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DISTORTIONS OF CHARACTER IN JOHN B. KEANE'S PEASANT PLAYS

Writing peasant plays in the Europe of the second half of the 20th century sounds anachronistic. Yet in a country like Ireland, where - due to various external and internal circumstances - the ancient, basically rural form of life together with its values and traditions, survived well into the 20th century, life itself produced material and inspiration for such plays.

It is no surprise that the tradition of peasant drama in Ireland - like in Hungary - is very strong. The peasants, as long as they lived in closed communities, structurally untouched by changing circumstances, were justly regarded - again, similarly to many romantic and realistic views in the Hungary of the last century as well as the first half of the twentieth - as those preserving the national cultural values, and, indeed, national identity. The literature that claimed to be national in spirit, was to be built on this culture - which was, of course, of special importance in countries struggling for cultural and political independence. Yeats, among others, makes it part of the programme for creating national drama at the turn of the century: "Every national dramatic movement or theatre in countries like Bohemia and Hungary, as in Elizabethan England, has arisen out of a study of the common people, who preserve national characteristics more than any other class." (1962:222) Accordingly, peasant or folk plays have constituted one of the main lines of Irish drama ever since. Yet reality, as well as attitudes to it, have changed from time to time. First, rural life was idealized (another feature familiar in Hungarian literature), later, or partly parallel, a more realistic and thus more contradictory vision was given by the greatest master of Irish peasant plays, Synge. He influenced later generations with his comic, ironic view, his grotesqueries and his indulgence in rich, colourful, graphic language, the eloquence and

vitality of his dialogues. But Synge's Ireland is a disappearing world and his successors are often concerned as much with the backwardness and contradictions of life untouched for centuries as with changes from bad to worse and the juxtaposition of the old and the new. These playwrights either present the passing of a civilization with brooding melancholy and nostalgia, like Michael J. Molloy, or "transmute old Ireland into fantasy", like, for instance George Fitzmaurice, while others, such as John B. Keane, "show it grappling with the modern world". (BUSIRUI, 1972: 273)

By the time Keane entered the literary, or rather the theatrical world, the genre of peasant drama had more or less lost its vigour. His first play, Sive (1959), created a real sensation: "the rediscovery by the urbanized Ireland of the rural background from whence it had sprung was quite traumatic in the age which saw the establishment of Shannon New Town, the first jumbo jets carrying the Irish insignia, the inauguration of the television service, and the first Programme for Economic Expansion." (FITZ-SIMON, 1983:191) Keane has his greatest strength in revitalizing the peasant drama, although his later plays break away from this traditional line. In his plays depicting the past and the changing present of his region (county Kerry, in the South-West of Ireland, a long way away from Dublin), where life is "larger than life" and is truer and richer than in Dublin (HOGAN, 1967: 208), he excels in his vigorous realism of character, situation and language, based on observation of, and indeed, participation in, country life. A realism that does not refrain from inherent brutality and violence but is often elevated through some imaginative theatrical scene, giving the ordinary a touch of the mythic or the ritual.

The world of the Irish peasant play is a strange one with its own laws and values, showing deep kinship in reality and in literature with many aspects of Hungarian peasant life. The cruel and savage rules directing this half-pagan, half-Christian life are partly necessary for survival, but under this necessity human life often becomes distorted into something wild and inhuman. The plays of Synge already border on this wildness and inhumanity but the author's understanding sympathy softens the sharpness of his criticism and irony. Keane's world is even

more overtly cruel, harsh and uncompromising, although he too, tries to understand the motives of such actions and behaviour.

The most often recurring themes of Irish peasant plays are centred around the land and the house: hunger for land, property, money: marriage - often as the result of matchmaking - as a means of acquiring land and property or connecting land and family; emigration as an escape from misery and its reverse: homecoming, and, in connection with all these, the relationship of the people to the law and the church. Keane's early plays give interesting examples of how he explores some of these subjects and how he dramatizes the distortions that these concerns can lead to.

Keane's first and very powerful play, Sive, shows one possibility of renewing the peasant drama. Its theme, matchmaking, is not particularly Irish. The basic story of the innocent young girl forced to marry an old rich man was already known from the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, where it led to a happy ending. In Irish folk songs and ballads - just like in many Hungarian ballads, too the dark and tragic dimensions of the same situation are fully acted out: the only escape possible for the young girl is death.

