‘But we’re only talking, maybe’: language, desire, and the arrival of the present in Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*

Robert Brazeau*

*University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada*

This essay examines the relationship between language, desire, and reality found in J.M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*. In this play, Synge suggests that language which is too infused with desire has the potential to outrace events, and will always fail to describe a reality that can actually form itself. With this, Synge is asserting that Revivalist myths are hopelessly out of step with Irish life and impede the formation of a sustainable political and cultural unit. Troublingly, however, Synge does not accurately gauge his own complicity in this process.

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John Millington Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* offers a tragi-comic look into the complex relationship that exists between the individual and the community, and also engages the compelling theme of the interconnection between language, desire, and what I am going to call, perhaps cumbersomely, the arrival of the present. It is my argument that Synge’s play draws repeated attention to the difficulties that attend the arrival and normalisation of a coherent and sustainable present, and that this very engaging theoretical agenda of the play helps us to understand Synge’s views on Irish politics as situated within a larger philosophical and world historical context. In fact, throughout *Playboy* the Mayoites are shown to be struggling with problems of at least two different historical magnitudes: they are subjects within a colonial modernity that will require the complete disappearance of ‘backward’ zones like their own. Moreover, they cope with a number of more immediate and pressing problems that issue from the community’s acceptance and glorification of Christy Mahon, a professed murderer. What we come to see in the play, then, is that a dual mechanism of colonial threat is active in the lives of the Mayoites, and while they may well be familiar with the immediate forces of colonial repression and the role they play in their lives, they face more intractable, historical and social difficulties that are much more difficult to overcome. These are, of course, hinted at in the play’s references to institutions of colonial domination, but they remain under-acknowledged by the characters Synge presents. These characters have a sense that they are alone in the world, cut off from history, but they are, in fact, subject to a number of economic and political forces – some imperialist, some nationalist – that are working to substantially transform their way of life.

*Playboy* is set in a rural shebeen or public house, and when it opens we learn of the impending marriage of Shawn Keogh and Pegeen Mike, the ostensible proprietor of the shebeen. Since both parties appear to be coming to the union with material assets, the
'bargain', as Shawn calls it, appears to be a good one. Unfortunately, however, the two are also related, and they therefore require a dispensation from the Catholic Church to wed. Shawn’s use of the term ‘bargain’ is especially appropriate, given that the marriage promises greater economic than generative prospects. Into this seemingly insular and cloistered community comes Christy Mahon, whose unconvincing story of killing his own father is instantly taken over by the community and presented back to him as an unrivalled example of heroic Irishness. Even before he appears on stage, Old Mahon is regarded as an anthropomorphosis of the Empire, which guarantees that Christy, by default, will become a nationalist hero: the ‘by default’, however, is the source of much of the comedy and tragedy in the work. Synge uses Christy and the community’s response to him to critique sharply the stock beliefs of Romantic and heroic Irish nationalism, a point confirmed later in the play when Old Mahon finally confronts his son, and, after understandably expressing his anger at Christy’s repeated attempts at patricide, shows himself to be reasonable and accommodating of change. So, while the play is certainly about the nature of heroism and the dashed hopes that ensue when the community projects its own emancipatory desires on an over-willing but under-qualified Christy, Playboy also questions the ability of the community to regenerate itself, and therefore engages debates about Empire and Irish nationalism that were current at the time.

Synge and his scholars: nationalism, Catholicism, and the Revival

These debates have, perhaps predictably, come to dominate the study of Synge’s plays, particularly Playboy, of which so much has been written that studies on Synge now have, of necessity, a meta-critical component. The current essay is no different, and situating my own argument about the play within the context of existing scholarship is a necessary component of it, if only to show that taking on the political and ideological subtext of Synge’s work is a difficult task. Even so, it has been the focus of much scholarly work ever since the riots that interrupted the original performances of Playboy in Dublin and New York. It is, frankly, difficult to understand why a generally liberal political thinker would choose to appear to heap more abuse on already disenfranchised rural Catholics through his depiction of the superstition, drunkenness, and the generally limited and limiting worldview of Playboy’s characters. None of the ready answers to this impasse seem especially convincing. If Synge was generally of the view that colonial modernity brought with it emancipatory and Enlightenment ideas, how could he fail to see the oppression of rural Catholics in the late nineteenth century as inherently contradicting this imperial conceit? If he truly believed the argument, espoused readily in Playboy, that Catholics are either going to be colonised by Rome or London, and so it may as well be London, how could he fail to see that Catholics were choosing their religion and having their government forced on them, sometimes at gunpoint? Why does he stage repeated scenes of manipulation, hypocrisy, and violence in his plays, and why do his characters all seem unable or unwilling to improve their situation in any lasting way? Why do Synge’s characters only find comfort in collective delusion?

