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In the Gap: Space, Language and Feminine Roles in *The Playboy of the Western World*

In Oscar Wilde's dialogic essay, "The Decay of Lying", one of the speakers, Vivian, traces the relationship between life and art. Initially, the two are separate, as art focuses upon the abstract, the "unreal and non-existent". In a second stage they meet and intermingle as art uses life for her "rough material", reformulating it, however, so that the result is "absolutely indifferent to fact". In the third and final stage, life "gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness" (Wilde, 1999: 1078). This brief outline is directly applicable to J. M. Synge's 1907 play *The Playboy of the Western World*, which divides into sections that exactly reflect these three stages. Furthermore, an examination of the play in light of Vivian's sketch allows us to revise traditional assumptions about rhetoric and reality in the play and its individualistic hero.

We can best understand the three stages if we observe what happens to space, language and feminine roles in each. In the first, which lasts from the play's beginning to the moment when Christy says he has killed his father, radical separations exist in terms of interiors and exteriors, words and their effects, and the hierarchical relationships between Pegeen and the two men in her life, her father and her fiancé. As the play progresses, these divisions vanish in the second stage, which ends when the villagers see Christy and his father together, but return in the third.

If we first look at the dynamics of space in the beginning of the play, we see a "fundamental contrast between inside and outside", and as Parker points out, in Synge's work, "[i]nside space is associated with the structured social community and its traditional institutions" (Parker, 1985: 69). Synge's interiors may be stable, but they are dull, and their inhabitants desire the excitement of the exterior. As Chaudhuri shows, "The public house in which the play's action is to occur begins as a centrifugal space: one which is in the process of being deserted" (Chaudhuri, 1989: 377). Only one character, Pegeen, is left inside, and she would prefer to be outside. Both Parker and Chaudhuri agree that she is "caught" in the shebeen (Parker, 1985: 72), becoming the "play's prisoner" (Chaudhuri, 1989: 377). In fact, we find out later in the play that she has been

“tempted often to go sailing the seas” (Synge, 1974: 55), but clearly has never been given the chance. The letter she writes at the play’s opening will hopefully bring excitement from the outside as it asks for special clothing for a wedding and spirits for a celebration – “boots with lengthy heels on them and brassy eyes (...) with three barrels of porter (...) (*idem*, 1). As a further suggestion that she would rather feel threatened than bored, Pegeen allows her imagination to play upon the dangers of “the thousand militia” (*idem*, 5) roaming the countryside. Even a pot-boy would bring some excitement from the outside. When Pegeen asks her father to find one, he responds, “Would you have me send the bell-man screaming the streets of Castlebar?” (*idem*, 7). The town, of course, is the source of the wedding “spirits”, the establishment of “Mister Sheamus Mulroy, Wine and Spirit Dealer” being located there (*idem*, 1).

Indeed, something exciting is approaching. It is Christy Mahon, the “eternal wanderer” whose “mobility (...) makes him so attractive to Pegeen” (Chaudhuri, 1989: 384). The traveler is “destroyed walking” (Synge, 1974: 7) and is associated with the “big world” (*idem*, 11), a “high distant hills” (*idem*, 12) and boots that have been muddied from his travels. When the villagers question him, they associate him with the traveling circus, “holy missionaries” (*idem*, 9) and soldiers “fighting bloody wars for Kruger and the freedom of the Boers” (*idem*, 10). Even before the event that pushes him onto the highway, the first “murder” of his father, he is connected with the outside. As he tells Pegeen, “There wasn’t any one heeding me in that place saving only the dumb beasts of the field” (*idem*, 16). Furthermore, his father says he was always “stretched the half of the day in the brown ferns with his belly to the sun” (*idem*, 39).