This well-known story in Sive receives vivid and unique treatment. On the one hand, the peasant milieu is created with faithful realism: the everyday activities, the miserable conditions, the pathetic relationships among the characters come to life on the stage in numerous well-observed, small details. The greed for land and money, which originates in misery but results in sacrificing human life, is painted with almost as dark colours as in Kodolányi's Földindulás ('Landslide'). Tragedy looms very heavily in the Hungarian play, and, although at the end it resolves in a hope for renewal, frightful examples show to what deformation of character and desolation of life the preference for material riches may lead. Sive ends with tragedy, and in this play some lighter tone is touched in the occasional comedy of character and situation. This is in accordance with the greater sense for irony and tragicomedy in Irish literature in general than in the altogether more tragic main line of Hungarian.

What elevates Sive above the level of naturalism and particularity is its ballad-like quality. Some critics claim that Sive's character lacks

psychological insight since she is too innocent and weak to defend herself. (MACANNA, 1985) But it is exactly this innocence and inability to defend herself that makes her so similar to many heroines of Irish and Hungarian folk ballads (for example those of "the sold girl" or "the sold daughter" type of ballads in our culture). She does not even get anywhere close to the possibility of choice or decision. She is destroyed due to the sins, faults and weaknesses of others, not to her own flaws. Indeed, her life is fated since before her birth as she is an illegitimate child with all the consequences. Other people act towards her like Fate, against which she is helpless; partly, the members of her family, whose power over her is fortified by the strong, traditional hierarchy, partly, the devilish matchmaker with his black force. This matchmaker could be the conventional stage-figure of the intriguer, but here he is both a character, a part of the village community, and also the embodiment of Evil. One of the great merits of the play is just this combination of the vivid realism of characters with their archetypal quality. Thus, for instance, Mena, the practical-minded, determined, hard-working - and, as her name suggests: rather mean - peasant woman, who rules over the family yet has become embittered and dried out over the years in her struggle for survival, is a flesh-and-blood character and also the embodiment of some aspects of the eternal woman who has to look after and support the family no matter what the circumstances are. Her husband, a well-drawn peasant figure, is also the type of the weak-in-will man, the old Adam, who accepts the apple from Eve - the shameful yet tempting offer of his wife. In *Sive herself* Christ-like innocence and suffering are contrasted with the demonic contrivances of the overtly Satan-like matchmaker.

The play is given a ritual dimension especially by the appearances of the two travelling tinkers - again fairly frequent figures of Irish plays. But they also become singers, story-tellers or bards, living conscience and judges, poets and prophets (the Irish spirit having the same association between poet and seer as the Hungarian), all at the same time, while also being embedded in a realistic vision of Irish country life. They are described by some critics as a "miniature Greek chorus" (O'TOOLE, 1985:1), but I see them much closer to our minstrels ("regösök"), who, with their magic, incantatory blessing or cursing songs

bring good luck to the Good and frighten away the Evil. Or at least that should happen. But with their very beings they step out of the past or a passing world, and turn out to be powerless to fight against the dark forces of misery and greed in this changing reality, and the most they can do is lament the death of Sive at the end and turn it into legend.

If some figures in Sive were distorted by misery and greed, they remained well within the confines of realistic probability. Distortions in Sharon's Grave (1960) are closer to fantasy and sometimes verge on the supernatural. Here, behind the greed for property an even more powerful force works: the repressed sexual drive. In Irish literature this is a fairly rare subject, and Keane treats it with unusual intensity.

The peasant milieu is given through realistic detail in this play, too, like in the others, but the extraordinary soon intrudes into the ordinary in two ways. One is the presence of the legend as part of reality, introduced by Neelus, the young man whose admiration for and attraction to the legendary princess, Sharon, drove him into a harmless yet disturbing insanity. The other is the increasingly menacing appearances of the devilish hunchback, Dinzie.