Critics of the work generally read it within the history of Irish nationalism as it was unfolding in the early years of the twentieth century or as a response to some of the most disastrous moments of nineteenth-century Irish history. In a recent article, George Cusack suggests that readers need to keep the Famine in mind as one of the essential historical contexts of the play, and goes on to elaborate a reading of the early moments of Playboy as exhibiting a heightened awareness to the realities of the era and the ravages it inflicted on community and family: ‘Michael Flaherty plans to leave his daughter in order to attend
a wake, and thus Peg’s demand for her father to stay with her forces Michael to choose between the duty to protect his living daughter and his duty to properly mourn the dead.¹ Cusack suggests that both the need to mourn the dead and the earliest descriptions of Christy as dying alone in a ditch are intended to invoke the memory of the cultural trauma visited by the Famine as a salient context of the play. However, this argument fails to convince for one important reason: Michael has very little interest in ‘properly mourn[ing]’ the dead; rather, he wants to hurry to the wake because, as Jimmy says, ‘they’ll have the best stuff drunk’ quickly.² It would be propitious for Synge’s apologists if he genuinely were pointing out ways in which the Union had failed Irish Catholics, but the view does not really stand up to much scrutiny; rather, Synge’s own political views, as we will see, are somewhat more intractable.

Synge’s apologists have also had an especially difficult time explaining the presence of much of the troubling anti-Catholicism and general glee about the misery of the peasant life that we find in his work. In his book Theatre and the State in Twentieth-century Ireland, Lionel Pilkington offers the argument that, as a strident individualist, Synge saw both Catholicism and nationalism as too delimiting to offer viable models of modern identity. Pilkington’s scholarship is, it should be noted, impeccable, but his defence of Synge’s politics is difficult to accept, especially as it comes to fruition in his reading of the intellectual and religious investments of the leaders of the Celtic Revival:

For Yeats, Gregory, and Synge, then, developing individuality was the primary goal of the literary movement and was an issue with an ever-present denominational aspect, to ‘get the right for every man to see the world in his own way admitted’ (Yeats) was, first and foremost, a broadly Protestant endeavour: an objection to the ‘medieval and ‘superstitious’ faith of Irish Roman Catholicism.³ Certainly, the spectacle of Orange Day marches, which Synge would have been familiar with, makes it difficult to seriously credit both the assertion that Protestantism is devoid of collective modes of identification and pre-modern ritual, as well as the corollary assumption that it legitimately rests on a deep philosophical commitment to individuality. The somewhat more plausible reading of Irish cultural and identity politics at the time suggests simply that middle-class Protestants like Synge and Yeats had less need for collective modes of subjectivity because they were not oppressed, as a group, in Ireland. Instructively, however, Pilkington’s reading leads us back to the ideological distance between Synge and his subjects in Playboy. This point is also made by Seamus Deane, who reads Synge within the context of the Literary Revival, but ambivalently argues that ‘Synge’s drama affirms and denies the value of the heroicizing impulse of the Revival. It produces the hero out of the “organic” community but leaves the community empty and exhausted.’⁴ It is not at all certain to me that Synge wants us to see the hero as emerging from the ‘organic’ community at all – Christy is a Catholic and a member of the peasantry’, of course, but also an outsider, and while the community does indeed bestow his heroic status on him, his social capital comes from his lack of history in this society. It seems feasible, then, that it is precisely his transplanted or ‘inorganic’ status that propels him towards heroism. As I want to show below, what precludes Shawn, who is Christy’s double, from ever becoming heroic is exactly his situation in the community and the fixed identity that accrues to him because of it.

What troubles Deane most about the play, however, is Synge’s anti-Catholicism, which is demonstrated amply throughout Playboy. Synge persistently represents Catholics as superstitious and backwards, and he offers this criticism chiefly through Shawn Keogh, who, in his constant evocation of religious authority (in the figure of the always-absent Father Reilly), is depicted as psychologically indentured to the Church. Moreover,
Shawn’s pathetic and hysterical screaming early in act one reaches a comical crescendo in the following: ‘Leave me go, or I’ll get the curse of the priests on you, and of the scarlet-coated bishops of the court of Rome.’\textsuperscript{5} This single sentence performs at least three interconnected ideological functions for Synge: it reveals Shawn’s personal weakness and lack of bravery, and suggests they are intrinsic to his Catholicism; it suggests that the religion is mired in a pre-modern and superstitious world of curses and vindictiveness; and it depicts Catholicism as presided over by a secret society of ominously clad bishops, which further suggests its archaism and relation to the world of superstition and fear. While critics like Pilkington have been generally unwilling to directly challenge the anti-Catholicism in the work, \textit{Playboy} has to be regarded, despite its many subtleties and its enduring interest to scholars, students, and audiences worldwide, to be deeply immersed in Synge’s own anti-Catholic bias, and this precludes anything like a fair representation of the religious beliefs of the Mayoites. Lionel Pilkington’s defence of this aspect of Synge’s writing, it should be noted, is especially difficult to follow. After detailing a couple of moments of ‘priestly hypocrisy’ that Synge claimed to witness, and which Synge construed as revealing the ‘many attitudes of the Irish church party’, Pilkington asserts: 

\begin{quote}
Whether or not this was intended as a criticism of the Roman Catholic church in Ireland or of the Irish Parliamentary Party (the ambiguity is itself revealing), Synge’s remark points to an almost institutionalized Irish hypocrisy: a Catholic nationalist obsession with home rule government without any consideration whatsoever of the many faults and problems of Irish society.\textsuperscript{6}
\end{quote}

It is, frankly, difficult to take seriously the argument that only those without faults or hypocrisy deserve self-government, or the equally troubling view that simply because Synge saw Catholicism as hypocritical that it was necessarily so. However, Pilkington is so bent on vindicating Synge’s work that he fails to see any of the ideological shortcomings inherent in the depiction of the religious lives of the Mayoites found in \textit{Playboy}.