In contrast to Pegeen, Christy is on the outside and would like to get in. He sees the villagers in terms of the interior space they inhabit. Thus Pegeen is the “woman of the house” (*idem*, 7), and Michael James is the “master of the house” (*idem*, 8). Furthermore, he defines his social position in terms of that interior, saying that his father “could have bought up the whole of your old house a while since” (*idem*, 9). Above all, he wants to be allowed to stay in their “safe house” (*idem*, 8).

If the opening scene shows clear divisions between inside and outside, effectively separating male and female protagonist, it also has divisions between words and the actions associated with them. Two written documents are moving in opposite directions. Pegeen’s written words requesting the materials necessary for a celebration are being sent outward, but the words will not be read and responded to for some time as Pegeen awaits delivery of goods to be sent by Mr. Sheamus Mulroy. Their effects will be delayed in time and in space. Another written document, the “dispensation from the bishops, or the Court of Rome” as Shawn innocently puts it (*idem*, 2), is coming towards the shebeen and is subject to a similar delay.

When Christy first enters the shebeen, words and deed are still separate. As King points out, Christy is unable to say what he has done to his father because he is “a mere sayer of words, not a doer of deeds” (King, 1985: 136). As the villagers offer words for what he has done, he responds, “I had it in my mind it was a different word and bigger”. Pegeen, in disgust, asks, “Were you never slapped in school, young fellow, that you don’t know the name of your deed?” (Synge, 1974: 8).

Finally, the first part of the play reveals a sharp division in social roles. The space Christy values so highly (and the space that seems to imprison Pegeen) is firmly

ordered. A “master” controls the establishment and has ensured that it conforms to the demands of the law, as it is “Licensed for the Sale of Beer and Spirits, to be Consumed on the Premises” (*idem*, 8). This interior provides Pegeen with two roles. To her father, she is the dutiful daughter who stays behind while the males enjoy the excitement of Kate Cassidy’s wake. Her shock upon hearing that Christy has murdered his father, and her naïve remark, “I never cursed my father the like of that, though I’m twenty and more years of age”, reveals her customary submission to authority (*idem*, 18). To Shawn, on the other hand, she is a masterful shrew. As he describes her later in the play, she has “the devil’s own temper” and can only get along with “a quiet simple fellow wouldn’t raise a hand upon her if she scratched itself” (*idem*, 35).

Interestingly, Christy’s previous relationship with his father parallels Pegeen’s, as the son has played the role of slave to his father. According to Christy, his father was the master who “never gave peace to any” for “it was a bitter life he led me till I did up a Tuesday and halve his skull” (*idem*, 18). Thus, as the two protagonists approach each other, they come from environments that sharply separate social roles into masters and those who are mastered.

At the beginning of the play, then, powerful divisions exist in terms of space, where inside and outside mean profoundly different things, in terms of language, where words and their effects are separated by space and time, and in terms of social roles, where key figures play the roles of masters and slaves. In physical terms, there are barriers that exist – the walls and doors of the shebeen prevent the outside from coming in.¹

In regard to the story of Old Mahon’s murder, Vivian’s description in “The Decay of Lying” of the relationship between art and life parallels this first part of the play. As he explains, “Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage” (Wilde, 1999: 1078). Indeed, in this section the villagers’ characterization of Christy’s crime is purely conjectural, as they suggest “false coining, or robbery, or butchery, or the like” (Synge, 1974: 10). However, what happens to Christy’s story in the next part of the play will reflect the mixture of art and life that appears in Vivian’s second stage.

The play’s second stage is defined by the notion of the gap. Indeed, to use spatial metaphors, the walls that created divisions are pulled down and replaced with large gaps, vacuums that are quickly filled with disorder, liberation and madness. Parker’s illuminating discussion of gaps in the play shows that they are generated by “thematic oppositions”. The scholar goes on to say, “In this play, Synge seems committed to exploring central gaps in human experience and demonstrating the importance of what happens to people in those gaps” (Parker, 1985: 68). Inside them one can observe “liminal situations” which, like rituals, are “the potentially transformative experience of being on the threshold between two recognized cultural loci or in a break in the continuity of life” (*idem*, 65). Parker also points out that these liminal spaces are filled with “festive misrule; at such times all members of a society are released from

