

## "The Well of the Saints: Synge and Yeats"

Francisco Javier Torres Ribelles  
University of Alicante

El propósito de este artículo es doble: por un lado, demostrar que se debería conceder un lugar más destacado a *The Well of the Saints* en la creación de Synge; por otro, reconsiderar la relación estética de Yeats y Synge a la vista de esa pieza. El estudio comienza examinando el valor que da Yeats al teatro de Synge como opción alternativa, de más peso que las obras ibsenianas, al drama victoriano. A continuación pasa a analizar la interpretación que hace Yeats de *The Well of the Saints* como texto simbolista. El artículo define tres niveles en la relación de los seres humanos con el mundo, según se aprecia en esta obra, como paso previo a la discusión de la existencia de un cuarto nivel, superior a los anteriores, que, de acuerdo con todos los indicios, pasó desapercibido a Yeats. También propone el artículo la hipótesis de que *The Well of the Saints* pudiera haber sido la respuesta crítica de Synge a la pieza teatral de Yeats *The Shadowy Waters*. El estudio finaliza defendiendo la idea de que la reacción de Yeats al realismo de Synge fue parcial.

In spite of the significance that *The Playboy of the Western World* has in Synge's career, *The Well of the Saints* should also be considered a milestone in his development. Besides, *The Well of the Saints* is an extremely important point of reference when defining Yeats's evolution as well as his relationship with Synge, one of the most interesting issues of Irish literature, and the beginnings of Modernism in the English language.

According to extant manuscripts, Synge worked intensely on *The Well of the Saints* in 1903 and especially in the first four or five months of the following year. The play was finished in the first half of 1904, as on 11th May he told Lady Gregory that he was revising and improving it, and on 17th June it was read to the company. It was immediately accepted for performance, as Synge says to Stephen Mackenna two days later (CLS: 86, 87, 89; cf. *ibid.*: 70-71, Carpenter, 1974: 160; abbreviations are

indicated under each title in 'Works cited'). Rehearsals began in July, and it was staged on February 4th, 1905 in the Abbey Theatre, which had opened on 27th December, a little more than a month before (Robinson, 1951: 42-46). This shows that, in spite of the fact that they did not foresee great success for it, Synge's text was welcomed by Yeats and most members of the dramatic society which he led, perhaps because Synge was the best find of the movement and his new play proved that *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen* were not the outcome of artistic luck<sup>1</sup>. But Yeats also had a vested interest in Synge's new text, as it epitomized qualities which he was himself trying to perfect in his own work. This can be seen in the preface he wrote for Synge's play.

The opening lines of the introduction which Yeats wrote for *The Well of the Saints* shortly before its first performance are dedicated to his first meeting with Synge in Paris in December 1896. Emphasizing his own role in Synge's artistic development, Yeats relates how he urged Synge to abandon his idea of criticising French works, and how he advised him to change his style radically and go to Aran in order to find a new means of literary expression. Yeats says that Synge's mediocre and exiguous production was based on a debilitated, exhausted language which had been widely used by many artists at the end of the nineteenth century (EI: 298; cf. *ibid.*: 325). There can hardly be any doubt that Yeats's influence was paramount, for Synge did eventually travel to Aran, and only after Yeats rejected his first play, *When the Moon Has Set*, did he change radically and write his great works for the stage. Yet the first lines of the preface to *The Well of the Saints* are especially important because Yeats recognizes that his own situation in the days when they first met was similar to Synge's. Although Synge was no more than an apprentice-writer and he was himself a widely recognized first-rate poet, Yeats openly states in 1905 that their problem at the end of 1896 was basically the same, namely, how to find an alternative to the literary language in fashion, which he found artificial after finishing *The Secret Rose* (EI: 298-99). This cardinal coincidence underlies the rest of the preface, which he mostly devotes to contrasting Synge's theatre with Ibsenian drama.