The only critic to explicitly confront this troubling aspect of Synge’s play is Seamus Deane. Deane rejects the prevailing critical view that the community suffers as a result of its religious beliefs, and recasts our attention firmly back to the political realities of the day:

\begin{quote}
The poverty and the limited incestuous nature of the society is hinted at on several occasions. Yet famine, eviction, military oppression and landlordism, the characteristic facts of late-nineteenth-century Irish rural existence for the peasantry are almost entirely repressed features of the text. The peasant society that Synge knew was dying because it had been atrociously oppressed – not because it had lost contact with the heroic energies which its early literature had once exhibited.
\end{quote}

Synge aestheticizes the problem of oppression by converting it into the issue of heroism. The oppression is finally understood as self-inflicted by the community.\textsuperscript{7}

This is an important corrective to readings of the play that work to vindicate its sometimes troubling glee that Synge seems to take from what he sees as the backwardness and hopelessness of Catholic rural life. Pilkington might have done well to take Deane’s arguments about Synge’s ideological investments more seriously. While I genuinely believe that Deane’s reading of the play has to be acknowledged as getting the history more accurate than other, later critical work, it does not ultimately get us closer to understanding why Synge makes the seemingly inexplicable choice of denouncing the Catholic victims of colonisation. He may well have been critiquing the bourgeois ideology of the nascent state, as critics like Declan Kiberd\textsuperscript{8} and Lionel Pilkington\textsuperscript{9} contend, but even these remarks of a generally apologetic nature fail to account for much of what we read
in these plays. It is not that these arguments are simply counter-intuitive; rather, they simply depart too readily from the words on the page, suggesting Synge’s subtle and incisive intervention in this debate, but too quickly looking past the criticism of the Irish peasantry that is evident in much of Synge’s writing. It is relatively easy to cast Synge as a diligent critic of a state ideology, but it is somewhat more difficult to explain why this criticism is proffered, first and foremost, against the peasantry. Nicholas Grene offers what may be the most reasonable explanation of Synge’s seemingly self-contradictory engagement with Irish nationalism and the peasantry:

There is a sense in Synge of a sort of helplessness in the face of drives of his own imagination, as if he could not himself understand why the convinced cultural nationalist that he was, with a genuinely sincere admiration for the Irish peasants, should have produced plays about them which were satiric to the point of caricature.10

Synge and the language of desire

The argument that Synge is venting his anti-nationalism rather than his anti-Catholicism hardly addresses all of the problems we might encounter with Synge’s politics, and nor is it meant to. However, it is certain that Synge’s criticisms were not directed primarily at the most immediate and obvious objects of it, the Mayoites themselves, but rather at nationalist politicians and Literary Revivalists who infused their own aesthetic constructions of the community – for Yeats and Lady Gregory this was ‘the people’ while for politicians this was ‘the nation’ – with more political and historical enchantment and ideological weight than it could bear. Many, if not most, readings of Synge see him as critical of Revivalist investments in the purity and simplicity of peasant life, or against what Gregory Castle has called the Revival’s ‘redemptive ethnography’ of rural Catholics.11 However, my view is that Synge was not only distancing himself from specific inscriptions of the rural Ireland that were pervasive during the Revival: the deeper point that Synge makes in Playboy is about the manner in which mythical and Romanticised identities too frequently outstrip culturally and politically viable ones. This is Synge’s more important corrective to Revival practices: he is not simply critiquing its content when it glorifies rural Ireland, but he is also critiquing the ideological practice by which language or art comes to displace reality in its offering up of counter-truths that have little or no historical or material validity. The nationalist and Revivalist reification of the peasantry was the specific instantiation of this practice that Synge chose to demystify, but it is both ideological content and rhetorical strategy that Synge wants to draw critical attention towards. As Synge shows repeatedly in Playboy, and also in plays like In the Shadow of a Glen, ideology and desire move with the speed of language, and as such are always on the verge of surpassing the real that they are claiming to simply represent or explain.

This important point comes through in Synge’s incisive thematising of the relationship between language – or, more specifically, with what we have come to call the symbolic function of language – and event in Playboy, and it is largely with this aspect of the play that the remainder of this discussion is engaged. What Synge wants to show is that language is not, strictly speaking, separable from reality, but neither is it incontestably reliable as a representation of that reality. Language is symbolic in that it runs alongside the real, at times in pursuit of it and at times in an obvious attempt to obscure its recognition, or even what I am calling its ‘arrival’. This capacity of language to speak and obscure at the same time is, of course, a signal interest of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and there are many important parallels between how Synge is figuring the relationship between language, reality and desire in Playboy, and how Lacan sees language as emerging from
the subject and the Other simultaneously. In his essay ‘The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’, Lacan describes language as not always or essentially motivated by desire, but as nevertheless prevailingly motivated in this way: ‘I have tackled the function of speech in analysis from its least rewarding angle, that of “empty” speech, where the subject seems to be talking in vain about someone who, even if he were his spitting image, can never become one with the assumption of his desire.’