¹ Although Parker’s distinction “between the home and the roads” has greatly influenced my characterization of interiors and exteriors, his view of the shebeen differs from mine. While I see it more as “home,” he describes it as “a public or communal space – rather than a home. (...) It is a liminal space where wanderer and local can meet on neutral ground” (Parker, 1985: 70).

the hierarchical structures of the patriarchal order which normally determine their identity (...) and temporarily inhabit a realm of cultural confusion or inversion" (*idem*, 71).

In this play, the gap is foreshadowed in the first part by a tiny "*chink*" when Shawn opens the door to announce that the "queer dying fellow's" coming (Synge, 1974: 7). Yet another small gap – the "slit" of a "wind pipe" – is mentioned just before Christy tells the villagers he has killed his father (*idem*, 10). These tiny openings will expand to grand proportions during the play as the fictional gap in Old Mahon's head grows and is filled with Dionysian madness. In fact, the gap that Christy's story ushers in will be the functional equivalent of the church document Pegeen is waiting for, a document that will allow the church's rules on consanguinity to be broken and will thus initiate the celebration she has been waiting for. The document consists of words "on a sheepskin parchment" (*idem*, 21-22) coming from "the Court of Rome" as Shawn naively says, but in the reality of this play, it will be replaced by the words of a man associated with foreign Catholic powers, "the great powers and potentates of France and Spain" (*idem*, 15). Christy's words will create and simultaneously fill a gap, just as Christy himself will fill Shawn's coat in Act II after the latter has fearfully emptied it in Act I.

The second stage of *The Playboy of the Western World* contains many figurative gaps that contain altered interiors and exteriors. Small, enclosed, claustrophobic spaces expand to infinity, mimicking outside space, and these are particularly associated with death. In the beginning, when Christy, "a close man" (*idem*, 12), assumes he will be caught and hanged for the murder of his father, he expects to be put in a "narrow grave" (*idem*, 30) like the one that has been prepared for Kate Cassidy (*idem*, 56). From there, however, the space available to him will expand to infinity in "hell's gap gaping below" (*idem*, 10). Jimmy Farrel's imagination likewise places Christy in hell's infinite space, "a foxy divil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell", and Pegeen expects that with him she won't have to fear "the walking dead" because a man with that kind of experience will of course be quite handy at battling them (*idem*, 12).

Old Mahon is likewise enclosed initially in a narrow space, at least in Christy's story about him, for Christy swears that he has "buried him" (*idem*, 11), yet before long he breaks out of his shallow grave, risen "from the dead" (*idem*, 60), a genuine example of the walking dead whom Christy must battle. The first time the story of Old Mahon's murder is told, there is no mention of his wound, but as the ground opens up to reveal the walking dead, the wound opens as well so that he is "split to the knob of his gullet" (*idem*, 28) and later to "the breeches belt" (*idem*, 37).

Pegeen's instinctive response to Christy also assumes that an interior space can expand to monumental proportions, although she refers to a psychological interior, comparing Christy to "the poets" who are "fine, fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused" and assuming he has killed his father because of "blind rages tearing (...) *within*" (*idem*, 15-6, *my italics*). She is certain of his tremendous powers, the "mighty spirit in him and a gamy heart" (*idem*, 34). The quiet lad's inner being must surely expand to hold such emotion.

Narrow spaces, then, be they graves, head wounds or human hearts, figurative, fictional or psychological, all expand as Christy's story grows. They are gaps that arise between opposing interior and exterior spaces, yet they allow such spaces to intermix.