There is clear evidence that, in the years before 1905, Yeats had quite earnestly tried to dispense with the languid, ethereal language of most poems included in *The Wind Among the Reeds* in 1899, as well as

the aesthetic, sometimes obscure style of the short stories in *The Secret Rose*, especially «Rosa Alchemica», and *The Tables of the Law and the Adoration of the Magi*, both published in 1897. In *In the Seven Woods* a change can be perceived in the poems written after 1901; the version of Hanrahan's short stories published in 1905 is also rather different from that included in *The Secret Rose*; and, as in that new version, Yeats also included dialect in his new plays, most abundantly in *The Pot of Broth*. However, the exuberant and vigorous discourse of *The Well of the Saints*, which is primarily based on a profusion of dialectal features and longer speeches of the characters<sup>2</sup>, makes Synge's progress from the language of the nineties greater. Besides, according to the preface to the *Well of the Saints*, by using his peculiar language Synge has managed to achieve Yeats's other fundamental aim in those years, the expression of the individual, which Yeats closely relates to the delineation of characters; and that achievement links Synge's theatre to the great universal dramatic tradition, something that, for Yeats, does not happen with Ibsenian drama.

In the early nineties, Yeats already thought that the drama of the Victorian age was poor both artistically and technically, and should be substituted with a new type of theatre. Therefore, he wrote verse plays with a Pre-Raphaelite flavour. Yet, with the turn of the century, he tries to find a more satisfactory form of expression, which is, at the same time, an alternative to the new realistic theatre, Ibsenian drama, unsatisfactory, for him, mainly because of its language. The preface to *The Well of the Saints* and *Samhain* reveal that Yeats thinks that an individual's personality is closely related to his language, and that the predominant materialism has radically changed linguistic expression. As he says in the preface, live language, based on «words and rhythms varying from man to man», has been replaced with «the impersonal language that has come, not out of individual life, nor out of life at all, but of necessities of commerce, of Parliament, of Board Schools, of hurried journeys by train» (*EI*: 300-302, *S*, 1904: 16). And that, for Yeats, is the language used in Ibsenian drama. Therefore, although he recognizes that some Ibsenian plays may have some interesting qualities, such as the delineation of well-defined characters in Ibsen, he also thinks that Ibsenian playwrights, including Ibsen himself, cannot shape exuberant, individual characters because they use a mediocre, powerless language (*S*, 1904: 25-27). However, Yeats

thinks that Synge's theatre is characterized by the opposite virtues, which are those virtues which he himself is striving for with his own new works. On the one hand, Synge generates a rhythm favouring escape from physical constrictions, «for it perfectly fits the drifting emotion, the dreaminess, the vague yet measureless desire». It is a rhythm that «blurs definition, clears edges, everything that comes from the will [and] turns imagination from all that is of the present [and] makes the people of his imagination a little disembodied» (*EI*: 300-301). On the other hand, in Yeats's opinion, Synge's peculiar dialect stems from purer times in the historic cycle, since he creates it by selecting a vocabulary «from the time of Malory and of the translators of the Bible, but its idiom and its vivid metaphor from Irish» (*EI*: 299). Like the great masters of the past, Synge has created «abundant, resonant, beautiful, laughing, living speech», something which is even clearer, for Yeats, when he comes to know *The Well of the Saints*. The way he defines Synge's relationship with those great playwrights fits that play better than *Riders to the Sea* or even *The Shadow of the Glen*, which very well fulfil Yeats's reflections upon the dreamlike quality of Synge's theatre.

Yeats's interest in the way Synge's characters express themselves is also related to two issues which can be seen as the two sides of the same virtue, and which greatly contribute to separating Synge's theatre from Ibsenian drama: Synge does not defend any specific ideology, and his protagonists have no materialistic worries. However, in comparison with Synge's plays, modern drama moves, according to Yeats, in a vicious circle. On the one hand, it is based on an impoverished language, the product of utilitarianism; on the other, it focuses on a society in which material questions are most important. Because of these two reasons, Ibsenian plays do not express «hopes and alarms common to every man that ever came into the world, but politics or social passion, a veiled or open propaganda» (*EI*: 301-302). As a consequence, it is difficult for the individual to appear in those plays. Typically, in Ibsen's texts «even the most momentous figures are subordinate to some tendency, to some movement, to some inanimate energy, or to some process of thought whose very logic has changed it into mechanism» (*EI*: 301-302, 304; cf. *S*, 1904: 13-14). Perhaps one should consider that when Yeats wrote these lines or when he said that Synge «has no wish to change anything, to reform anything», the controversy over Synge's plays had renewed, and that Yeats