For Synge and Lacan, language is first and foremost the conduit of desire, the field or endeavour whereby the real is only ever tenuously grasped as a pretext for the articulation of dread, desire, ideology, rationalisation, delusion, love, etc. So it is not simply that in Playboy we see language operating, at times, with little regard for reality – that is obviously the case – but rather that Synge, like Lacan, is interested in what is articulated in the inter-dit, in the gaps of utterance, and even by the gaps in any utterance; that is, meaning is formed by what is said and what cannot be said, and what is almost said. In the seminar known as ‘The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious’, Lacan both articulates and enacts this capacity of language to both present and repress meaning:

What this structure of the signifying chain discloses is the possibility I have, precisely, in so far as I have this language in common with other subjects, that is to say, in so far as it exists as language, to use it in order to signify something quite other than what it says (emphasis in the original). This function of speech is more worth pointing out than that of ‘disguising the thought’ (more often than not indefinable) of the subject; it is no less than the function of indicating the place of this subject in the search for the true.

I do not wish, here, to offer a thoroughgoing application of Lacan’s thinking to Synge’s play, but rather wish simply to demonstrate that in a number of important scenes inSynge’s play we find characters both articulating and simultaneously stifling desire as they speak. For my purposes, it is enough to note that in Playboy a symbolic apparition of the present always runs the risk of being fatally out of step with the real, and in this gap between reality and representation, or between the present (as it is trying to form itself in the material world) and its representation in language by characters in the work, we see the seeds of chronic disaffection and failure, both for the characters themselves and for the community they form. For Synge, language can, when it is romantically charged, disengage itself from reality and become the scene of myth making and hopelessly unfulfilled personal and communal desire. And while most readings of Playboy call attention to the obvious importance of representation in the world that is staged here, critics have yet to take up the idea that Synge is critiquing the incongruous temporality of language and reality at the heart of Irish nationalism, and the Revivalist ethnography that catered to it, while simultaneously working to expunge such romantic animism from the intertwined worlds of Irish culture and politics. Discourses of the eternal peasantry and the soul of the nation sat poorly, for Synge at least, alongside modern bourgeois nationalism. What is equally compelling, at least from a cultural or literary historian’s perspective, is how Synge found a place for himself within the Revival, despite what has to be seen as his antipathy for the role that art would have to play in this romanticisation and inflation of the peasantry. Near the end of the paper I will offer a brief sense of how Synge works to resolve this ambivalence, at least in Playboy.

It has proved difficult to appreciate the full importance of what Synge is saying about language and its relationship to politics, history, and identity in Playboy. The generally astute Seamus Deane, in fact, suggests that, for Synge, language plays an ultimately and unequivocally positive role in the lives of his characters: ‘No longer imprisoned by sea or cottage, by age or politics, the Synge heroes and heroines chat themselves off stage, out of history, into legend.’ However, language is not simply dynamic and emancipatory for
Synge, since it also has the ability to outstrip events, to describe a present that cannot come into being, or to promise a future that will never arrive. When a character does this we might see it as comic, but Synge’s play moves up a dialectical register to examine the consequences of an entire community indulging in symbolic and mythical delusion. This is, by my reading, the central political argument advanced in *Playboy*, and the one that most readily connects it to the politics of nationalism in early twentieth-century Ireland. Ultimately, *Playboy* considers the gap that opens between events and their representation, and offers the view that this temporal lag can be the chasm into which emancipatory moments, so pregnant with affect and possibility, sometimes plummet. For Synge, as we will see, the regeneration of the community is promised within nationalist discourse, but this ideological project describes a present for itself that it cannot successfully bring into being, and Synge’s sometimes comic and sometimes tragic critique revolves around the pervasive deferral of hope and desire that impels itself into the lives of the Mayoites.

**Tenuous desire and empty speech in *Playboy***

Synge’s play evidences, in almost every scene, the chronic emptiness of speech and language, the deferral of desire, and the inability of words to reliably point back to reality in the lives of the Mayoites. We see Synge’s engagement with language, literally, from the opening scene of the play, in Shawn’s exchange with Pegeen. Shawn enters the shebeen while Pegeen is writing a letter and asks whether Michael James has arrived, to find that he has not. Shawn’s sometimes cloying sense of propriety dictates that his own arrival should only happen under certain conditions, the first and foremost of which is the presence of Michael James. Despite this keen sense of decorum, he does enter, albeit with an apology for his presence:

Shawn: *(turning towards the door again).* I stood a while outside wondering would I have a right to pass on or to walk in and see you, Pegeen Mike *(comes to fire)*, and I could hear the cows breathing, and sighing in the stillness of the air, and not a step moving any place from this gate to bridge.¹⁵

Shawn’s speech is directly engaged with the problematic of arrival, as, by the way, is the letter that Pegeen is writing itemising the things needed for the upcoming wedding. I will discuss the letter at greater length momentarily, but first I want to suggest that one of the important nuances of the earliest exchange of the play is that Shawn’s discourse expresses a level of poetic beauty that is not often recognised by critics of *Playboy*. Pegeen is going to fall in love with Christy partly because of his poetic speech, but here she simply responds to Shawn’s burgeoning poetry by providing the information that he requests: ‘It’s above the cross-roads he is, meeting Philly Cullen: and a couple more are going along with him to Kate Cassidy’s wake.’¹⁶ My view is that Synge is suggesting early on that Shawn, and not Christy, as poet-hero-lover may well be on the verge of arriving in the present, but this arrival is fraught for him because of his obsession with both religion and decorum, and also because of the image of himself that the community continuously reflects back to him. Like Christy will in just a few minutes, Shawn obliges the community by behaving in the manner expected of him, and while for Christy this means ascending to the heights of a heroism for which he is unfit, for Shawn it means conforming to an identity that delimits his potential. With both characters, however, we see an identity constructed linguistically by the community that the characters themselves accept as seamlessly real.

