

## The Wood in M.J. Molloy's *The Wood of the Whispering*: A Comparison with Chekhov's Orchard

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M. J. Molloy has a knack of creating enticing titles. Once asked why he named his one-actor *The Paddy Peddler*, he replied with surprising candidness that it was picked simply for its alliteration. Clearly the same impetus must have been at work behind his choice of the title *The Wood of the Whispering*. But just as *The Paddy Peddler* precisely captures the morality-like nature of the play by pinpointing the universal figure of an Everyman travelling the dusty road of life, *The Wood of the Whispering* tells us that at the centre of the play is the wood, the wood the writer loved, and even planted, filled with the voices of the people whose life it sustains.

Modern Irish drama is full of bogs, hills, lakes and the sea but the woods we rarely encounter. History is largely to blame for this. The Druids literally worshipped trees and plenty of forests are found in Irish mythology, or in Gaelic poetry as Daniel Corkery has shown<sup>1)</sup>. But the Anglo-Normans, Cromwellian settlers and successive landlords who had no long-term interest in the land, have so relentlessly exploited the woods and sometimes destroyed them on purpose to hunt out rapparees that subsequently the country appears stripped even of their representation in literature. What we now have left are later landlords' ornamental plantations, such as we find in the Big House novels and Yeats's poetry. Some say this has caused a feeling of certain antagonism to develop among Irish people towards woods in Ireland until recent times because of their association with the landlords<sup>2)</sup>. The handful of Irish plays that are set in the woods are mostly mythical or allegorical in nature. Two of the better known,

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1) Daniel Corkery's vituperation in *The Hidden Ireland* is not simply to be discounted.

2) Eoin Neeson refers to "a climate of public opinion, principally among farmers, hostile to forests and forestry" in *A History of Irish Forestry*, Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1991, i. Molloy's unpublished play *The Runaways* is very insistent on this point. The farmers hated the wood because their grandfathers have been evicted "to make room for" its planting (15) and if they had their wish they "won't leave one tree standing" (23)

perhaps, are the woods Grania and Diarmuid fled into and those where Countess Cathleen vied with the devils for the souls of the famine-struck peasants. To name a couple more, there are the woods where Lady Gregory's five princes served the ogre as wrenboys (*The Jester*), Corkery's *Fohnam the Sculptor* acquired his artistic inspiration, T. H. Nally's child hero ventured in to save a neighbouring girl from a witch's spell (*Finn Varra Maa*), or more recently, the imagistic forest of Murphy's *The Morning After Optimism*. The writers of these plays are faithful to the European tradition of the misty forest in fairytales, or of Arden, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, of Sherwood, etc. In these rustic settings, at a distance from the machinations of courtiers/townsmen, identities are transformed; wandering youths reemerge matured; and social order is restored.

Molloy's wood, unlike those literary models, does not offer an alternative mode of being to civilized society. In a sense his is more truthful to history in that he makes it quite clear that this is not a primeval forest, but only a private estate of the landlord D'Arcys<sup>3)</sup>. Its significance for the characters and for the play is more social than natural. A character explains the origin of its name: "The Wood of the Whispering they do call this wood on account of all the courting couples that used to be in it some years ago before all the lads and the girls went foreign." (132)<sup>4)</sup> Budding relations in courtship would lead to marriage and keep the community going for generations. However, the wood that once was alive with echoes of young voices, now (in 1950) looks as if the dead are out to take over. More dead are referred to in the conversation on stage than the living<sup>5)</sup>. And even that is not entirely accurate since the ghosts them-

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3) Liam de Paor takes note of the difference. "The clearance of the virgin forest was proceeding ... Here and there the primeval woods which had suited the pastoral-venereal style of medieval Ireland were being replaced or modified by ornamental plantations designed to provide pleasing prospects for the new houses which we call 'Georgian'.... In the country along the Shannon, ... the landlords were covering the hills and valleys with elegant arrangements of trees." (*Landscapes with Figures*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998, 49)

4) All subsequent references to the play are from *Selected Plays: M. J. Molloy*, ed. Robert O'Driscoll, Gerrards Cross, Bucks.: Colin Smythe, 1998.

5) Brehony is one of them. The others are Owen Kelly, who had a cancer, Linehan and Keenan who died in the mental hospital, Mickel Kelly who was killed in a fire at home, Mickil Doogan and Jimmy Walsh, two of the ghosts, Crawley Comm that took so long stiffening that he carried three more men to death within the year. Some are desirous to override the living. Bidy Roche's ghost foreboded that "You are the last that'll live here... the longer you stop here the sooner you'll die." Major D'Arcy's oak tree withers the hand that touches it.

selves are said to make less frequent appearances; they are "not as plentiful" as they used to be, according to Sanbatch, who claims to keep in touch with his friends long dead. The whispering in the wood is now transformed to denote the hushed, muted mutterings of the few who are left and are on the point of disappearing altogether if nothing is done to save them.