may have been trying to eliminate any social content from Synge's plays and to assert the political independence of the dramatic movement culminating in the newly open Abbey Theatre, as in the issue of *Samhain* published in December 1904 on the occasion of the event (*EI*: 300, *S*, 1904: 13; cf. *CW III*: xxiv)<sup>3</sup>. One could also consider that it is doubtful that Synge's theatre lacks critical intent, since he quite clearly attacks materialism and religion. However, this does not mean that he aims at specific social reforms like those defended in Ibsenian drama; and Yeats finds a clear coincidence with his own theatre, as Synge's main characters yearn for a very different, non-materialistic world, a feeling similar to that of Yeatsian protagonists, such as those in *The Shadowy Waters*, *Where There is Nothing* or *The Land of Heart's Desire*.

The tension of ideas expressed in *The Well of the Saints* is particularly interesting in the clarification of the aesthetic relationship between Synge and Yeats. In this respect, a comparison with *The Shadow of the Glen* is very useful, since the text finished by Synge in 1904 can be considered a complex development of the opposition of nature and imagination versus materialism and constrictions, one of the main themes in the play written two years before. *The Well of the Saints* is not merely an example of the struggle between reality and unreality, typical of the Celtic personality, as Bourgeois and others claim (1965: 193, Worth, 1986: 130). A more accurate view of the play is that proposed by Gerstenberger, who says that «the power of imagination to create and to destroy, and the compromises men make with reality, are the central concern of *The Well of the Saints*», but only if her definition is taken to its limits (1964: 55). By making his approach in *The Shadow of the Glen* much more complex, Synge now presents three different ways of understanding life, which, at first sight, correspond to three possible stages of perfection in the relationship of human beings with the world. Each one of those levels can be said to be symbolized by a character, in this order, Timmy, the Saint and Martin Doul himself.

The first way of understanding reality in *The Well of the Saints*, which is represented by the ironsmith, restricts existence to the material level. For Timmy, work also has an extraordinary importance, and he prefers a comfortable, sedentary life inside a house and separated from nature. This level is, therefore, equivalent to that symbolized by Dan Burke

in *The Shadow of the Glen* (cf. Saddlemyer, 1968: 22-23). However, there is an interesting difference in relation to that play. The female component, Molly Byrne, now reacts in a different way to the life which the male offers to her. Whereas the heroine in the earlier play, Nora Burke, suffers her husband and everything that he represents, and eventually manages to escape in search of a more promising and intense life, Molly Byrne consolidates what Timmy represents by marrying him. Molly can then be taken as a complement to what happens in *The Shadow of the Glen*. Her union with the blacksmith, an official ceremony vividly contrasting with the pagan rite in *When the Moon Has Set*, is the previous, necessary step leading to an existence similar to Nora's mediocre, unsatisfactory life, as can also be guessed in the diatribe Mary and Martin dedicate to Molly (*CW III*: 121, 162, 177, Skelton, 1971: 18; cf. Gerstenbenger, 1964: 60, O'Brien Johnson, 1982: 44). That Timmy represents a restricted relationship with the world should be evident as soon as the knowledge of the world that it provides is compared to that of the blind couple, which is more refined in spite of their blindness (cf. Gerstenberger, 1964: 60-61). However, a superficial examination of *The Well of the Saints* may not reveal Synge's attitude to Timmy and Molly, since his criticism is channelled almost exclusively through Martin Dougl, and the setting of the play may also contribute to veiling it. The action takes place in «some lonely mountainous district in the east of Ireland, one or more centuries ago»; that is, the environment is hardly affected by progress, which makes it more difficult to detect Synge's onslaught on materialism. Besides, the fact that this level is represented by a blacksmith may also conceal Synge's attack. An ironsmith may be regarded as an early representative of industrialism, but on the other hand, he is also an important figure in Irish folklore, holding magic powers and linked «with the powers of darkness», as Synge himself says in relation to the play (*CW III*: 90). Nevertheless, a careful analysis of the text immediately reveals that this level is presented as a negative one, which agrees with what Synge expresses more clearly in other works, such as *When the Moon Has Set*, *The Aran Islands*, «The Vagrants of Wicklow» or *The Shadow of the Glen* itself. This means that Corkery's conclusion that Timmy and Molly are mere supports for the plot is unacceptable, as they fulfil a well-defined symbolic role (1947: 173).

