

## **'THE DEATH OF AN AUTHOR': COLLABORATIVE VOICES IN J.M. SYNGE'S *DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS* (1910)**

**Lucie Pereira**

In his essay "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes seeks to decentralise the position of authors in relation to their work. In Barthes' view, the conceptual death of the author is necessary for writing to express itself freely so that "disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (142).

In the case of J.M. Synge, the writing of his last, uncompleted play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, was accompanied by the gradual deterioration of his health. He had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease and was informed after his second operation on 5 May 1908 that the tumour was inoperable. The idea of adapting the legend of Deirdre arose at the same time as the first symptoms became apparent. The earliest draft of the play is dated 5 September 1907, and he subsequently produced a considerable number of notebooks and typescripts ordered chronologically and alphabetically.

The storyline is very similar to the famous legend of *Tristan and Isolde*. A young, beautiful girl is predestined to bring destruction and sorrow to Ulster. In order to prevent this, the aged king Conchubor has her raised in a secluded place until she can be made his bride. However, she meets a young man named Naisi and elopes with him and his brothers to Scotland. After seven happy years spent in exile, they are called back to Ireland under the king's pledge of safety and protection. On their arrival, the treachery of the king is revealed: the three brothers are slain and Deirdre commits suicide.

Synge's uncompleted play is based on anonymous medieval prose texts. The re-creation and theatrical re-presentation of an ancestral tale thus implies the co-existence of multiple voices and intentions, some drawn from a mythical past. Since the author died before completing the play to his own satisfaction and had himself expressed great anxiety about the fate of the drafts, the disconcerting question of responsibility towards the intended text inevitably arises. By analysing the individual and collective forces at work before the author's death as well as the multiple responsibilities involved in the act of posthumous collaboration, this paper will look at the process of transmission, transformation, and editorial preservation of textual and pre-textual meaning.

Adapting ancient Irish folk material to a modern audience was an exercise that was new to Synge. On 29 November 1908, he wrote to an American admirer of his work, Louis Untermeyer: "I am at work on a saga play – after the *Playboy* I wanted a change from Peasant Comedy – [...] on the Deirdre story that Yeats and so many

others have treated [...] in one way or other" (CL 227).<sup>1</sup> The legend had indeed been adapted six years earlier by George Russell (AE) and published in the *All Ireland Review* of 1901.<sup>2</sup> Synge hated this version as he felt it was too disconnected from reality.<sup>3</sup> Lady Gregory had also provided a prose account of the story in her *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* in 1902 and Yeats's play *Deirdre* had been performed at the Abbey Theatre in 1906. Synge's desire to turn to folk material may thus have been prompted by an imitative drive to add his name to the long list of modern adapters of the Deirdre myth. The change from peasant comedy to Irish saga was probably not an easy one to make. The legendary characters belonged to an inaccessible pre-Christian era to which Synge could not relate personally. He remarked in a letter to the New York journalist Frederick J. Gregg on 12 September 1907: "I am a little afraid that the 'saga' people might loosen my grip on reality" (CL 56) and four months later confessed to the New York lawyer and collector John Quinn: "these saga people when one comes to deal with them seem very *remote*; – one does not know what they thought or what they ate or where they went to sleep" (CL 121). The experiment therefore appeared as a challenge to Synge, whose creative imagination had always worked from what he knew, from observations and subjective impressions anchored in reality.

The mystery surrounding the origins of the tale further complicated this retrospective process. It has widely been agreed that the legend of Deirdre, like many other Celtic stories, was initially transmitted orally. The tale later underwent major alterations and the fifteenth-century version *Oideadh Chloinne hUisneach* appears as a Christianised and romanticised re-telling of the twelfth-century primary text *Longes Mac n-Uislenn*. The extent of the influence of a pre-Christian oral tradition on the first written narratives is difficult to prove as in its unwritten form, and later in the first medieval narratives, the legend had already absorbed the thematic, aesthetic, and ideological elements carried by the early individual voices (storytellers, scribes, etc.) that had re-fashioned the myth. Barthes' definition of text as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (146) can be applied to these multiple vehicles of textual meaning. The eradication of these creative voices or, as Michel Foucault put it, "the voluntary obliteration of the self" (117) probably favoured collective interest in the story and was a necessary condition for it to acquire a new mythical dimension. J.M. Synge was aware of the complex origins of the legend. Unlike Yeats and Russell, Synge probably did not rely on nineteenth-century English translations, but read the original texts. He strove to retain the Celtic flavour of the tale and attended Henri D'Arbois De Jubainville's course in Old Irish at the Sorbonne.

