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THE ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY IN *RIDERS TO THE SEA*

*Riders to the Sea* is undoubtedly a singular kind of tragedy. It is, in the first place, of the kind that Northrop Frye would define as "low-mimetic", set in a realistic context. By comparing it with the common pattern of tragedy, one may easily note the differences. D. Krook points out four basic elements in tragic structure: 1. the *act of shame or horror* 2. the *suffering* 3. the *knowledge* of man's nature or the human condition 4. the *affirmation* of the dignity of the human spirit and the worthwhileness of human life<sup>1</sup>. This pattern dovetails only very partially with that of *Riders to the Sea*, where no act of shame or horror appears. Moreover, the suffering in the play is caused by the ordinary event of death by drowning – a sort of occupational accident, as it were, a work-related death! Hence, the only knowledge we acquire is that of the mortal nature of man but not, I think, that of the worthwhileness of human life.

Taking into account the content of the tragedy, we wonder what its significance may be. Could those critics who define it as a "dramatic fragment"<sup>2</sup> – for reasons other than its brevity – be in the right? Una Ellis-Fermor, in her fundamental contribution to the study of the Irish Dramatic Movement, considers *Riders to the Sea* an "isolated fragment of human experience" in which "the human spirit [...] is unrelated to any other spiritual value"<sup>3</sup>. And yet, *Riders to the Sea* is something more than a mere fragment. It has a completeness of its own, both on the aesthetic and on the philosophical level (if I may extend Una Ellis-Fermor's reference to spiritual values).

The tragedy starts *in medias res*, when – as critics of classical tragedy would say – the catastrophe has already taken place. Maurya's men, her husband and four sons, have already died at sea; her fifth son has just been found drowned and his clothes have been brought home for recognition. The sixth son is about to go to sea. The catastrophe is in the past, in the present and, as can be foreseen, in the future. This is suggested by the sense of death which pervades the drama from beginning to end. The action of the play opens, in fact, with the two

sisters confronted with the grievous task of examining the clothes of a drowned man. They are to see whether they belong to their own brother Michael or not. The play closes with a lament over the corpse of Bartley, the youngest son. Between these two events, a long series of images foreboding death recur.

A turning-point in the drama seems to be Bartley's departure. The mother fails to detain her son and is unable to return his blessing, while his sisters forget to give him the bread for the journey. Interpreting Bartley's departure as the hero's error – the violation of a moral law – is highly debatable. Cathleen, the elder sister, clears up our doubt:

It is the life of a young man to be going on the sea (p. 11) <sup>4</sup>.

This in no *tragic flaw*, then. Nor can we give a deterministic interpretation to Maurya's withheld blessing and deem it the direct cause of Bartley's death. Maurya's failure to bless her son can be viewed as one of the many omens which give the tragedy a regular, rhythmic cadence and lead it to its inevitable conclusion.

It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drown'd with the rest (p. 11)

says the mother to the son.

In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind them for them that do be old (p. 13).

These words of Maurya's are certainly suggested by past experience, but are, at the same time, gloomily proleptic of future events.

Even more poignant is the vision Maurya has while going to meet Bartley at the spring well to give him the bread and bless him. She sees him on the red mare's back, followed by Michael – his drowned brother – who is riding the gray pony. They are companions on a journey which, symbolically, is already taking place in the hereafter.

Before Bartley's death is revealed, Maurya says:

I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby, lying on my two knees, and I seen two women, and three women, and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves, and not saying a word. I looked out then, and there were men coming after them, and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it – it was a dry day, Nora – and leaving a track to the door (p. 21).

Soon after, Nora witnesses and describes a similar funereal scene occurring under her very eyes:

They're carrying a thing among them and there's water dripping out of it and leaving a track by the big stones (p. 23).

Along with these forebodings, there are presages of death in recurring images where black is the outstanding feature: "the pig with the black feet" (p. 9), "the black night is falling" (p. 11), "the black cliffs of the north" (p. 15), "a black knot" (p. 15), "black hags" (p. 17). Knowing that in Irish folklore *black cliffs* relate to the idea of death and the entry into the next world<sup>5</sup>, or that *black hags* (cormorants) might be the spirits of dead relatives<sup>6</sup>, is not of such great consequence. The effect is attained even independently of all the possible supernatural connotations of the images<sup>7</sup>.

The Almighty God won't leave her destitute ... with no son living (p. 5).

These are the young priest's words as related by Nora, but Maurya knows better:

It's little the like of him knows of the sea (p. 21).