In comparison with the materialistic vision of the blacksmith and his future wife, the Saint's attitude is not as superficial, and, at first sight, he represents a higher level. He penetrates the barrier of the senses and is perfectly conscious of the spirit lying under the appearance of things. However, though he apparently sees beyond what Timmy sees, his approach is equally restricted, as he takes the opposing stand and perceives only the spiritual side of the world. He defends the idea that it is necessary to leave physical interests aside and lead a life of asceticism and prayer that makes it possible to find «the splendour of the Spirit of God» in every element of nature (*CW III*: 101). His approach can then be labelled as pantheism. Yet it is acosmistic rather than atheistic pantheism, as he understands the world as just a derivation of divine reality. His strong tendency to see God everywhere makes him regard men simply as an expression of the divine image. Nor is he interested in women, an attitude even more exaggerated in the drafts of the play, where he sees them as mere objects and considers them «a thing of weakness and sin». It is no wonder that Martin also rejects the Saint, while criticizing his physical weakness and the fact that he mortifies himself (*CW III*: 88, 89, 139, 149). Therefore, *The Well of the Saints* can be seen as another example of Synge's denunciation of religion, a central issue in *When the Moon Has Set*, though now much more subtly expressed.

The third option presented by Synge in *The Well of the Saints* is portrayed in Martin Doul's reaction to Timmy's materialism and the Saint's extreme spirituality. A little before the end, the protagonist makes his answer explicit in a sort of moral by which he distinguishes the three levels possible for him in the relation with the universe:

if it's a right some of you have to be working and sweating the like of Timmy the smith, and a right some of you have to be fasting and praying and talking holy talk the like of yourself, I'm thinking it's a good right ourselves have to be sitting blind, hearing a soft wind turning round the little leaves of the spring and feeling the sun, and we not tormenting our souls with the sight of the grey days, and the holy men, and the dirty feet is trampling the world (*CW III*: 149).

Passionately opposing the constrictions that the other two alternatives imply, Martin defends a more intense communion with nature

through imagination, which must also enhance the senses<sup>4</sup>. His final escape with his wife to a more satisfactory, open-air life contrasts with Timmy and Molly heading a procession into the church to be married by the Saint -an ending which, as O'Brien Johnson well remarks, Synge preferred to the one he had thought of in the first drafts, where the play ended with Timmy's invitation «to the green below for the piper has come and we'll have dancing till the fall of night» (*CW III*: 150, O'Brien Johnson, 1982: 36). The wedding of Timmy and Molly by the Saint shows that both extremes of the dichotomy of materialism and spirituality are in fact interdependent and even join to conjure threats. As often happens in Yeats's plays, in Synge's theatre, those who are different are rejected by society, which is what happens to Nora and the tramp in *The Shadow of the Glen*. Although it looks as if she took the decision to leave home, the truth is that she is expelled from it. And that is what happens to Martin and Mary, who are rejected by the people, led by the Saint. However, in contrast with the lives of those people, Martin and Mary's decision to continue being blind, and their departure towards the south can be considered a regeneration similar to that at the end of *The Shadow of the Glen*. The sense of renovation contrasting with the rejection is even reinforced by the fact that the action develops through the three seasons leading to regeneration of nature: the first act takes place in autumn, when Martin and Mary really begin to know a world which will not satisfy them at all; the second act in winter, when, in spite of having recovered his sight, Martin's sensorial faculties have diminished and he also feels extremely miserable; and the last act takes place «at the beginning of the spring», when Martin and Mary decide to regain their original happiness (*CW III*: 55, 57, 68, 145).