A similar mixing occurs when Christy and Pegeen imagine themselves together or when Christy refers to other pairs of lovers. A series of striking images arises, images that combine the inside and the outside, creating a liminal space that is neither wholly one nor the other, but both. In these, male and female are given their heart's desire as Christy is allowed in and Pegeen is allowed out. Christy tells Pegeen of lovers in the night "talking deep love in every shadow of the ditch" (*idem*, 32). These men and women are outside, yet they have simultaneously managed to enter an enclosed, sheltering space, a ditch (reminiscent of a shallow grave). Likewise, when Christy and Pegeen picture their future relationship, they imagine themselves outdoors "pacing Neifin in the dews of night" in a "kind of a poacher's love" (*idem*, 53), yet once again they find cover. They will "shelter easy in a narrow bush" (*idem*, 55) or will be found "gaming in a gap of sunshine", a beam of light which creates an enclosed space with translucent walls which allow inside and outside to mix together (*idem*, 54).

Another remarkable image of the mingling of a vast exterior and interior occurs as Christy metaphorically puts the infinity of the night sky inside Pegeen's head: "Amn't I after seeing the love-light of the star of knowledge shining from her brow" (*idem*, 41). Furthermore, there is "the light of seven heavens" in Pegeen's heart, light which will shine outward because she is "an angel's lamp" (*idem*, 54). The description is an echo of Pegeen's reference to Christy's raging emotions which tear him inside and burst forth in poetry. Pegeen's internal heavens pour forth in light, while Christy's do so in words. Nevertheless, with both, tremendous internal energy escapes in beauty. Both have inner beings with the capacity to expand, tear, and shine forth, mixing inside and outside.

Words and actions also mix in this liminal gap. In the play's second stage, words and actions are not divided as they are in the first one. In the crucial transformation that allows the gap to open, Christy is pushed into "naming his act" (King, 1985: 137), and at that moment we see "language as action" (*idem*, 13). Furthermore, the origin of the first "murder" and thus Christy's story is associated with words that perform actions simply by virtue of being uttered. Christy attacks his father because the old man tries to force him to marry the Widow Casey, a woman he describes as a witch with the power to cast spells. She is "a hag this day with a tongue on her has the crows and seabirds scattered, the way they wouldn't cast a shadow on her garden with the dread of her curse" (Synge, 1974: 27). Throughout the play Christy's "fine words" (*idem*, 57) work a similar sort of performative magic,² as many scholars have pointed out. They seem to "do" and "say" at the same time, much like Christy's arresting image of lovers' talk "where you'd hear a voice kissing". In this description, the utterance of a human voice can perform the action of kissing. Furthermore, these men and women make love by "*talking deep love*" (*idem*, 32, *my italics*).

In terms of social roles, the gap created by Christy's story has a liberating effect, especially for Pegeen.³ The strict divisions associated with the two roles that have previously been available to her – Shawn's master or her father's slave – break down when a third role opens up, one in which she and Christy are equal partners. As she says, "If

² Christy's stories are like "performative verbs," because they are being used to perform the illocutionary act they refer to" (Traugott/Pratt, 1980: 233). He becomes heroic by saying he is heroic.

³ Declan Kiberd discusses the "positive revolutionary potential" in the play "suggested by a masculinization of women and a corresponding feminization of men" (Kiberd, 1995: 176-77).

I was your wife I'd be along with you those nights, Christy Mahon, the way you'd see I was a great hand at coaxing bailiffs, or coining funny nicknames for the stars" (*idem*, 54). While she must stay behind when her father goes to Kate Cassidy's wake, she will accompany Christy when he is out poaching at night. Furthermore while she would have been Shawn's shrewish mistress, she will simply lend a "hand" with Christy's imagined adventures.

This part of the play, then, contains a gap that allows opposites to interact and insists on breaking down former division. In terms of Vivian's outline of the relationship between life and art, it precisely mirrors his second stage. He explains,

Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. (Wilde, 1999: 1078)

Similarly, Christy's story (art) takes the attack on his father (life) as its "rough material", but completely refashions it so that it is "indifferent to fact" by the end. Inside Christy's gallous story, rhetoric and reality blend together as word and deed merge in performative utterance. Thus, in both Vivian's sketch and Synge's play, art and life interact in a second stage.