---

1 The sigla *CL* and *D* are used throughout for references to Synge's *Collected Letters* (Vol. 2) and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* in *Collected Works* (Vol. 4), respectively.

2 *The All Ireland Review* was a weekly literary journal published in Kilkenny from January 1900 to January 1906 and edited by Standish J. O'Grady.

3 Synge criticised Russell's work for being of "the fancy land only" ("Various Notes" 348).

During his sojourn on Aran from 21 September to 9 October 1900 (or 1901),<sup>4</sup> he translated into English a manuscript written about 1740 and based on the later medieval version. This school exercise book containing fifty-seven leaves and entitled "The Fate of the Children of Uisneach" is preserved in Trinity College Dublin (MS 4,341).

Faithfulness to the multiple pre-texts demanded a death-like disconnection from one's subjective impressions and contemporary reality. In Synge's version of the legend, the physical death of the protagonists is described as a necessary precondition for the legend to transcend time and for the story to be "remembered for ever."<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault underlines that the same logic is displayed in Greek epics where "the hero accepted an early death because his life, consecrated and magnified by death, passed into immortality; and the narrative redeemed his acceptance of death" (117). There is definitely a Greek touch to J.M. Synge's dramatic treatment of the legend. Deirdre is certain that she will only achieve mythical status by choosing to accept a premature tragic death. Her hubristic pride also recaptures the mood of Greek tragedy, as she prophesies before killing herself that "there will be a story told of a ruined city and a raving king and a woman will be young forever" (*D* 267). Just like Yeats's Deirdre, she defies time by making events into legends and by asserting the need for the story to be carried through time, triumphantly unaltered.<sup>6</sup> The ideal story should thus *be told*, its legendary status prevailing over the agents of its transmission. This is also symbolised in Deirdre's "half-finished piece of tapestry,"<sup>7</sup> which conjures up the image of the Fates, the Greek goddesses who presided over the births and lives of men. In the same way, the thread of the story metaphorically escapes, at least to a certain extent, authorial control.

*Deirdre of the Sorrows* was also the unique personal investment of a dying man, as its continuous rewriting mirrored the progression of the author's final intentions. Paradoxically, despite its being based on a pre-established text, it is considered to be the most autobiographical of his plays. He undoubtedly identified his fiancée Molly with the tragic heroine, and openly expressed in his letters a desire to see her play the part of Deirdre. The fact that he mentally visualised his young girlfriend as a beautiful tragic heroine is not in itself surprising or indicative of a wider identification process. But, written at a time of great physical suffering and under a growing sense of a fatal outcome, his version of *Deirdre* became very much reflective of his own

---

4 The exact year is uncertain.

5 On the theme of eternal remembrance being achieved through an early death, consider W.B. Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902): "They shall be remembered for ever, / They shall be alive for ever, / They shall be speaking for ever, / The people shall hear them for ever" (*Collected Plays* 86).

6 Yeats's Deirdre offers her bracelet to a nameless musician: "[...] you are wearing this [*Gives Musician a bracelet*. / To show that you have Deirdre's story right" (*Collected Plays* 194).

7 The "half-finished piece of tapestry" appears as a central element in the opening stage directions.

tragic condition. In that light, one no longer finds a Machiavellian representation of the evil monarch, as had been the case in most of the previous texts. Instead, the figure of the king becomes humanised to the extent that the reader cannot help pitying him for his loneliness in old age: "it would be a good bargain [he says] if it was I was in the grave, and Deirdre crying over me, and it was Naisi who was old and desolate" (D 259). The sixteen-year age difference to Molly undoubtedly preoccupied Synge. At 37, Synge was not old, but he was in the last year of his life. The identification was thus two-fold: like King Conchubor he feared that his young love would reject him on account of their age difference and his deteriorating physical condition, but he probably found consolation in the thought that he would never become "old and desolate," that he, like Naisi, was to be eternally young. As Maurice Bourgeois underlined in his biography of Synge, published four years after the writer's death: "it is because he bids farewell to life that he grasps it to the full" (217). Synge's Deirdre is therefore made to live passionately and fully until she feels it is time to die. In that, she is distinguishable from the classical Greek heroine, as she is not trying to escape from her fate but freely chooses to follow it. These few examples suffice to illustrate the extent of J.M. Synge's emotional involvement in the writing of what became a very personal version of the tale.