So far, the thought underlying *The Well of the Saints* coincides remarkably with Yeats's philosophy in the first years of the new century, which he had developed in the nineties. The separation of matter and spirit, which for Yeats is the negative outcome of the expansion of rationalism and modern religion, results in two main departures from a balanced condition. From the moment he became a writer he had rejected one of them: materialism. But, from the mid-nineties he also becomes aware of the opposite danger, that is, extreme spirituality. This can be perceived quite clearly in «The Tables of the Law», where Aherne, the main character, epitomizes that capital defect (*SR*: 150-51, 153-58;

Whitaker, 1964: 44, 60; Good, 1987: 106; Wilson, 1969: 171). As O'Driscoll says, all the evidence indicates that Yeats's answer to the problem is to consider symbolism as the balanced solution (1975: 75-76, 1979: 161-62). In other words, Yeats proposes in his works the recovery of the spiritual part lost by materialistic humankind through symbols, as well as to develop refined senses and imagination. This corresponds with the three-fold distinction which Synge presents in *The Well of the Saints*. Martin's rejection of both the existence proposed by Timmy, namely materialism, and that proposed by the Saint, immoderate spiritualism, is equivalent to Yeats's denunciation of those two extreme philosophies. Therefore, Martin's declaration at the end of *The Well of the Saints* can be regarded as a manifesto of the symbolism defended by Yeats in the first years of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, this interpretation of *The Well of the Saints* may appear simplistic, and even more so if we consider the fact that it is Martin himself that makes it formally explicit. Corkery identifies him with Synge (1947: 169), but it is evident that Martin's relationship with the universe is also biased. On the one hand, although he recovers his refined senses when he decides not to avoid becoming blind again, those senses are partial, and he will not be able to experience a very important part of the world. On the other hand, his interest in nature is limited to its agreeable side. He rejects as ugly what he does not like, or else he beautifies it by altering reality according to his inclinations (*CW III*: 141). Therefore, Martin's final choice is nothing other than another incomplete way of understanding the world. As Sidnell suggests, when Martin rejects the water offered to him by the Saint, he becomes similar to the holy man, since he will nurture himself exclusively on the images created by his own mind (1979: 57). It is, then, advisable to add a fourth level to the three considered so far, and conclude that, according to *The Well of the Saints*, in a perfect relationship with the world, one should also accept the unpleasant aspects of the universe, rather than limiting oneself to the pleasing part as Martin does when he decides to become blind again and escape to the south. This interpretation also agrees with the thought underlying the other major texts written by Synge, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Aran Islands*, as well as *When the Moon Has Set*. In one of the drafts of *When the Moon Has Set*, he attacks religion because of the defect shown by Martin in *The Well of the Saints*, namely,

looking at the world through rose windows: «there is another world [...] the real world which we are learning to look at with white light and in it we have rain and wind and snow but we see all things and experience all things» (CW III: 280). As in *The Shadow of the Glen*, in his new play, Synge again demands an intensified union with the world. Imagination and refined perception are extremely important in that union, but always subordinate to an intense contact with reality, which is, precisely, the main quality of the life overtly praised in *The Aran Islands*.