What Vivian describes is highly paradoxical because it allows elements of art and life to mix while simultaneously keeping an "impenetrable barrier" between the two. What happens in *The Playboy of the Western World* is similarly paradoxical because this merger of utterance and action inside the gap, what Kiberd calls the "dancing dialectic" between "poetry and violence" (Kiberd, 1995: 170), is made possible by, and is dependent upon, a separation of story and deed outside the gap. In fact, this liminal gap exactly reverses the relationship between rhetoric and reality inside and outside of it.

It is an unwritten rule of the play that this fragile gap can remain open only so long as the story of the murder and the reality of Christy's action in raising the loy remain separate. This situation in the play has a parallel in speech act theory, for just as the power of Christy's language is dependent upon (although not reflective of) an external situation, so too "the accomplishment of an illocutionary act depends [upon] 'appropriateness conditions'" (Traugott/ Pratt, 1980: 230). The maintenance of the separation of word and deed outside the gallous story is the appropriateness condition for the power of utterance inside the story.

The necessary separation of rhetoric and reality outside the gap explains the urgent need to keep Christy and his still-living father apart. As long as Old Mahon remains "dead" or a "walking dead" and as long as the gaping wound in his skull remains as large as possible, this other, miraculous gap can remain open. The character who is responsible for keeping the gap open is the Widow Quin. Consequently, she must make sure that the person formerly known as Old Mahon's son is never identified with the playboy.

WIDOW QUIN: (...) That lad is the wonder of the western world.

MAHON: I see it's my son.

WIDOW QUIN: You seen that you're mad.

(Synge, 1974: 51)

Significantly, the Widow uses Mahon's supposed madness to maintain the separation between the "wonder of the western world" and the "son". In fact, the gap created by Christy's story is itself associated with madness, drunkenness and Bacchanalian celebration as well as the words and savagery of great poets. As the Widow Quin says, "It's mad yourself is with the blow upon your head", and when Old Mahon agrees that he is perhaps "out of reason", she attributes his condition to his "brainpan that is gaping now" (*ibidem*).

Christy brings this madness into the shebeen. This disorder is neatly reflected in the confusion left by the "pack of wild girls" (Christy's maenads) who listen to his story (*idem*, 31). Pegeen instinctively reacts to the disorder, spitting out commands: "Fling out that rubbish and put them cups away. (...) Shove in the bench by the wall. (...) And hang that glass on the nail. What disturbed it at all?" (*idem*, 29). Soon, however, she is likewise transformed by the "great savagery" of his words which liberate her from the close interior space in which she has been trapped (*idem*, 33).

As the Widow Quin struggles to defend this wild, liberating gap against threats from without, it becomes apparent that there likewise exist threats from within. There is always the danger of a collapse of this interior/ exterior lovers' space where performative language and equality reside. When Pegeen says she will go poaching with Christy, he shows surprise and doubt: "You, is it? Taking your death in the hailstones, or in the fogs of dawn", suggesting that she should after all remain inside and adopt the role of the domesticated female, too delicate to survive in the dangerous outdoor world. Furthermore, to emphasize his dedication to her, Christy says he would like to offer a prayer to the interior space that has entrapped her: "I'd be saying my prayers and paters to every jackstraw you have roofing your head (...) (*idem*, 55). There is a danger that Christy's magic words will lose their power, a possibility raised by Philly's suggestion that the playboy has told his tale a few too many times: "he'll be rightly hobbled yet, and he not able to say ten words without making a brag of the way he killed his father, and the great blow he hit with the loy" (*idem*, 45). Finally, Pegeen herself shows a tendency to master Christy when she taunts him with a story she has read in a newspaper "of the hanging of a man" (*idem*, 30).