The two young men embody two excesses of love and/or sex. The hunchback, being distorted inside as much as outside, is ready to bully, beat or kill in order to achieve his purpose. He wishes to possess his cousin's house and land by driving her out of it, so that it could attract some woman - any woman - to marry him. The situation, together with Dinzie's fanatic insistence on his plan, suggests that the poverty of these families would not make it possible for him to obtain a house of his own in any other way. Without a house and land he can never hope that any woman would marry him, so his wickedness is also rooted in a necessity for survival, just like that of Mena in the previous play. But he is different in that his cruelty combines with madness, thus making it hard sometimes to judge how far he is mad and how far merely evil. His soul certainly has become warped due to his physical disfiguration, which makes the misery much graver, and the fight for survival more savage. Ordinary human will is not enough, so he developed - or originally possessed - a demonic power which seems irresistible; although everybody hates and despises him, they also dread him. The fear of the people

around him, combined with their being nearly hypnotized by him, allows him to go on from sometimes childish mischievousness to deadly terror.

Robert Hogan suggests that both Dinzie and Neelus are obsessed by sex, but while Dinzie's obsession is diabolic, Neelus's is angelically simple and harmless (1967:214). It is certainly true that there is an almost transcendental nature to the Evil-Good opposition of these characters, but it might be more appropriate to attribute Neelus's desire to something other than sex. He lost interest in earthly women because he fell in love with the legendary princess, Sharon, who, due to the jealousy and betrayal of her handmaiden, fell into a bottomless hole and died. Good and Evil, love and hatred, innocence and jealousy appear in the legend in their pure forms. The image of the golden haired princess is the embodiment of the most perfect beauty in Neelus's fantasy, which he chooses over reality. Thus his obsession is rather with the ideal, the perfect, the unchanging, the unearthly, the world of pure values. He is similar to some of the heroes in Yeats's plays who also turn away from all the attractions of this world and follow their longing for the otherworldly, which path, of course, leads to death. The difference between Yeats's idealism and Keane's more realistic and sober peasant world is that Yeats's characters are mostly heroes and heroines, while Keane's poor Neelus is obviously insane, not only in the eyes of the other characters but also to the audience through the author's presentation.

Yet the world of fantasy is not only the property of the mad - at least not in Ireland. Kathryn Hume asserts that "western culture has traditionally been hostile and dismissive toward fantasy in most of its manifestation." (1984:148) While this is true of most of the western world, it is certainly not so in Irish culture, where the visible and the invisible, reality and fantasy have always coexisted from the ancient times up to the modern, in both life and literature. The Irish way of thinking is basically different from that in other western countries; in Richard Kearney's words: "the Irish mind remained free, in significant measure, of the linear, centralizing logic of Graeco-Roman culture which dominated most of western Europe. ... The mainstream of western thought rested upon a series of fundamental oppositions - between being and

non-being, reason and imagination, the soul and the body, the transcendently divine and the immanently temporal and so on. ... In contradistinction to the orthodox dualist logic of either/or, the Irish mind may be seen to favour a more dialectic logic of both/and: an intellectual ability to hold the traditional oppositions of classical reason together in creative confluence." (1985:9) This "double-mindedness" or "double vision" has always created very favourable ground for fantasy as an important and vital part of Irish culture.

So it is in the play: fantasy permeates reality; in some form and to some degree it touches the life of all the characters. Even the most sober and reasonable figure, Trassie, in spite of her better knowledge, half believes in the magic power of the faith-healer (who is, of course, a quack), and even though she does not hope too much that the doctor would be able to cure her brother, she is seriously afraid of his curse should she refuse his service. The men all have dreams about women, although Peadar's, the wandering thatcher's dreams about Trassie's beauty are healthy and real; Danzie's ravings are based on his evil, but still practical plans, and only Neelus's are totally other-worldly. Peadar's attitude is the ideal: he is sensitive enough to the irrational and to supernatural beauty to sympathize with Neelus's admiration for Sharon, but is sober enough to base his life on realities and to appreciate beauty in its attainable form.