And facts will show that she is right. Reality is something different from the confident outlook of a priest.

Maurya says to Bartley, who means to use the rope as a halter:

It will be wanting in this place, I'm telling you, if Michael is washed up tomorrow morning, or the next morning, or any morning in the week, for it's a deep grave we'll make him by the Grace of God (p. 9).

That rope, however, will be needed for Bartley himself, when his coffin is to be lowered into the deep grave.

Maurya's following sentence is charged with a similar ironic undertone:

It's a hard thing they'll be saying below if the body is washed up and there's no man in it to make the coffin (p. 9).

The coffin, too, in fact, will be needed for Bartley.

Burdened with tragic irony and ominously forewarning are Nora's following words:

it's destroyed he'll be going till dark night, and he after eating nothing since the sun went up (p. 11).

Playing on the semantic multivalence of *destroyed*, the author conveys both the Anglo-Irish meaning of *starved* and the more direct meaning of *killed*. E. Boyd is



right in saying that "there is no suspense as to the fate of her sixth and last son, Bartley"<sup>8</sup>.

Death is felt as omnipresent due to recurring gloomy images, but, somehow, it is also associated with white and with the new, as D.R. Clark has pointed out<sup>9</sup>: the *new* rope to lower the coffin, the *white* boards used to make it, Michael's ghost wearing *fine* clothes and *new* shoes and, one might add, the burial defined, time and again, as "clean burial" (pp. 5, 19, 27). *Clean* conveys here both the idea of *fine* and also that of *free from dirt, immaculate, untainted*. It thus suggests ritual sacrifice, death as purgation and purification. The connection with the very origin of tragedy – ritual sacrifice with the accompaniment of choral song in honour of Dionysus – is easily recognizable. But if Bartley's death, as well as that of Michael and the other men of the family, is to be read in terms of ritual sacrifice<sup>10</sup>, finding the reasons for it will be an ordeal. Bartley is, in fact, absolutely innocent and, what is more, his alleged guilts – his being indifferent to his mother's attempts to detain him, his taking the rope which might be needed to lower Michael's coffin into the grave – do not justify the other deaths in the family. Seeking metaphysical or psychological guilts on the part of the mother or the son in their mutual relationship seems to me a bootless effort<sup>11</sup>. Bartley does not appear morally guilty of anything whatsoever; where there is no guilt, therefore, there can be no Nemesis. There is no divine anger to be appeased. Furthermore, even if Bartley had been guilty and had fallen as a consequence of his guilt, still one should remember that he is not the hero of the tragedy, and it is not *his* fall that one should expect. The guilt then – if there is such a thing as this in *Riders to the Sea* – is quite different, and of a more universal nature. The tragic sense in *Riders to the Sea* is highlighted by our awareness that death is an event which recurs cyclically. It is not so much the consequence of an individual's tragic flaw, as an ineluctable, as well as unfathomable, principle of nature. The tragedy is an existential rather than a moral one. Man's only guilt seems to be that of living. He cannot intervene to affect the developing of events. Maurya fails in her attempt to make her son stay, nor has the son any choice but to leave. Cathleen makes this point very clearly:

It's the life of a young man to be going on the sea (p. 11).

Tragedy stems from the apparent lack of free choice or, at least, from the deep tension between the individual's will and, as it were, the *forces of nature*. The heroic figure in *Riders to the Sea* is not the dead person (or people), but obviously Maurya, the mother who is to outlive all her children and witness helplessly the gradual annihilation of her family.

In dealing with low-mimetic tragedy, N. Frye refers to the isolation which is peculiar to the hero<sup>12</sup>. Maurya is undoubtedly on a different level from that of her daughters, who act as a chorus. Maurya is the only one who engages in the

impossible enterprise of opposing death by trying to snatch Bartley from its jaws<sup>13</sup>. Her daughters, although more practical, appear resigned from the very beginning. Yeats's claiming that *Riders to the Sea* is "too passive in suffering"<sup>14</sup> is only true, *before* Bartley's death, about Nora and Cathleen, and only *after* Bartley's death will it suit Maurya, too. The active element of life is Maurya, although everything seems to prove the opposite. It is the daughters' task, in fact, to see to the material needs of daily survival. They knead dough and they bake it, they spin the wool, they recognize the drowned brother's clothes, they urge their mother to bring the bread to Bartley and bless him. Yet, just because they are more positively linked with daily life, the two sisters seem rationally – and passively – resigned to the fate awaiting their brothers. Only Maurya goes on struggling till the last man has died. When the sea has got them all, Maurya, too, gives in, for the simple reason that there is nothing else, or nobody else, to fight for. "They are all gone now" (p. 23). In this respect, Maurya is on a different plane from the people who surround her; she still has the strength and courage to fight. Her fall takes place when she is obliged to give up.