Importantly, Shawn cannot express his full love for Pegeen, it seems, because he is waiting for yet another arrival in this scene that is in every way obsessed with belated
or impossible arrivals. He says to Pegeen: ‘Aren’t we after making a good bargain, the way we’re only waiting these days on Father Reilly’s dispensation from the bishop, or the Court of Rome.' This last observation records some sense on the part of Shawn that events in Mayo are dictated from afar – whether that be Rome or London – and that there is a temporal lag between the written representation and the events themselves. Furthermore, that Pegeen is first writing a letter, then addressing the envelope, and finally affixing a stamp to it, can hardly be overlooked in the context of the discussion that Synge is staging in the important opening scene of the play. The letter is an instrument of communication and community that has built into it, of course, a temporal lag. The post, as Jacques Derrida and others have shown, functions by a logic of disclosure and deferral, and in the opening scene of *Playboy* this is especially important: Pegeen is ordering materials and supplies for her impending wedding to Shawn, and this wedding, while it has all of the false promise of a regenerative beginning, will ultimately only serve to sediment existing and debilitating realities. The wedding, then, is on the verge of arriving, but is caught within a network of deferral that simultaneously heralds and postpones it, and potentially precludes its ultimate arrival.

Equally importantly, the sending of the letter identifies Pegeen, and the village itself, as subjects of a centrally administered colonial regime. The Irish postal system ‘was established in 1657, by the same Act of British Parliament that set [the rates] for the English postal system’. However, this system was relatively independent from the British system, and was administered in Dublin rather than London until 1831, when it was increasingly synchronised with its English counterpart. It was, however, only at the end of the nineteenth century that the Irish postal system became fully integrated within the British Post Office. Synge, then, uses the postal system as the first sign in the play that the villagers are administered by a distant colonial regime, and that this level of administration has worked a degree of deferral and self-alterity into the community itself. We see numerous examples of this self-difference throughout the work, especially in *Playboy*’s comical discussion of the heroes who are continually lauded but never emulated in this environment. Moreover, at the conclusion of the play, the community’s changeability is going to be amply shown in their denunciation of Christy. This may well be yet another important and generally unacknowledged way in which Synge can be seen to counter Revivalist ethnographic assumptions regarding the eternality and conservatism of rural communities: Synge shows us a village in Mayo that, whatever else its drawbacks, is capable of rapid change and of a relatively effortless absorption of outsiders.

It is telling, however, that the post does not simply enable a system of diverse and sometimes anonymous communication. The letter’s receiver is, in some ways, an intimate interlocutor: the two both know Jimmy Farrell well enough that he is named as the conveyor of the goods listed. The postal system seems somehow too abstract and formal for the world of the play, and its incongruity in this environment is exactly the point. Mayo is becoming modern from the top down, as it were, and is in constant danger of not resembling itself. Furthermore, the presumed modernity that the postal system might lend to the community is mitigated by the fact that the goods are to be delivered on a creel cart. While it may strike a contemporary reader as an enviable sign of intimacy between citizens that the vendor and the consumer know the shipper, it still has to be seen as in some ways ominous that the community itself is relatively small even while it is part of a larger administrative unit, and that its precarious place within that larger system will be consequential as the community struggles to maintain a sense of identity with itself. The idea that the community indeed borrows its identity from afar is amply demonstrated
by the various changes that inscribe themselves in it with Christy’s arrival: like their own sense of themselves, he comes from elsewhere.

For Synge, this habit of borrowed, repeated, and deferred schemes of identification was debilitating in the lives of the people he represents in *Playboy*, and this is shown often in the play. For example, Christy’s entrance in the play revolves around tropics of delay and deferral. In fact, Christy Mahon arrives twice: once prior to his actual entrance in the form of Shawn’s report, and then, just moments afterwards, as a physical form. It is, in fact, more accurate to state that two different Christys arrive: the first is entirely a figment of Shawn Keogh’s anxieties about ‘the other’ – in this case an injured stranger – and the second is a timid and downtrodden wanderer, in every way as anxious as Shawn himself. While Christy has done nothing more threatening than lie in a ditch in obvious pain, Shawn offers the following characterisation of him:

Shawn: The queer dying fellow’s beyond looking over the ditch. He’s coming up, I’m thinking, stealing your hens. (Looks over his shoulder.) God help me, he’s following me now (he runs into the room), and if he’s heard what I said, he’ll be having my life, and I going home lonesome in the darkness of the night.20

That Shawn’s comments conclude with explicit self-reference points us to the fact that what he has just said is more about himself than Christy. That is, his projection onto Christy of all manner of criminal and odious intent tells us about Shawn’s anxieties, and, through him, something of the guarded nature of this small, but not xenophobic, community. While he can have no way of knowing that Christy has committed a crime, his imputation of criminal behaviour to the stranger makes clear his view that all strangers are potentially dangerous. His language outstrips events, and while readers are right to find many of the instances of linguistic and material dissonance – by which I mean simply the gap between what is said and what is actually happening – comic, these moments nevertheless accumulate in the play to the point where all individual and communal sense of self is lost in the gulf between the symbolic and the real. Needless to say, for Synge this is the selfsame gulf that opens between nationalist and Revival rhetoric and the reality of economic and political affairs in Ireland.