But works are also produced under defined social circumstances and texts are themselves producers of ideologies. Yeats remarked in *The Death of Synge* that Synge displayed no interest in politics and rarely drew political implications: "I cannot remember that he spoke of politics or showed any interest in men in the mass" (*Synge and the Ireland of his Time* 11). He also suggested that Synge never commented on other authors, including Yeats himself, and was only concerned with his own writings: "For him nothing existed but his thought. [...] I do not think he disliked other writers – they did not exist" (*The Death of Synge* 17).

Synge gave a naturalistic grounding to *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. By rooting the myth in contemporary reality, he created what Nicholas Grene called "a saga play in peasant dress" (175). According to Maurice Bourgeois, he "adapted a more or less supernatural theme to the requirements of his realistic art" (214). A Rabelaisian note was introduced through the grotesque character of Owen, who was not present in the original. He serves as the raving fool of the tragedy who declares, "It's a poor thing to see a queen's nose reaching down to scrape her chin," or complains of being "so lonesome you'd squeeze kisses on a cur dog's nose" (D 225, 223). But if Synge strove "not to loosen his grip on reality,"<sup>8</sup> then the adaptation also had to operate on the linguistic level, hence the odd juxtaposition of colloquial and elevated styles. Making kings speak like peasants may indeed seem unusual, yet as was underlined by Declan Kiberd and Maurice Bourgeois, such linguistic primitivisms were in fact truer to the real spirit of the legend, as they best recaptured the crudeness of the first medieval

---

8 This fear is expressed in a letter to Frederick J. Gregg: "I am a little afraid that the 'saga people' might loosen my grip on reality" (CL 56).

tale. The farcical aspects of the play further betray a certain pragmatic desire to anchor the text in a more contemporary social reality, as opposed to the polished style and dreamy idealism of AE's and Yeats's versions.

The fact that J.M. Synge was not, in Yeats's view, famous for being politically involved makes it all the more interesting to determine to what extent the political context still invades the text, whether this had been intended by the author or not. As the work of Pierre Bourdieu has emphasised,<sup>9</sup> individual and collective forces go hand in hand and the social contextualisation of the figure of the author renders authorship necessarily collaborative. The author exists as an autonomous self, but also functions within a given society. Synge achieves the transposition of what Louis Althusser calls the "real conditions of existence"<sup>10</sup> into a popular legendary tale by, for example, having Deirdre go back to Ireland willingly, although she is aware that certain death awaits the lovers there. Some patriotic and political choices are therefore at stake and one of the reasons she gives Fergus to justify her return to Ireland is that "it's a lonesome thing to be away from Ireland always" (*D* 237). By contrast, in the medieval accounts of the legend, the heroine goes back to Ireland reluctantly, singing the beauty of Scotland. It is then well possible that the political context in 1909, with the growing nationalist sentiments that would lead to the 1916 Easter Rising, favoured the representation of a heroine ready to sacrifice her life for Ireland. In that context, the figure of Deirdre became assimilated collectively with the situation in Ireland even before Synge's version. As Mary C. King underlines, "Deirdre was already well established in the mythology of Irish nationalist aspirations as a typological figure whose tragic fate represented that of Ireland" (161). The running ideologies of national independence thus became transposed onto the adapted text.

In the last stages of Synge's life, the growing awareness that he would not have sufficient time to complete his *Deirdre* led him to express his last wishes regarding his unpublished material. It appears that Synge felt uncomfortable with the idea that soon he would no longer be present to monitor what was to be done with his works. He thus decided that W.B. Yeats's sister Elizabeth, who directed the Cuala Press, should publish his *Poems and Translations*, to be followed by *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. But he then told W.B. Yeats in a letter dated 29 April 1908: "I will not be able to have Deirdri [*sic*] for your sister – I have written to tell her" (*CL* 151). On 4 May 1908, the day before his second operation, he had written a will-like letter that stated his desire to have Yeats as editor of his works:

This is only to go to you if anything should go wrong with me under the operation or after it. I am a little bothered about my 'papers.' I have a certain amount of verse that I think would be worth preserving, possibly also the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> acts of 'Deirdre' [...]. It is rather a hard thing to ask you but I do not want my good things destroyed or my bad