The fourth level which I propose may not be easy to discern for two main reasons. First, the harsh side of the world presented in the play may be regarded just as a form of pathetic fallacy. The landscape and Martin Doul's allusions to the ugliness of the world might be understood as the literary projection of his frustration. Secondly, in spite of the fact that some irony can be perceived, Synge presents the blind couple «more sympathetically than the villagers», as Thornton says (1979: 131), by expanding an observation by Corkery (1947: 162; cf. O'Brien Johnson, 1982: 33)<sup>5</sup>. However, this does not necessarily mean that Martin can be considered Synge's mouthpiece. The whole work indicates that Synge was aware of the implications of his text, and that he delineated his characters ironically, a conclusion also defended by Gerstenberger - although she sees this as a defect of the play (1964: 55, 61). It is, therefore, doubtful that the thought underlying *The Well of the Saints* exactly corresponds with Yeats's ideas.

A balanced relationship with reality is a main aesthetic concern for Yeats in the first years of the twentieth century. By 1904, when Synge finishes *The Well of the Saints*, Yeats is well aware that the exclusive pursuit of the essences contained in the beauty of the world is not a satisfactory objective in art, since it is too close to extreme spiritualism and results in weak artistic expression. Therefore, he thinks that he must move towards reality in order to overcome his previous exaggerated spiritualism and strike a balance between extreme spiritualism and materialism, which makes it possible for the imagination to find symbols. The change in his attitude towards the tangible world can be perceived in some of the poems in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, although it becomes clearer in the book of poems which he publishes in 1903, *In the Seven Woods*. Yet, by criticizing the predominant use of imagination in the

relationship with the physical universe in *The Well of the Saints*, Synge goes beyond Yeats, as the obvious implication is that art must primarily focus on the whole of reality. Also, *The Well of the Saints* can be taken as Synge's counterpoint to *The Shadowy Waters*, a play belonging to Yeats's previous period, but staged in January 1904; and not only can Synge's new play be considered a criticism of art that escapes from the real world, but a veiled criticism of Yeats himself too. As happens with Forgael and Dectora, Martin and Mary Doul personify man's capacity to transform himself and escape from reality. Both women also play a decisive role in that transformation. Dectora is an almost spiritual ideal incarnating Forgael's yearnings, whereas Mary greatly contributes to creating a different world that satisfies her husband's inclinations (cf. Duke Elkins, 1993: 91-93). The two blind people in Synge's play can be seen as a parody of Yeats's couple, and therefore they can also be considered a parody of artists trying to erect a personal universe beyond the physical world, based on abstraction and beauty, by using a language of symbols, which is the case not only of Forgael, the symbol of that type of art, but also Yeats himself<sup>6</sup>. In this regard, it is extremely interesting to compare a fragment written by Synge in 1908 with a letter that he wrote to his close friend Stephen MacKenna in June 1904, in which he tells him that he has finished *The Well of the Saints* and that the play has been accepted for performance. In the fragment which he wrote in 1908, he distinguishes two kinds of poetry, «the poetry of real life [...] and the poetry of a land of the fancy»; but he adds that «in all the poets the greatest have both these elements». And he concludes that «Mr. Yeats, one of the poets of the fancy land, has interests in the world and for this reason his poetry has had a lifetime in itself, but A.E., on the other hand, who is of the fancy land only, ended his career in poetry in his first volume» (CW II: 347-48). Four years before, in June 1904, when he writes to MacKenna, Synge already attacks A.E. ruthlessly in relation to an article that A.E. publishes in *Dana*, a new magazine. Yet the most interesting point in his letter to MacKenna is that he derogatorily alludes in passing to Yeats, when criticizing rational, pedantic art, represented for Synge on that occasion by John Eglinton, the editor of *Dana*: «after all it is better to rave after the sun and moon as Yeats does than to be as sane as [Eglinton]» (CLS: 88). This means that, although Synge praises Yeats in 1908 because he combines the world and imagination, in contrast with A.E., who is stuck in the style of the nineties, his view of Yeats's work in 1904 is completely

different. The fact that, at the time when he has just finished *The Well of the Saints*, he poses Yeats's uses as what is, in the end, a negative example, proves that in those days Synge believes that it is necessary to relate reality and imagination in order to create high art, and that Yeats does not comply with that requisite. With logical reservations, it is, therefore, possible to propose the hypothesis that in *The Well of the Saints*, Timmy, with his common sense and his superiority, is a figure close to pedantic, sane artists, as happens to be the case of Eglinton (cf. note 5), whereas the Saint is similar to A.E., and Martin Doul to Yeats. The relationship between *The Well of the Saints* and *The Shadowy Waters* seems even more plausible if one remembers that Yeats's dramatic poem was staged in Dublin on 14th of January, 1904 by «The Irish National Theatre Society», and that only some days later, on the 28th, Synge sends a letter to Stephen MacKenna, the draft of which says:

I do not believe in the possibility of a 'purely fantastic, unmodern, ideal, breezy [sic], springdayish, Cuchulainoid National Theatre.' We had the 'Shadowy Waters' on the stage last week, and it was the most DISTRESSING failure the mind can imagine, -a half empty room, with growling men and tittering females. Of course it is possible to write drama that fits your description and yet is fitter for the stage than the S. Waters, but no drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life which are never fantastic, and neither modern, nor unmodern, and as I see them rarely spring-dayish, or breezy or Cuchulainoid! (CLS: 76; the capitals are Synge's).

The definitive version of the letter is softened, as the allusions to *The Shadowy Waters* have disappeared; but the essence of the message remains, especially the idea that it is necessary to commune with the whole of reality, a notion that has become fundamental in Synge's poetics. He emphasizes that, although a specific work may be «fantastic or spring-dayish», «Ireland will gain if Irish writers deal manfully, directly, and decently with the entire reality of life» (CLS: 74; my italics).

However, Yeats's preface to *The Well of the Saints* shows that, in spite of his interest in Synge's language and characters, he considers the play a metaphor of the rejection of materialism and a defence of symbolist art. For Yeats, Martin and Mary Doul's decision to become blind again in

order to achieve their dream, univocally reflects Synge's aesthetic ideas. Yeats's interpretation is clear at several points of his preface, especially when he says that «those two blind people [...] are so transformed by the dream that they choose blindness rather than reality. [Synge] tells us of realities, but he knows that art has never taken more than its symbols from anything that the eye can see or the hand measure» (*EI*: 304).

Two related conclusions which will be extremely important to define Yeats's own evolution and his attitude to Synge's creation, can, then, be drawn from his reaction to *The Well of the Saints*. In the first place, it is obvious that, to a large extent, materialism and the physical world are still the same thing for Yeats in 1905. In 1896 he says to Synge that his scarce production was not related to the real world, and advises him to go to Aran and express the islands' reality; on several occasions, he also accuses modern society of rejecting the physical faculties, as can be seen in the preface to Synge's work and in the issue of *Samhain* published in December, 1904; and in the plays which he writes from 1900 to 1905 there are attempts to connect art and reality. Yet, under Yeats's declarations that it is necessary to express the individual and fashion an authentic language rooted in specific environments, there is a latent, prevailing idea: although art must feed on reality it has no other aim than escaping from it (*EI*: 302-303, *S*, 1904: 5-6). This indicates that in 1905 Yeats's theories about the existence of a supernatural sphere constantly struggling with the visible world still rule his view of artistic creation. Rather than delving into the complexity of Synge's characters, Yeats just remarks that they are overwhelmed by emotions that they cannot understand. Without doubt, his interpretation is limited and even obviously related to his own notion of «moods» as incarnation of immortal beings in human beings, which decisively conditions his works in the nineties (*EI*: 195, 304-305, *S*, 1904: 17, 27-28; *SR*: 31; *VP*: 749; Wilson, 1969: 169).

