tower made famous by Joyce in *Ulysses* and arrived ahead of schedule shortly before 10 a. m. amid bright spring-like sunshine, which the diarist in his report to

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[4] Yeats's entry for March 24, however, reports that Synge's last words were, "It is no use fighting death any longer." Thereupon "he turned over and died." (pp. 133)

one of the leading Dublin papers noted "offset the gloom of the occasion." The cortege included five horse drawn cabs, the first two bringing Synge's close relatives, in-laws and friends; riding behind in the other vehicles were W. B. Yeats, Sara Allgood, Kerrigan, and the leading actors of the Abbey company. Notably absent, however, was Synge's fiancee, Molly Allgood, who was too grief-stricken to attend. Hence many at the graveyard expressed their sympathy instead to her sister, Sara.

Because of Synge's reputation as a writer and the notoriety associated with his name through "The Playboy" riots, the attendance of about 50 people at the cemetery seemed quite meager to Holloway. Turning to his friend, Lawrence, nearby, he remarked caustically, "He would want to have been a publican or a butcher to command a big gathering." But to the diarist those present formed "a representative gathering of sincere fellow-workers and friends all of whom felt the loss of him who was gone."

After the officiating clergyman had read several prayers, the gravediggers began their noisy work. The heavy sods thudding on the coffin, the diarist observed, quickly brought "tears to the eyes of Henderson as he silently watched the earth cover the mortal remains of poor Synge." The grave was soon filled in with a mound of earth, and Yeats then put on it his wreath, "In memory of his gentleness and courage. The lonely returns to the lonely, and Divinity to Divinity." Next to Yeats's tribute members of the Abbey Company placed an Irish cross, and a wreath from Miss Horniman in London enscribed, "To our leader and friend, Goodbye." Representatives of other dramatic and literary groups, including the Theatre of Ireland, the rival company to the Abbey, the Ulster Literary Theatre, and the National Literary Society also stepped forward with their floral tributes to Synge's memory.

Shortly afterwards the mourners began to depart, and the diarist joined D. J. O'Donoghue, who had known Synge in Paris, to congratulate him on his article of appreciation on Synge in the *Irish Independent* of that morning. But the same article later drew Yeats's barbed criticism against its author when commenting on Synge's "idiot enemies," unnamed, who were present at the funeral.[5] Leaving the graveyard, the diarist finally perceived that "many lingered around the place as if loath to depart." Among these he saw Yeats "wandering around the tombs that surrounded the recently filled grave—a commanding figure amongst men."

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[5] "And there was C— whose obituary notice speaks of Synge's work as only important in promise . . . and then claims that its writer spent many hours a day with Synge in Paris (getting the date wrong by two years, however)." (p. 135)