---

9 Consider, for example, Bourdieu's work on Flaubert.

10 See Louis Althusser: "men represent their real conditions of existence to themselves in an imaginary form" (294).

things printed rashly [...]. Do what you can – Good luck. J.M. Synge. (Yeats, “Preface”, *Synge and the Ireland of his Time*)

Synge survived his second operation but his condition soon deteriorated. In February 1909, he had to go to hospital for the third and last time. He took the typescript of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* to Elpis Nursing Home, where he died on 24 March 1909. The different drafts were later transmitted to Yeats:

In the summer of 1909, the Executors sent me a large bundle of papers, [...] manuscripts and typewritten prose and verse, put together and annotated by Synge himself before his last illness. I spent a portion of each day for weeks reading and re-reading early dramatic writing, poems, essays, and so forth [...]. (Yeats, “Preface”, *Synge and the Ireland of his Time*)

By publishing Synge’s confidential letter and alluding to the Executors, Yeats became his official editor following the wishes of the moribund author.

Faithful to the last wishes of his friend, Yeats worked with Molly’s advice at constructing an ideal text out of the chronologically and alphabetically ordered drafts. Lady Gregory assisted them and recalled in *Our Irish Theatre* the difficulties of the collaboration: “After he had gone, we took infinite trouble to bring the versions together, [...] but it needed the writer’s hand” (82). During the summer of 1909, the three of them tried to bring order and form into the innumerable typescript pages. They had to determine which drafts to use as copy-texts for the first printed edition. Would the last version be most representative of the author’s final intentions? In his preface to the first edition of *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, Yeats points out that this is not necessarily the case, as Synge “would have made several more [versions] always altering and enriching” (D 179). However, the text finally produced draws substantially on the final drafts. The other dilemma for Yeats was to choose whether he should follow his friend’s last wishes and alter certain scenes himself or leave the text as it was. Yeats opted for the second alternative, refusing to corrupt the text by rewriting certain passages: “Synge asked that either I or Lady Gregory should write some few words to make this possible, but after writing in a passage we were little satisfied and thought it better to have the play performed, as it is printed here, with no word of ours” (D 179).<sup>11</sup>

This decision was made contrary to authorial intention. In his letter to Yeats, Synge also implied that the second act of his *Deirdre*, with which he was deeply dissatisfied, should not go into print. This posed structural problems to the editor, who could not have a play published with the middle-act missing. In the end, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* confronted the editor with a desire to reproduce an authoritative text, but also with the realisation that this was not possible.

---

11 Synge had apparently asked Yeats to include Owen in the first act and have him steal a knife left by king Conchubor in Lavarcham’s cottage.

As desired by Synge, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was subsequently left in the hands of Elizabeth. In 1910, the Cuala Press was in its first independent years, having previously existed as an all-women co-operative industry, with an embroidery department, under the name of the Dun Emer Press. The Cuala Press preserved the ideological and typographical principles of Dun Emer, as formulated in the publicity leaflet the co-operative produced in 1904:

A wish to find work for Irish hands in the making of beautiful things was the beginning of Dun Emer. [...] Everything as far as possible is Irish: the paper of the books, the linen of the embroidery [...]. The designs are also of the spirit and tradition of the country. (Miller 15)

The young women employed there were trained not only in printing, but also in Irish dance, language, and games. The paper used was an Irish mould-made all-rag paper, produced locally at Swiftbrook Paper Mills in Saggart, County Dublin. Although the type was Caslon, not an especially Irish type, and the ink was German, the spirit of the press was decidedly Irish. The pressmark of the Dun Emer Press, "The Lady Emer Standing by a Tree" drawn by Elinor Monsell, was used on Cuala title pages until 1925 and further emphasised both the Irishness and feminine dimension of the press. The figure of the melancholic young woman and the Celtic symbolism of the tree seem particularly appropriate to introduce the first edition of Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.

As Jerome J. McGann points out in *The Textual Condition*: "Meaning is transmitted through bibliographical as well as linguistic codes" (57). The Irish nationalism inherent in the press was reflected in the pressmark of its title pages and colophons that stressed a Gaelic provenance. If *Deirdre of the Sorrows* is already based on a Celtic tale, the colophon further insists: "Printed & published by Elizabeth Corbet Yeats at the Cuala Press, Churchtown, Dundrum, in the county of Dublin, Ireland, finished on May eve, in the year nineteen hundred and ten."<sup>12</sup> The insistence on "May eve," instead of 30 April, is not *insignificant*. "May eve" bore a Celtic resonance, being the night of the pagan feast of Bealtaine. The nationalist messages implicit in its bibliographical codes (such as the title page, pressmark, and colophon) emphasised the role of such paratextual elements in generating meaning derived from the ideologies of the press rather than the text itself.