In the play's third stage the gap does indeed close and the playboy and son do merge as story and reality meet. A barrier once again arises between inside and outside, word and act and master and slave. Concern for the law replaces Bacchanalian celebration when the gap shrinks and disappears; as Pegeen says, "And it's lies you told, letting on you had him slitted, and you nothing at all". Thus, the gap diminishes once again to a tiny slit before vanishing because Christy's was, in reality, "a soft blow" that was not powerful enough to tear fiction from reality (*idem*, 60).

Christy's desperate efforts to reopen the gap only exacerbate the problem because they are attempts to bring together story and reality outside the gap, not inside. For example, when he tells Pegeen, "You've seen my doings this day (...)" (*ibidem*) and when he reminds the crowd of how he has "won your racing, and your lepping" (*idem*, 62), he is describing a merger of reality (his actual performance) and story (the larger-than-life actions of the playboy). In the races on the beach the "son" and the "wonder" truly do merge, but contrary to Christy's expectations, mentioning this only intensifies Pegeen's anger, because, as Widow Quin knows, the son and wonder have to remain

separate. Christy's second "murder" is similarly wrongheaded in its attempt to turn story into reality. He defiantly asks Pegeen, "And what is it you'll say to me, and I after doing it this time in the face of all?" (*idem*, 64-5). Her answer, of course, only underscores the importance of the gap, although Pegeen does not seem to realize this: "(...) but what's a squabble in your back yard, and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed" (*idem*, 65). There is indeed – and as long as it remains open there can be no such thing as a lie. Stories in the gap remain autonomous and words carry their own actions that are altogether divorced from the actions of real life.

All of the effects of the gap vanish along with it. Significantly, interiors and exteriors are again separated. Pegeen is once more trapped in the shebeen as she repeatedly orders Christy to get out. No less than three times does she insist, "Take him on from this (...)" (*idem*, 60, 61, 65).

Likewise, with the destruction of the gap, language loses its performative power. Words are no longer actions, and, in fact, rhetoric and action are profoundly split. In the first place, Christy's claim that he will "stretch" his father (*idem*, 62) and that he has done "it this time in the face of all" (*idem*, 65) do not reflect his father's true condition. He may demand, "Are you coming to be killed a third time", but his father remains resolutely alive (*idem*, 66). His words cannot bring about a death once the gap is closed.

Furthermore, Christy's impassioned rhetoric describing Pegeen seems absurd given her reality after the gap closes. One has difficulty believing in "the splendour of her like, and she a girl any moon of midnight would take pride to meet" (*idem*, 61), when she burns Christy's leg with the "lighted sod" (*idem*, 65). Nor does Christy's heroic self-description seem to bear any resemblance to the original. His speech paints a noble yet doomed tragic hero, who will "have a gay march down" to the gallows as he makes the "jury in the courts of law" tremble at his deed. There will be "crying out in Mayo the day I'm stretched upon the rope, with ladies in their silks and satins sniveling in their lacy kerchiefs, and they rhyming songs and ballads on the terror of my fate" (*idem*, 65-6). Yet, what does this larger-than-life rhetorical figure become in reality? Like the "mad dog" he is compared to, he bites Shawn's leg and scrambles around "*on his knees face to face with old Mabon*" who is "*on all fours*" (*idem*, 66). The reality presented to the audience has nothing to do with the rhetoric of the "gallant captain" (*idem*, 67). The infinitely expanding space of hell that could hardly contain the heroic Christy of the play's middle section is mentioned once again. Christy threatens his potential victims that if he catches one of them, "(...) it's the way you'll be at the fall of night, hanging as a scarecrow for the fowls of hell. Ah, you'll have a gallous jaunt, I'm saying, coaching out through limbo with my father's ghost" (*idem*, 66). This time, however, Christy cannot enter this space because he has not killed his father. Instead, we have mighty words spoken by a mad dog.