This pattern of dissonance between language and event is explored in a number of ways in the play, and is the chief temporal and ideological device that prevents what I am calling the arrival of the present. Critics are, of course, quick to seize on the opening scene of act two, where Christy is admiring his reflection in the mirror, and tend to offer the fairly trustworthy view that within the mirror Christy is starting to delude himself about the veracity of the identity that has been foisted upon him by the villagers. Synge’s plays are replete with such deluded and mock-heroic characters. I would add, however, that two other significant issues are being explored early in act two: the first is that Synge may well be suggesting that nationalism and Revival aesthetics cater to each other as immediately as do subject and reflection. But what is more compelling yet is the notion that the real reflection going on in this scene may not be visual at all, but is rather recorded in Christy’s linguistic rehearsal of the identity that he is in the process of acquiring. An essential element of this identity will be explored in this act: Christy has to be able to disseminate the heroic vision that he has acquired not only to those that gave it to him but to others as well. When the village girls (Sara, Susan, and Honor; Shawn has sent them, most likely to distract Christy’s affection for Pegeen) enter the shebeen, we see that Christy has so convinced himself of the validity of his new identity that he effortlessly embodies it in the presence of a new audience. While this is obviously a significant scene in Christy’s progress towards the mock-heroic, understood as it appears late in the play and involving...
his ability to move past communal reflection of his status, it is also an important moment in our understanding of the speed with which myth and forms of delusion spread throughout the community. The girls and Widow Quin, deprived of ‘nothing worthwhile to confess at all’\(^{21}\) are keen to participate in the mythic construction of Christy, but they find this process complete, or at least nearly so, early in act two. It is important to note that earlier in the play, when prompted by leading questions, Christy tended to accept and assimilate the suggestion implicit in the question or comment. For example, when Michael asks him if he buried his father’s corpse, he responds ‘Aye. I buried him then. Wasn’t I digging spuds in the field?’\(^{22}\) It is not true that Christy buried his father, of course, but it makes for a better story, and also shows us that early in the play Christy is taking his identity, in part, from the community. Later, however, he rejects the inclusion of suggested material from the Widow Quin, who appears to be testing the veracity of his back-story. After Christy recounts, yet again, the supposed initial moment of conflict between himself and Old Mahon, the Widow Quin says ‘So you hit him then.’\(^{23}\) Christy responds in a way that amply demonstrates that he is now taking a greater degree of control over his own narrative: ‘I did not. “I won’t wed her”, says I, “when all know she did suckle me for six weeks when I cam into the world’’.\(^{24}\) My point, then, is that act two revolves around the trope of reflection in both an immediate and somewhat more expansive way. While it begins with Christy’s famous scene in front of the looking-glass, it grows to include the somewhat more complex rendering of ‘reflection’ in Christy’s returning the identity given to him back to the community from whence it came. Indeed, he is doing this too liberally, as the characters complain about the frequency with which Christy tells the story of his murdered father, more in an effort to convince himself, it appears, than others.

Extrapolating from the immediacy of the lives of the characters to the political realities that these figures allegorise, what we see in act two is that the heroic narrative becomes domesticated and loses much of its cache. This is emphasised when Shawn Keogh offers Christy rewards if he will leave, and Christy responds by taking Shawn’s clothes even while he will not promise to fulfil his part of the bargain. Most immediately, by taking Shawn’s clothes Christy is becoming domesticated in this world, but also, and I think more significantly, bargains, contracts, agreements and the like are all part of the catalogue of speech acts introduced in act two that have the cumulative, if sometimes contradictory goal, of stabilising a status quo that can thrive after the disruption to community that is represented by Christy’s first arrival. Importantly, if act one represents Christy’s quick apotheosis, then act two settles back into a reality dominated by the Widow Quin, who is able to manipulate the characters and ensure that whatever the marital outcome, it is likely that she will benefit from it. She makes a deal with Shawn to prevent the wedding between Christy and Pegeen, and the same bargain with Christy to guarantee that Pegeen marries him. In some sense, then, act two is the most important in the play, given that it is here we see the restoration of important social contracts and relationships that will come to represent a challenge for Christy. These contracts are also important to the present discussion because they represent moments where, through the agency of a speech act, a character – or two working in concert – attempt either to stabilise a status quo or bring about an advantageous future by simple collusion or deception. That is, in the two scenes of barter that we see in act two we come to glimpse a process that is central to what Playboy is saying about social and political events of every description: there is a discrepancy between their linguistic and material apparitions, and while it is possible for the linguistic to get far ahead of the material, this in no way means that events will ever catch up to the reality promised in language.
But act two also involves an important moment of temporal eclipse, and is therefore at the heart of the argument I want to make about Synge’s sense of chronic deferral and the inability of the present to form itself in the village. Old Mahon arrives, and the certainty that he will return imbues a kind of hopeless temporality into the lives of the principals of the play. If not for this second intrusion from the outside world (Christy’s was the first), the comic doings and undoings of the characters could proceed more or less unhindered and without much serious consequence. But the drama in *Playboy* moves forward despite the obvious hopelessness impelled into the play by the certainty of Old Mahon’s return. Most obviously, Christy and Pegeen are going to make plans that never have a possibility of coming to fruition, or, to put it differently, they are hesitatingly living a present that is built on a past that never happened. That Synge is critiquing nationalism and the Revival that catered to it is obvious at this point in the play, since he saw both as collective delusions that were grounded in fictional historiographies. It is also certain that Pegeen’s utter hopelessness comes through clearly in the later scenes of the play, since even while she doubts that Old Mahon is really dead – she does, after all, continue to check the newspapers to no avail – she permits herself the possibility, now becoming delusional, that Christy has managed to free himself from the past and from his community (such as it is) and hopes she can do the same.