D. Krook claims that great tragedy can only be achieved in the high-mimetic mode, and that the tragic hero, in order to stand for all mankind, must not be the average man. "He must be distinguished, extraordinary"<sup>15</sup>. *Riders to the Sea* demonstrates that her contention is not necessarily true. Tragedy may occur even in a fisherman's cottage, among ordinary people and in a domestic setting. Tragedy in *Riders to the Sea* ensues from the very ordinary nature of the characters, from their being losers, doomed to defeat from the start. Life harrows the under-privileged – those who are in want and misery, cut off from the rest of the world – and bereaves them even of the dearest objects of their affection. After which Maurya can say: "there isn't anything more the sea can do to me" (p. 23). Life rages with implacable fury against the helpless, those at the lowest level of the social scale. Man's struggle against his own destiny is an unequal one, but there is no room for poetic justice. There is no redressing of the balance. It is true, however, that Maurya's tragic quality stems, in a sense, precisely from her unyielding difference from the other characters in the drama. Her isolation is more and more emphasized as the tragic conclusion of her now passive waiting draws nearer. Now she speaks to nobody but herself; she rises out of her poor existential context, and recalls, in a sort of epic evocation, those who died fighting with the sea.

[in a low voice, but clearly] [...] I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house – six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world – and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them ... There were Stephen, and Shawn, were lost in the great wind, and found after in the Bay of Gregory of the

Golden Mouth, and carried up the two of them on one plank, and in by that door (p. 21).

And then, deaf to her daughters' interruptions, she goes on to say:

[continues without hearing anything]. There was Sheamus and his father, and his own father again, were lost in a dark night, and not a stick or sign was seen of them when the sun went up. There was Patch after was drowned out of a curagh that turned over (*ibidem*).

Maurya's isolation and the elevation of her mind are indirectly hinted at by the words of the old man who notices the lack of nails for Bartley's coffin:

It's a great wonder she wouldn't think of the nails, and all the coffins she's seen made already (p. 25).

Maurya leaves, once more, to the care of others the mean details of daily life. Her sole concrete act is the final overturning of the cup which contained the holy water. The action assumes an obvious symbolical meaning. There is no more water in the cup, there are no more dead to be blessed. At last, the cycle has been completed.

What more can we want than that? ... No man at all can be living for ever and we must be satisfied (p. 27).

As D.R. Clark points out, there is a change in Maurya's speech, from the first person singular to the first person plural<sup>16</sup>. In so doing, Maurya sets herself up as the epic representative not only of a whole people, but of a whole universe of men. Life, viewed at the essential, final point of death, is the great levelling experience we all share. W.B. Yeats says that "tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man [...]. The persons upon the stage [...] greaten till they are humanity itself"<sup>17</sup>.

Maurya's antagonist in the play is, no doubt, nature, or rather, the sea. The sea, however, is not regarded here as a divine power, as R. Skelton argues<sup>18</sup>, but as a mere force of nature, the adversary man has to confront in his daily struggle for survival. Although the sea is omnipresent as an indomitable force, it is also an element of nature that the characters are perfectly familiar with. They never show any animosity towards it, nor does the sea ever appear as a personified force, as D. Corkery remarks<sup>19</sup>; it is just *the sea* and nothing more. Neither can one rail against it as against a god, nor can one use it as a rationale for one's trials and tribulations: it is no god whose malevolence man can bemoan. No religious pattern, either of a pagan or of a Christian kind, is superimposed upon the deve-

lopment of the tragedy. "Tragedy – as I.A. Richards says – is only possible to a mind which is for the moment agnostic or Manichean. The least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic Hero is fatal"<sup>20</sup>. Nora tries to avert the misfortune which she feels impending once again upon the family and recalls the young priest's words:

Didn't the young priest say the Almighty God won't leave her destitute with no son living? (p. 21),

but Maurya replies unhesitatingly:

It's little the like of him knows of the sea ... Bartley will be lost now (p. 21).

In saying this, Maurya underscores the young priest's callow benightedness, his lack of that practical sense which can only be acquired through experience and the daily confrontation with the obstacles of life. At the same time, she denies that the problem of life and death has anything to do with God. This is a question, she seems to say, that is to be settled between man and the sea. With a further effect of tragic irony, the priest's words will turn out to be thoroughly groundless, when the Almighty God's absence from the vicissitudes of human life is unveiled. God, a passive element in the tragedy, only serves to be invoked.