Reality and fantasy are very closely interrelated not only in the way of thinking of the characters but also in the plot. The hypnotic power of Dinzie is only at the border between reality and fantasy. He is like a rural Cipolla - he even uses Cipolla's (cf., Thomas Mann: Mario and the Magician) magic equipment, the whip, but in a much ruder way. That he paralyzes most people around him is only a stretching of psychological reality. Neelus's escape into fantasy is a different matter: a total absorption. For his love for a phantom he gives up the possibility of love in reality, although in several ways he keeps contact with what is happening around him. At the beginning his fantasy seems only day-dreaming, but gradually it takes up new dimensions: it will give him courage at the end to save his sister from the very real danger of Dinzie's knife. Thus fantasy, that first diverges from the real world,

later turns back, intrudes and helps bring resolution to it. The wheel turns full circle: Neelus realizes his imaginary union with the legendary princess in her grave through a life-saving self-sacrifice. (He jumps into the grave - the abyss - carrying Dinzie on his shoulders.) His deed can be interpreted on two levels simultaneously: first, his self-sacrifice for his sister elevates him to the status of a hero; and, second, he fulfils the prophecy of the legend that Sharon will stop suffering and her handmaiden stop cursing only when "the bodies of two young men are cast into the hole. One will be small and ugly and wicked and the other will be tall and straight and pure..." (317) In other words, in his action life comes to imitate fantasy. Also, life (that of Peadar and Trassie) can go on safely in reality only at the price of Neelus's pursuit of his fantasy.

Neelus's self-sacrifice opens another dimension of the relationship between reality and fantasy: the two, combined, link the present to the past, the actual to the mythic and spiritual. The platonically ideal, the devilishly physical and destructive, and the healthy, human attraction of the three men in the play can be seen as representing heaven, hell and earth. These levels confront one another: the Satanic (Dinzie) wants to destroy the good on earth (Peadar and Trassie) but first has to get rid of the presence of angelical innocence (Neelus). At the end the good wins, when the harmless and gentle Neelus becomes the angel of vengeance and carries away Dinzie to death.

Sharon's Grave is, however, nothing like a miracle play or morality. It is not written within the framework of Christianity, but rather presents a mixture of Christian and pagan belief, much as in the Irish country people's way of thinking, pre-Christian beliefs, fears and superstitions are peacefully built into, and live side-by-side with, more orthodox Christian dogma. Neelus's self-sacrifice evokes a basic mythic situation where sacrifice is necessary in order to assure the continuation or revival of life. The image of the innocent young man picking up and carrying away the ugly, devilish, deformed creature on his back, can be regarded as a naive-grotesque presentation of a mythic Saviour or even of a Christ, who takes Evil upon himself, dies under it and enters into the other world, while saving the people in this one.

In Sive singing and music enrich the emotional impact; in Sharon's Grave fantasy, legend and the "many touches of heightened imagination" (HOGAN, 1967: 213) add a higher-than-reality dimension; whereas in The Field (1965), in Keane's best known, and perhaps best, peasant play, there is no such invocation of pure values. This play is altogether darker, more savage and brutal than the ones before. It bears a strong resemblance to the cruel, austere beauty of Móricz's short story, Barbárok, ('Barbarians'). The world of the Hungarian plain some 30 years earlier, which this miniature masterpiece brings to life, is very similar to Keane's Irish village in that both have their own laws, which are far from man-made laws of urban civilization. Both stories centre on murder committed out of greed - one for a few acres of land, the other for 300 sheep -, both treat the killing as some remnant of a past, primitive, violent world, which is, nevertheless, still very powerful. What Mihály Czine says about Barbárok, is also true of The Field: it is a cry of pain, accusation and despair, all at the same time, also self-mockery as well as the mockery of the mockers. (1979:157) One of the main differences between them lies, again, in the tone: while the Hungarian short story is heavily tragic in its atmosphere all the way through, the Irish play has comic, grimly humorous elements, which give, however, little relief from the looming fear and horror.