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the preface which Yeats writes for *The Well of the Saints* is closely related to the first one. Only a month before he alludes in *Samhain* to Synge's works as «those curious ironical plays of his». Yet in the preface he does not even mention the existence of irony in the play, and he does not even contemplate the possibility that, apart from defending imagination and a revitalization of the senses, Synge may also be demanding a more intense contact with

reality (S, 1904: 21). This amounts to saying that Yeats adapts Synge's ideas to his own. Yeats offers a biased interpretation of Synge's poetics by restricting his analysis to specific questions, which are, in fact, more interesting for himself, such as the dreamlike quality of the text, or the overpowering impulse forcing Martin to find a better existence. Although he recognizes that reality plays a role in Synge's work, in 1905 Yeats does not realize how important that role is, as happened with *The Aran Islands* not long before (EI: 326-27). It is also evident that he does not even consider the possibility that *The Well of the Saints* may be the expression of Synge's reaction to texts of his own, especially *The Shadowy Waters*.

The importance of *The Well of the Saints* is undeniable. The present study shows that it is highly significant both to define Synge's ideas and his relationship with Yeats, which is much more complex than may appear at first sight. The above considerations show that Yeats's interpretations of Synge's personality and work should not be taken lightly or for granted. Although Yeats's commentaries are very useful, they should be contrasted meticulously with the works in question. In the present case, although there are points of coincidence between the two authors, everything indicates that Yeats misinterpreted Synge's thought and that he adapted it to his own ideas, thus decisively contributing to deforming, or at least, obscuring Synge's poetics.

## NOTES

1. Edward Stephens underlines the fact that William Fay feared that the constant bad humour of the characters would create a similar feeling in the audience (Carpenter, 1974: 172, 167-68; cf. Fay and Carswell, 1935: 167-68). In spite of the welcome, there were some difficulties, as with every play by Synge. On the first days of September 1904, Synge complains to Lady Gregory that the actors seem to begin to reject his new play, and he even mentions Pádraic Colum, who does not consider it a satisfactory play «because the Saint is really a Protestant!» (CW III: xxii).

2. The following fragment clearly illustrates this idea. It is part of the dialogue between Martin and Molly in the second act, which Synge

defines as «love current», and labels as «TraPoetical». Martin's tendency to express himself through sentences not linked to each other is, on this occasion, very likely reinforced by his strong feelings: «You'd do right, I'm saying, not to marry a man is after looking out a long while on the bad days of the world, for what way would the like of him have fit eyes to look on yourself, when you rise up in the morning and come out of the little door you have above in the lane, the time it'd be a fine thing if a man would be seeing, and losing his sight, the way he'd have your two eyes facing him, and he going the roads, and shining above him, and he looking in the sky, and springing up from the earth, the time he'd lower his head, in place of the muck that seeing men do meet all roads spread on the world» (*CW* III: 117, 264; cf. *ibid.*: 97, 98, 115).

Little before the performance of Synge's new play in February 1905, Arthur Griffith again attacked *The Shadow of the Glen in The United Irishman*, questioning its Irish nature. Apparently impelled by Yeats, Synge eventually sent a letter to the newspaper with the folkloric tale of the unfaithful wife included in *The Aran Islands*, which Pat Dirane had told him in 1898, as he says in that book (CLS: 106, cf. *CW* II: 70-72; cf. Robinson, 1951: 36). However, fulfilling the ominous expectancies, the first performance of *The Well of the Saints* was not welcomed by the press, and the play was accused of not being truly Irish (Fay and Carswell, 1935: 141, 168-69, Corkery, 1947: 160, Carpenter, 1974: 173).

4. It is evident that Synge wanted to emphasize Martin's special sensorial faculties, which allow him to perceive what the others do not notice. For instance, Martin says in a draft that he can hear «the swift crying things do be racing in the air», but the subject of the sentence becomes «the swift flying things» in the final version (*CW* III: 140, 141).

5. Instructing the company before the first performance, Synge wrote: «If it is possible -Timmy, Molly should be got to show that in all their relations with Martin & Mary -friendly as they are- they feel their own superiority» (*CW* III: xxiii).

6. It is curious that the initials of the main words in both titles, *The Shadowy Waters* and *The Well of the Saints*, are the same, though in contrary order, and that Synge's play centres on water. The magic sea in Yeats's

text has become a holy well in Synge's; and it is now the characters, Martin and Mary, rather than the waters, that are in shadow.

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