Actually, the great presences in the drama are Maurya and the sea, the two active elements in conflict. They are two female forces, for water is a mythical and psychoanalytical symbol of fertility, a mother who gives life and snatches it away. In *Riders to the Sea*, however, fertility is only a potential, frustrated energy, because the male active element is missing. Man's role in the play is to die. No sign of the continuity of life emerges to relieve the play of the sense of extinction.

In quest of the real meaning of *Riders to the Sea*, D.R. Clark refutes D. Donoghue's idea that "action is frustrated, purpose cannot even be formulated. The play ends in Maurya's Acceptance rather than in any positive perception"<sup>21</sup>. The rest Maurya is finally able to take is, according to D.R. Clark, "the Peace of God"<sup>22</sup> and, as a consequence, is the positive value of the tragedy. It is difficult for one to see how the condition of an individual crushed by necessity and forces devoid of will can reveal any positive value, except for the great, heroic human endurance of the irrational. There being no poetic justice certainly rules out all possibility of that "sense of heightened life that goes with the tragic experience"<sup>23</sup>.

According to D.D. Raphael, "tragedy snatches a spiritual victory out of a natural defeat"<sup>24</sup>. Applying this contention to *Riders to the Sea* one realizes that Maurya's spiritual victory consists, primarily, in attempting to oppose the forces of nature (I would be tempted to say "destiny"). Her fall, therefore, fol-



lows her victory, instead of being its source.

"The anagnorisis is the realization of the truth", says F.L. Lucas<sup>25</sup>. It is precisely the search for the moment of recognition that provides the key to the sense of tragedy. And the sense of tragedy is that the law governing man's life proves incomprehensible to Maurya. She accepts her defeat without even questioning it. She submits to the "Almighty God" and entreats him to show mercy for the souls of her dead sons and all the living.

No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied (p. 27),

adds the mother, as if to convince herself that she is to give up. And this is the knowledge she acquires through her suffering. This is the moment of recognition. God, however, does not become more tangible because of man's entreaties. God is absent, as he has been throughout the play, and man's fate proves even more tragic when the deity turns out to be a sheer product of the imagination. No divine will is at work, but, rather, an inscrutable law or, perhaps, the twisted, unpredictable ways of fate: "tragedy would not be tragedy if it were not a painful mystery"<sup>26</sup>.

The tragedy in *Riders to the Sea* is the helpless submission to fate, the futility of man's least effort. As for Maurya, her final state is a waiting for death – her own death. After waiting for the death of all her children, there is nothing for her to do but wait for her own. What has changed is the nature of the waiting, for the tension between the course of life and Maurya's opposition to it has now dissolved. Dynamic waiting is replaced by a thoroughly passive waiting. Asserting, at this point, that *Riders to the Sea* paves the way for *Waiting for Godot* does not seem too rash a judgement. We thus have an answer to the question raised by U. Ellis-Fermor's above-quoted remarks. Casting about for the relationship between the human spirit and spiritual values, whose absence the critic laments, is certainly fruitless. The sense of "unresolved pain" – which U. Ellis-Fermor is inclined to ascribe to an incomplete synthesis of Synge's mind<sup>27</sup> – has, in fact, a precise import. Pain is "unresolved" because man cannot find a rational explanation for it. No spiritual value can bring comfort to man. The human spirit cannot be elevated because man cannot find the answer to the motives of the human condition. Comfort and elevation are not within the realm of human experience.

With *Riders to the Sea* Synge goes beyond the bounds of the Irish theatre. By universalizing the content of the tragedy, he enters the mainstream of European theatre and eschews, as was his intention, purely nationalistic problems. In a polemical letter to the Gaelic League, entitled "Can We Go Back into Our Mother's Womb?", he wrote as follows:

How are the mighty fallen! Was there ever a sight so piteous as an old

and respectable people setting up the ideals of Fee-Gee because, with their eyes glued on John Bull's navel, they dare not be Europeans for fear the huckster across the street might call them English<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>) See D. Krook, *The Elements of Tragedy*, New Haven-London, 1969, pp. 8-34.

<sup>2</sup>) R. Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, Harmondsworth, 1976 (1968), p. 144.

<sup>3</sup>) U. Ellis-Fermor, *The Irish Dramatic Movement*, London, 1971 (1954), p. 185.