As greed for money in Sive, so hunger for land in The Field originates from the poverty and misery of generations. The peasant ownership of the land had been the target of long, desperate fights in Ireland much before the time of the play. But even after the Land Purchase Act of 1903, which made it possible for tenants to buy the land they cultivated, the average farms were still too small to support a large family. "The history of the relation of the Irish farmer to his soil has been one of contradiction and violence" (STADLER, 1978:45), and a constant struggle. Not that such or any circumstances justify the murder in The Field, but they provide a background which makes it understandable why violence is in the centre. It is made explicit within the play, too: "in this parish you, and your fathers before you, know only too well what it is to starve because you did not own your own land - and that has increased: this unappeasable hunger for land." (59)

Yet land is not only a practical source of life but also, just as importantly, a symbol of roots, of belonging and of continuity. In the same sense as the old Irish poet and seer would say about every chief he wanted to praise "that that man had been wedded to Ireland - wedded to Ireland always, because even if the man owned only a few acres of ground, you still thought of Ireland, the country... ." (RONSLEY, 1977:3)

The plot focuses on the auction of a piece of land. A farmer, called "the Bull" by the villagers, wants it for himself for much less money than is reasonable. His rival is an unexpected bidder, an Irishman living in England. As he insists on a regular auction and is ready to pay more than the Bull, the latter, together with his son, beats the newcomer up, and kills him accidentally, although he wanted only to frighten him away. The rest of the story shows how the Bull can manage to keep the villagers intimidated so that no evidence is given against him although everybody knows, including the police, who the murderer was.

This attitude toward the law has been known at least since Synge's The Playboy of the Western World and his notes in his Aran Islands, which point out that Irish communities were ready to hide criminals as a protest against the law which they associated with the hateful English jurisdiction. But what was a comic-grotesque story and behaviour in Synge's play, becomes fifty years later in this play a real bloody murder. The refusal to collaborate with the police is less motivated by national feelings than by the fear of the Bull's threats. The notion of the law being English still exists, and is offered as an excuse, although its reality is gone in the Republic of Ireland.

The Catholic Church, however, has always been the national church of the Irish, so resistance to its influence must have another reason. In a scene reminiscent of the Interlude in T.S.Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral, the bishop gives a moral teaching from the pulpit, pointing out everybody's responsibility and share in the crime if they keep silent about the murderer. The scenes which follow show the futility of his warning. Joyce's despair about his nation being "priest-ridden", does not seem to be true in the peasant environment: instead of the institution of the church, pagan or mythic beliefs or the laws of nature rule in the isolated country communities, as was apparent among Synge's country

people or Yeats's peasant and legendary figures. In The Field, when in the course of the investigation the priest becomes associated with the police, he loses the people's respect. So much so that he is asked to leave the house: "I'll have to ask you to go now, Father. What will the village think if ye don't leave? We have a family to think of. ... You'll have us disgraced." (75)

The author does not suggest an unequivocal judgment, nor does he simplify the story into a parable. The sergeant and the priest, the representatives of the modern State and Church, are obviously right in trying to find and punish the murderer, but on the other hand, the Bull's attack on them is the expression of basic social injustices, the eternal complaint of the oppressed: "There's two laws. There's a law for them that's priests and doctors and lawmen. But there's no law for us. The man with the law behind him is the law... and it don't change and it never will." (75) However, this truth is given with an ironic overtone again, as it is said just by the person who makes the objective work of the law impossible.

This ambiguity is best seen in the figure of the Bull. Despite his immorality and his bullying, threatening, bribing, cheating the villagers, there is something impressive in his insistence on the land. He has some ancient passions and dignity in him, the dignity of the primary contact with the soil. In this region one has to fight first with the soil to be fertile, and only then for it with the people. But he also has a great love for his land: "I watched this field for forty years and my father before me watched it for forty more. I know every rib of grass and every thistle and whitehorn bush that bounds it. ... There's shamrock in the southwest corner. Shamrock, imagine! ... This is a sweet little field..." (22-23) (The shamrock, as the national emblem of the Irish, suggests patriotic feelings, also.) He listens to the grass growing even on the night of the murder: "Listen and you can hear the first growth of the grass. The first music that was ever heard." (47) This way of looking at the land combines the practical view of it as the source of life with that of its being the roots and the pledge of consistency and continuity. In contrast with the rootless priest and policeman, to whom he says: "When you'll be gone, Father, to be a Canon

somewhere, the Sergeant gets a wallet of notes and is going to be Superintendent, Tadhg's children will be milking cows and keepin' donkeys away from our ditches. That's what we have to think about and if there's no grass, there's the end of me and mine." (76)