Most distressingly, perhaps, masters and slaves reappear after the closing of the gap. Inside the shebeen Pegeen is once again Michael James' dutiful daughter/ domestic servant and Shawn's shrewish mistress. Michael James knows that as long as she remains within, she will be there to take orders, and he immediately begins with the request, "Will you draw the porter, Pegeen?" To Shawn she will be the cruel tyrant, demanding, "Quit my sight" and giving him "*a box on the ear*" (*idem*, 67). Outside the shebeen the

master/ slave relationship also reemerges, although in reverse, as Christy becomes the new master:

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 from now. [*Pushing Mabon*] Go on, I'm saying. (*idem*, 67)

Thus the gap's magical ability to break down division is lost. Furthermore, the final moments of the play emphasize that these losses are permanent. The wound Shawn receives from Christy's bite can be viewed as an attempt to once again open the miraculous gap, but as Shawn points out, the breach will close: "(...) we'll have none to trouble us when his vicious bite is healed" (*idem*, 67).

This final stage of the play corresponds to what Vivian says in "The Decay of Lying" about the inevitable outcome of art's interaction with life. He laments, "The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence (...)" (Wilde, 1999: 1078). In Synge's play, reality does indeed get the upper hand when the appearance of Old Mahon proves Christy's story to be untrue. There are various reactions to this "decadence": anger on the part of the villagers, anger and grief on the part of Pegeen, and an attempt by Christy to recapture the spirit of the gap. As we have seen, however, Christy can reproduce only a flawed copy of the hero who was created in the original gap. This defective reproduction is full of the inequality of the master/ slave relationship rather than the equality of his imagined life with Pegeen. It will be lived in the exterior, rather than in a space that mixes inside and outside. Finally, it will consist of words divorced from action, for no future deeds are mentioned, only the expectation that Christy and his father will go "telling stories of the villainy of Mayo, and the fools is here" (Synge, 1974: 67).

The play's ending perfectly demonstrates Vivian's dissatisfaction with the current relationship between life and art. While Wilde's interlocutor in "The Decay of Lying" complains that "[f]acts" have "invaded the kingdom of Romance" (Wilde, 1999: 1080-81), Synge's play shows *fact* in the form of Christy's living, bloodied, bandaged father as it invades Christy's rhetorical kingdom. As Vivian says, "wherever we have returned to Life and Nature, our work has always become vulgar, common and uninteresting" (*idem*, 1080). This is exactly what happens to Christy when he is reduced to crawling around on all fours, biting like a mad dog and when he later becomes a slave-owning tyrant. After the gap closes, he is "Fact, occupied as Fact usually is, with trying to reproduce Fiction" (*idem*, 1083). Vivian explains that this is to be expected: "A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher" (*ibidem*).

Christy's poor reproduction, then, is the inevitable result of life's attempt to copy art, and his final speech is a weak attempt to revive the power of words previously spoken in the gap. A long scholarly tradition has (erroneously, I feel) arrived at exactly the opposite conclusion and has celebrated Christy's triumph at the end of Act III while excoriating Pegeen's betrayal. Price applauds Christy as his "imagination transforms the dream into actuality" (Price, 1961: 19), but claims that Pegeen "falls far short of Christy's image of her" (*idem*, 30). She loses Christy "because, at the crucial moment, her belief in the image collapse[s]" (*idem*, 32). Bigley stresses Christy's "transformation and tran-

scendence” which stems from “his acceptance as actual of what the others were willing to accept as tall tale” (Bigley, 1977: 92), and calls the play a “*Bildungsdrama*” (*idem*, 98). King, to take another example, says that Pegeen “prepares her ultimate treachery”, while Christy “fights back to regain his playboy status – but this time on his own terms” (King, 1985: 155). She continues,

Part of Christy’s dramatic development has been concerned with freeing himself from fear of confronting the father – a fear which is widely shared by the society which sought to make of him the father-*slayer*. Christy, henceforth, will lay down the law. The elder shall serve the younger in his new world (...). (*idem*, 156)

This characterization of Christy’s final words and actions, however, must be reconsidered. If we accept his assumption of the master’s role, we participate in his error, which is to create a new “violent hierarchy” when, in fact, the only satisfactory ending must be a decentering of all hierarchy. Such a utopian ideal exists in Christy’s linguistically created gap, but is most tragically absent from his final speech.