I want to conclude this reading of the play by looking at two intrinsically connected scenes very close to the end of the work. The first is the report of the donkey race which Christy wins as part of the test of his manhood, and the second, which also explores the tragic and comic potentials that issue from the power of language to move readily past the events it should work to describe, transpires when Christy woos Pegeen. That the donkey race takes place off stage is understandable enough: technical difficulties associated with actually bringing the animals on stage might be seen as prohibitive. Equally importantly, however, the race happens off stage, like many important events in *Playboy*, because this makes acute its status as both linguistic and physical phenomena, and it is the impossible simultaneity of these two aspects of the ‘event’ that Synge wants to consider. To state this somewhat more simply, the ‘race’ as a physical phenomenon goes slowly enough: Christy is able to fall off his mount and still win, which is a testament to its other than breakneck pace. The race is also the occasion of impassioned cheering, bantering, prediction, and general dialogue that actually moves much faster than the animals and jockeys (84).

The consequential, and what, in a comedy at any rate, would be climactic scene of the play transpires just after the report of the donkey races. Pegeen and Christy are hesitantly planning their future together, and are trying, I would argue, to bring a reality into being that, they hope, will survive its utterance and be translated into event. Christy and Pegeen are speaking with a sincerity that has not only been lacking in their own communications up to this point but has indeed been unseen in any of the communication shared by any of the characters to this point.

The scene begins perhaps typically enough, with Christy wooing Pegeen, and she coyly enquiring as to whether there is any substance to his speech or if it is simple romantic verbosity. She notes that it would be hard to meet ‘a young man was your like for eloquence, or talk at all’. Christy responds by saying ‘Let you wait, to hear me talking, till we’re astray in Erris’, and the promise here is twofold: not only does he promise to take her away and marry her but he also promises, more generally, to turn his words into deeds. The difficulty of this is going to become apparent as the scene progresses, and comes through most clearly when Pegeen reasserts that ‘we’re only talking, maybe’ about a future that can only come into being as a figment of discourse and never as a series
of real events. The exchange between the two makes explicit reference to speech, speech acts, and the words ‘talk’ and ‘talking’ in almost every passage of dialogue, alerting the reader not only to the tentativeness of the characters but also their growing awareness that this continued speech represents both the desire for a future and the persistent deferral of that desire. Rather than being a mechanism by which the present can be re-conceived, speech is here the device that precludes the arrival of what it promises.

Ultimately, however, the present does arrive, or – perhaps what is more accurate – one actual present out of a number of possible ones finally comes into being. The last arrival of Old Mahon, which, like Christy’s arrival earlier is an arriving-twice, secures the fate of the principals involved. After an understandable fit of hostility, Old Mahon settles back into himself and, despite what is now Christy’s second attempt to murder him, reaches a compromise with the son-turned-master:

Old Mahon: … My son and myself will be going our own way, and we’ll have great times from this out telling stories of the villainy of Mayo, and the fools is here. (To Christy, who is freed.) Come on now.

Christy: Go with you, is it? I will then, like a gallant captain with his heathen slave. Go on now and I’ll see you from this day stewing my oatmeal and washing my spuds, for I’m master of all fights now. (Pushing Mahon.) Go on, I’m saying.28

In the context of the discussion elaborated above about the relationship between speech and ‘the present’ in this play, Christy’s crowning of the new dispensation with the phrase ‘I’m saying’ has to be seen as paramount. The point has finally arrived in the play where reality is going to converge with its description by a character, and this is the point where some semblance of rational order is introduced into the world of the play. Ironically, it is also the point at which it leaves the play, in Synge’s final comical suggestion that the truth cannot be uttered in the Western world, since the latter is too hostile to reality to accept it. The superstition, myths, and irrationality exhibited in Mayo are to be told to others as a cautionary tale. It perhaps takes little imagination to see Old Mahon as the voice of Synge himself, who is doing exactly this kind of demystifying work in Playboy.