In his poem "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," W.B. Yeats pays homage to J.M. Synge: "And that enquiring man John Synge comes next, / That dying chose the living world for text" (*Collected Poems* 149). Yet, after the author's death, the living world was in charge of giving textual unity to the diverse drafts and notebooks of the

---

12 The colophon was to be parodied by James Joyce in the opening dialogue between Stephen and Buck Mulligan in *Ulysses*: "Five lines of text and ten pages of notes about the folk and the fishgods of Dundrum. Printed by the weird sisters in the year of the big wind" (11).

unfinished *Deirdre*. However, this collaborative editorial responsibility enabled the materialisation of Synge's uncompleted play and allowed readers to take part, in their turn, in the process of textual transmission. *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was staged at the Abbey Theatre on 13 January 1910 with Molly playing the part of Deirdre, as Synge had wanted. Nevertheless, the shadow of the author was still present. Maunsel and Co. in Dublin published the first trade edition in 1911. Long after these inaugural publications, editors persevered in their attempts to produce a text that would remain as close as possible to the one originally intended. The most recent example is Ann Saddlemyer's genetic editing of Synge's works, which provides a detailed account of the different draft variants of the text on the left-hand page. The reader is thus made more aware of the plurality of Synge's intentions as they evolved through time. Yet if intentions vary with time, does an objectively definable authorial sense still exist?

The collaborative and social aspects of text-production do not obliterate the figure of the author. For obvious reasons, a legend cannot survive unaltered, but needs to be reshaped in different forms and by various agents in order to raise collective interest and survive. Although the author has limited control over what is eventually signified (and even more so if he dies prematurely), I would argue against Barthes that his voice still lives on, even after the birth of the reader.

### **Works Cited**

#### **Primary Sources**

- Gregory, Augusta Lady. *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. London: Murray, 1902.
- Hull, Vernam, ed. *Longes Mac n-Uislenn*. New York: MLA; London: OUP, 1949.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. 1922. London: The Bodley Head, 1986.
- Mac Giolla Leith, Caoimhín, ed. and trans. *Oidheadh chloinne hUisneach; or The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach*. London: Irish Texts Society, 1993.
- Russell, George William (AE). *Deirdre*. 1901. Dublin: Maunsel, 1907.
- Synge, John Millington. "Various Notes." *Collected Works of J.M. Synge, Vol. 2: Prose*. Ed. Alan Price. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982. 347-351.
- *The Collected Letters of J.M. Synge, Vol. 2: 1907-1909*. Ed. Ann Saddlemyer. Oxford: Clarendon, 1984.
- *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. Churchtown: Cuala Press, 1910.
- *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. Dublin: Maunsel, 1911.
- "Deirdre of the Sorrows." *Collected Works of J.M. Synge, Vol. 4: Plays, Book 2*. Ed. Ann Saddlemyer. London: OUP, 1968. 177-269.



- "The Fate of the Children of Uisneach." Ms. 4,341. Library of Trinity College, Dublin, 1900 or 1901.
- Yeats, William Butler. *Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1952.
- *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Rev. ed. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977.
- *The Death of Synge and Other Passages from an Old Diary*. Dublin: Cuala Press, 1928.
- *Synge and the Ireland of his Time with a Note concerning a Walk through Conemara with him by Jack Butler Yeats*. Dundrum: Cuala Press, 1911.

### **Secondary Sources**

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. 294-304.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. 142-148.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Les règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Paris: Seuil, 1998.
- Bourgeois, Maurice. *John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre*. London: Constable, 1913.
- Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" Ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977. 113-138.
- Gregory, Lady. *Our Irish Theatre*. 1913. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1972.
- Greene, Nicholas. *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays*. London: Macmillan, 1975.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Synge and the Irish Language*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979.
- King, Mary C. *The Drama of J.M. Synge*. London: Fourth Estate, 1985.
- McGann, Jerome J. *The Textual Condition*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.
- Miller, Liam. *The Dun Emer Press, Later the Cuala Press*. Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1973.