Parker is almost alone in his characterization of Christy’s “transformation” at the end: “Seen in relation to the rest of the play, however, the playboy’s self-proclaimed triumph seems decidedly suspicious”. In a withering summary, he declares,

Apart from his alleged success at racing and ‘lepping’ at a village competition, Christy’s most noteworthy deeds are giving his already injured and somewhat crazed father yet another clout on the head with a loy, and biting the leg of his rival. It is important, of course, that Christy is able to stand up to his father, but his transition seems to be from abused child to rebellious punk. (Parker, 1985: 76)

Parker, however, admits that, despite “the unheroic cast of most of Christy’s actions (...) it is clearly Christy’s triumph that we *want* to participate in” (*idem*, 77). He goes on to explain that this is Synge’s strategy because by “catching us off-guard, he turns the brunt of his irony on the audience (...)”, robbing us of expectations that have been created throughout the play (*idem*, 81).⁴ Nevertheless, Parker is quite clear that Christy is not the self-made hero at the end of the play that the audience desires to believe in. He cannot be, for the gap that created him has closed.

Synge’s overall strategy, then, has often led to a mistaken approval of Christy at the end and belief that his words are indicative of a real transformation. Scholarly fascination with the merger of rhetoric and reality in the play has likewise contributed to this error. In their enthrallment with the interactions inside the liminal gap, scholars have often made the same mistake Christy makes by failing to recognize the tremendous shift that occurs when the gap closes, disregarding the crucial distinction between events inside and outside the gap. Spacks, for example, says that Christy is created “by the power of his metaphors” and that at the end there is a “fusion of joy and reality”. The play “presents essentially the vision of a man constructing himself before our eyes” (Spacks, 1961: 16). Gerstenberger argues that he “creates himself to match the image held up for him” (Gerstenberger, 1990: 70) and closes the “gap between the realized and the ideal” (*idem*, 73). Even Chaudhuri, taking a Lacanian perspective, argues, “The

⁴ The issue of audience reaction, especially the riots at the play’s opening in 1907, has been extensively studied and would require another article to adequately treat this complex subject.

process by which Christy gains an identity can be described as an insertion of the subject into what Jacques Lacan calls the 'symbolic order,' that is, the realm of language and of other symbolic systems" (Chaudhuri, 1989: 381). In this play, "it is not so much a question of Christy *telling* a story as of his *being told* by story-telling itself (...)" (*idem*, 383). Chaudhuri's point holds for action within the gallous story but not outside of it. What scholars have tended to forget is the great difference between what Christy is inside the "gallous story", when his reality is the product of language, and what he is outside of it, when he becomes a tyrant who like all slaveholders, is capable of "dirty deeds".

Kiberd implies this distinction, because although he discusses how Christy "becomes 'a mighty man ...by the power of a lie'" (Kiberd, 1997: 287), or rather, how words are actions, he also notes the limitation of those utterances by pointing to the "massive amount of talk and little real action, (...) gestures struck rather than deeds done" (*idem*, 288). Christy truly is a mighty man inside the gap, but his talk and action are divorced from each other when it disappears. In "The Decay of Lying" Vivian understands what happens when the gap closes and life get the upper hand. This is why he so persistently urges that a barrier between life and art remain in order to provide a space where rhetoric and reality can, paradoxically, merge. The loss of this space is the passing away of a utopia, and in insisting on the inevitability of this loss, Synge is describing the human tragedy. Wilde's character Vivian, a "Tired Hedonist" (Wilde, 1999: 1073) who has seen it all before, knows this sorry "fact", and it is exactly this that makes him prefer to stay in the gap, behind the impenetrable barrier that separates art and life.

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