If this moment ends a certain discussion that is staged in Playboy about reason, language, and the formation of the present, it certainly opens up another one. Critics of the play have generally not paid enough attention to a subtlety that, whether intended or not, is intrinsic to the play’s argument about language, chronic disaffection, and the community depicted here. Moreover, it is really at this point in the play where we can grasp Synge’s deep ambivalence about the Revival and the way it became something like the cultural arm of the nationalist romanticisation of the peasantry. Any story that concludes with ‘the villainy of Mayo and the fools is [there]’, should, properly speaking, begin with Old Mahon’s tyranny and Christy’s attempted parricide, as this violent act, committed far from Mayo, is the foundational one in Playboy: without Old Mahon’s tyranny and Christy’s first attempt at murder, Christy would not wander around the countryside and arrive in the shebeen. It is difficult to believe, however, that Old Mahon and Christy will continuously recount their own ‘villainy’ and foolishness as part of the tale of the Western world. Rather, they are, to employ an important concept from Roland Barthes, ‘exnominating’ themselves from the world of myth and foolishness: their story imputes chronic foolishness to others as a way of masking their own complicity in the events, and will succeed, despite the fact that their own irrationalism and violence have generated subsequent events. In his essay ‘Myth Today’, Barthes formulates the important but relatively under-considered concept of ‘exnomination’ as the key to understanding the
political and philosophical agenda of bourgeoisie liberal rhetoric. ‘Exnomination’ refers to the rhetorical strategy by which the bourgeoisie attempts to mask its own interests in a discourse of universality and ahistoricity: ‘The political vocabulary of the bourgeoisie already postulates that the universal exists: for it, politics is already a representation, a fragment of ideology.’ The bourgeoisie, then, can ‘lose its name without risk’, since its political agenda becomes naturalised as the obvious, the ethical, and, most importantly, the universal. This essay is also, for Barthes, surprisingly pessimistic, in that he contends that all political resistance to bourgeoisie ideology amounts to ‘a political richness’ by which he means that it only serves to fill out the political spectrum without effectually challenging bourgeoisie ideology and the stability of the nation-state on which it relies.

It is clear that Synge is working to demystify the process by which Irish Revivalists and nationalists attempted to exnominate themselves from politics by both universalising their own political views and, concomitantly, by projecting their own political and ideological desires onto the peasantry. The nation, in their view, was composed not of an economically self-interested bourgeoisie and gombeen men, but rather of an eternal and glorious peasantry that had an organic relationship to the land. That Synge demystifies this nationalist conceit is laudable; however, he is, troublingly, also wishing away his own status as a politically interested observer of debates as they were unfolding in Ireland in the early twentieth century. Indeed, this may help us to understand why it has proved so difficult for critics to discern Synge’s political views: critics like Cusack see him as an uncomplicated nationalist, while others, like Pilkington, see him as espousing the merits of Protestant individuality and constructive unionism. With Synge, every point on the continuum joining unionism and nationalism seems equally likely to be the place from which his own political voice emerges, and this, in large measure, is due to the fact that the author of Playboy, in a fashion similar to Old Mahon at the end of the work, wants to efface his own role in the story, exnominating himself from the fraught world of Irish politics even while he is implicated fully within it.

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Notes
2. Synge, Playboy, 77.
3. Pilkington, Theatre and the State, 53.
5. Synge, Playboy, 65.
6. Pilkington, Theatre and the State, 52.
8. Importantly, though, Kiberd offers this argument after citing a number of the more dubious things that Synge, in fact, had written about the peasantry. For example, Kiberd cites a letter Synge had written shortly after the riots, where he states ‘the wildness and, if you will, vices of the Irish peasantry are due, like their extraordinary good points, to the richness of their character’ (emphasis in the original) (Kiberd, Inventing Ireland, 169). This might seem ultimately laudatory, but it nevertheless rehearses a negative stereotype, and it is comments like this that make it difficult to place Synge definitively in terms of the prevailing conceits of the Revival.
9. Pilkington, Theatre and the State, 41. Writing on In the Shadow of a Glen, Pilkington argues: ‘it is as if Synge’s play assumes that Irish political autonomy has already been achieved, and that the time has now arrived for a bracing programme of national self-examination’.
13. Ibid., 155.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 59.
18. See, for example, Derrida’s *The Post Card* and Bennington’s incisive essay ‘Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation’.
19. This is a mistake, since there was no British Parliament in 1657. Surprisingly, however, no history of the Irish post office has yet been written. The information provided here is from the online philately resource at Napex (www.napex.org).
21. Ibid., 97.
22. Ibid., 75.
23. Ibid., 103. Early in act II, Christy performs this gesture of contradicting the prompts of others on a number of occasions, which shows not only that he is making the story his own but also that he has rehearsed it often in his mind since the previous evening. In fact, Honor comments that ‘He tells [his story] lovely’ (103), recognising how well rehearsed it is.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 147.
26. Ibid., 149. In fact, it is curious and appropriate how often Christy mentions other places – towns, lakes, etc. – in this short scene. He has clearly come to see identity as attached to community (and place) and knows that redefining the former requires changing the latter.
27. Ibid., 149.
28. Ibid., 173.
30. Ibid., 139.
31. Ibid.

**Bibliography**