All this adds not only to the psychological explanation of the Bull's crime, but also, and more importantly, makes him the representative of a different age and of a different order of living, laws and values: those of the cruel but heroic struggle for survival in the world of nature. A world not so much inhuman (although that, too), as ahuman. In the play this barbaric, savage world confronts the values of the human and moral order. This is why, although from the point of view of human society his behaviour and deed are undoubtedly condemnable, yet, in the lack of a common value system, he is hardly touched by this judgment. The possibility of a synthesis or reconciliation of the two systems is suggested only in his last words, expressing that he will not be free of remorse: "The grass won't be green over his grave when he'll be forgot by all... forgot by all except me..." (76)

The confrontation between the old and the new is sharpened on more concrete levels, too. The second bidder at the land auction trusts civilization, the power of man-made laws, of enlightenment, but does not understand anything of these dark, primitive forces. What adds a social and national dimension to the clash is that the newcomer wants the land for producing cement - a total break with the continuity of its natural use. In countries where industry and commerce started to dominate comparatively late, they were received with general suspicion and hostility. The situation was complicated both in Ireland and in Hungary by the fact that industry was introduced mostly by the foreign colonizers, and served first of all foreign interests. The young man wanting the land for cement-making in The Field, is of course an outsider: Irish by origin but living in England, and would prefer living there had not circumstances forced him to return to Ireland. The outsider, entering the peaceful life of a family or village, disturbing or changing the ordinary routine of life, is an often recurring figure in Irish peasant plays. (see CLARKE, 1982) This young man in The Field combines all the foreign features - national and social - so he could

hardly be accepted by the community anyway. The world of the Bull is built on such values of a past or passing form of living as community feelings, belonging to one another and helping one another. Obviously these values become strongly devaluated and turn into their opposites when helping one another comes to mean hiding the criminal.:

Another way in which the old and the new are juxtaposed reminds one of Yeats's ideas of the decay and degeneration of human beings and of the nation, especially as it is symbolically presented in Purgatory. There the three succeeding generations show the growing degree of the distortion and emptying out of human nature. The Bull in The Field, in spite of his brutality, carries great potentials in him and is capable of strong feelings. His son seems to have inherited only the brutality without the feelings, and his relation to the land, as well as to his would-be wife, is purely practical. This contrast in the play does not lead to conflict, but makes the image of the changing world more complex.

One of the few serious discussions of the play, Stadler's book, charges it with didacticism. (1978:74) It is true that the backwardness, violence and cowardice in the life of rural communities is severely criticized, and so is also the attitude of mistaking brutality and anarchical passions for heroism, the deception of the law out of patriotism, and the utilization of the biased historical understanding of situations. Yet Keane's treatment of the theme avoids one-sidedness and didacticism. Instead there is ambivalence in the judgment of the character of the Bull himself, and in the elevation of him as a late remnant of a different order of existence and of a different value-system.

The Field becomes an outstanding achievement due not to its formal innovations - that has rarely been a strong feature of Irish drama -, but to its vivid imaginative realism, its lively mixture of comedy with tragedy, and its rich language. Keane's best plays are realistic "only in the sense that the imagination and the sensibility give total assent to the validity of the character" (FEEHAN, 1979:97). It is the sort of realism that, while showing the particular, reaches out towards the universal. This is achieved partly by forming the characters so that they are flesh-and-blood, recognizable figures of rural Ireland, while also

being archetypal, embodying some deep-down drives of human nature. Comedy is introduced into the tragic plot mainly through language - a language that has been the greatest luxury of even the most miserable Irishmen, that has also been their compensation for hardships and their weapon against the nothingness their fate would impose on them. The villagers use this language in The Field as a weapon against the investigation of the police and the priest; their verbosity is a source of a lot of comedy but their skill is impressive. For outsiders - such as the policeman and the priest actually are - there is no way to get behind this language.

With the disappearance of this old style of life in rural Ireland, certainly the folk or peasant plays will disappear, too. The best of them, however, can survive, not only as documents (although Keane's plays would serve very well as that), but as powerful visions of certain forms of human behaviour, including distortions of feelings and relationships, which often turn up in other circumstances or in different disguises, but which always remain possible within human situations and processes come to life; great passions or cool reason destroy their victims, values clash, past and present collide. In this world reality and fantasy penetrate into each other in such a way that the fantastic achieves reality and reality is given a fantastic, larger-than-life quality.

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