<sup>4</sup>) Quotations from *Riders to the Sea* are taken from *J.M. Synge: Collected Works*, General Editor R. Skelton, 4 vols., London, 1962-68, Vol. III, pp. 1-27.

<sup>5</sup>) See R. Skelton, *John Millington Synge*, Lewisburg, 1972, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup>) See S. Ó Suilleabháin, "Synge's Use of Irish Folklore", in *J.M. Synge. Centenary Papers 1971*, ed. M. Harmon, Dublin, 1972, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup>) The meaning of the image, incidentally, might be questionable. R. Skelton holds that Synge "was also interested in creating a more universal picture of man surrounded by natural elements and supernatural forces - or beliefs about supernatural forces - which he is unable to control" (*The Writings of J.M. Synge*, Indianapolis-New York, 1971, p. 49). This view seems to me untenable - and ambiguous - if not clarified by the content of the parenthesis. One could claim, at the most, Synge's concern with the faithful rendering of a syncretistic culture. The merging of paganism and Christianity is, of course, peculiar to the most genuine spirit of Ireland.

<sup>8</sup>) E. Boyd, *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*, Dublin, 1968 (1916), p. 322.

<sup>9</sup>) See D.R. Clark, "Synge's 'Perpetual 'Last Day'": Remarks on *Riders to the Sea*", in *Sunshine and the Moon's Delight*, ed. S. B. Bushrui, Gerrards Cross-Beirut, 1972, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup>) See N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, 1957, pp. 214-15.

<sup>11</sup>) Cf. T.R. Henn, "Riders to the Sea: A Note", in *Sunshine and the Moon's Delight*, cit., pp. 37-38.

<sup>12</sup>) See N. Frye, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-08.

<sup>13</sup>) As a corroboration of the vivid effect achieved by Synge in portraying Maurya's struggle against death, one might consider how Federico García Lorca drew on *Riders to the Sea* to depict the character of the mother in *Bodas de Sangre* (1933). There are moments in the plays when the similarity is obvious. First, when the mother strives to detain her son and keep him out of danger. Then, when the mothers recall the fate of the men that have died.

MAURYA. [...] I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house [...] but they're gone now, the lot of them (p. 21).

MADRE. Cien años que viviera, no hablaría de otra cosa. Primero tu padre; que me olía a clavé y lo disfruté tres años escasos. Luego tu hermano (Buenos Aires, 1938, p. 25).

Finally, when, after the son's death, the mother remains with her sorrow, but rid, at last, of all trepidation. Lorca's text, in this last case, seems to follow Synge's almost word by word.

MAURYA. They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me ... I'll have no call to be up crying and praying [...] and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening [...] It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping [...], if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking (pp. 24-25).

MADRE. Aquí. Aquí quiero estar. Y tranquila. Ya todos están muertos. A medianoche dormiré, dormiré sin que ya me aterren la escopeta o el cuchillo. Otras madres se asomaran

a las ventanas, azotadas por la lluvia, para ver el rostro de sus hijos. Yo no. Yo haré con mi sueño una fría paloma de marfil que lleve camelias de escarcha sobre el camposanto [...] No quiero ver a nadie. La tierra y yo. Mi llanto y yo. Y estas cuatro paredes. (p. 130).

14) W.B. Yeats, *Synge and the Ireland of His Time*, Dublin, 1911, p. 32 (now reprinted in *Essays and Introductions*, London, 1961).

15) D. Krook, *The Elements of Tragedy*, cit., pp. 35-37.

16) See D.R. Clark, *art. cit.*, p. 50.

17) W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, cit., p. 241.

18) See R. Skelton, *The Writings of J.M. Synge*, cit., p. 43.

19) See D. Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, Cork, 1966 (1931), p. 141.

20) I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, London, 1924, p. 246.

21) D. Donoghue, "Riders to the Sea: A Study", *University Review*, I, 5, Summer 1955, p. 156 (quoted in D.R. Clark, *art. cit.*, p. 47).

22) *Ibidem*, p. 49.

23) F.R. Leavis, "Tragedy and the Medium", *The Common Pursuit*, London 1952, pp. 131-32 (quoted in D.R. Clark, *art. cit.*, p. 51).

24) D.D. Raphael, *The Paradox of Tragedy*, Bloomington, 1960, p. 28.

25) F.L. Lucas, *Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics*, London, 1949 (1928), p. 95.

26) A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London, 1904, p. 38.

27) See U. Ellis-Fermor, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

28) *J.M. Synge: Collected Works*, cit., Vol. II, ed. A Price, London, 1966, p. 400.