For Molloy, the draining away of young men that puts a community at a risk of extinction becomes identified with the denuding of woods in the country<sup>6</sup>). Christy Molloy, who shared many a common interest with his brother M. J., best speaks for the playwright in his book of local history *Milltown Sketches*<sup>7</sup>).

"In 1901 there were 755 households in the parish. The number is almost halved to 410 in 1994. When a tree is felled in a wood it is of little consequence, but when another is felled and then another, and the process continues, however slowly the wood eventually disappears. This is what is happening in our parish and in many other rural parishes. Each year sees a few hearths quenched and the farms attached offered for sale. The farm purchaser becomes wealthier, but the parish becomes poorer, for a parish's greatest wealth is in its people."(209)

In Molloy's play the same process is explained by Con the timberman with a map.

"And now, look at the green patches in this map! They're the woodlands of Connacht... There was hardly a parish, or half-parish, without its woods when this map was made forty years ago. But now they're all cut down very near, and not wan in thirty of them was ever replanted. The timbermen say the last of the woods'll keep us going for maybe three years more; after that we'll get high road."(139)

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6) Ireland was the only country in Europe whose rural population declined without a concomitant sharp rise in the urban population. In the decade 1926-1936 the rate of celibacy in Ireland reached its peak, and the birth rate for 1936-1946 was lowest in the period from 1871 to 1996. (Paul Brennan "Ireland's Rural Population", *Rural Ireland, Real Ireland?*, Jacqueline Genet ed., Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1996, 31-45)

At about the same time, after the landlords left, the woods were systematically destroyed. Peter Somerville-Large records: "Some destruction continued [after the Civil War], principally the felling of trees which no one wanted when people were land hungry. ... Trees were associated with landlords. One of the most comprehensive tree-felling exercises took place in Co. Laois on the Castle Durrow estate after the departure of Lord Ashford. Over 650 acres of oak, beech, and ash were cleared between 1922 and 1928". (*Irish Voices: An Informal History 1916-1966*, London: Pimlico, 2000, 75-6)

7) Milltown, 1995.

*The Wood of the Whispering* tells the following story. Sanbatch has been camping in the wood with his dog Leggy ever since the roof of his house fell in and the farm went to ruins. Just before the play starts the young D'Arcy has sold his estate to a timber company and Con, one of its employees, arrives to build a shed for tools. Sanbatch sees in his coming a hope for a new marriage to save the village from dying out. The other villagers come passing through the wood and each stops to talk to Con. After a variety of simple maneuverings, disappointments, and volte-faces, three matches are finally made. Con and Kitty, a young girl who works at a local pub, Mark and Sheila, who has returned from England to tend her dying father Stephen, and the middle-aged couple Hotha and Sadie, who renew their attachment to each other after many years. Con and Kitty, moreover, will take Sanbatch as their adopted father to restore his farm.

It is ironical that Con, who serves as the catalyst to extract all the confidences from the other characters, and who in the end is to become the saving force for the community, is an agent of the destruction of the wood. Right from his entrance, Con is identified by his job. "Cutting timber is my trade. Against the tree beyond is the boards for my hut, and on the roadside there aback is my lorry, with saws and engines of many a kind"(116), he intones to Sanbatch<sup>8)</sup>. Con carries on his task cheerfully, in full recognition of his part in the destruction that is taking place<sup>9)</sup>. *The Wood of the Whispering* is no environmentalist's tract, though it could well have turned into one if Molloy had written it today. Molloy, for all his conservatism, is too concerned with the economic conditions of his people to ignore the inevitable tide of modernization, and it is to a character who is rooted in the country but who has kept pace with the times that he gives a focal role in opening a way out for the future.

The same ambivalence in the writer's attitude towards progress can be observed in another play that revolves around the threatened destruction of trees, though it is an

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8) Or put variously as: "Timber-cutting" (123) to Mark, "Cutting trees" (126) to Jimmy, and "'Tis for cutting down every tree in all these woods, so the devil a bit of shade or shelter ye'll have for courting (132) to Kitty.

9) Cheerfulness is a mark of Molloy's favorite characters. In the eyes of the villagers being an outsider and having worked in a big city seem to qualify him to act as a trusted adviser to just about anyone. He has a rather disinterested view of both the city and the wood and is contrasted with Sanbatch, as a man who "tell(s) the time by the back of his hand" rather than "by the sun and by the daughter" (141). He has all the signs of a good character in Molloy's work, a quick sense of humour, serious and hardy at work at the same time that he is capable of enjoying life.

orchard of cherry trees and not what is generally considered a wood. Chekhov and Molloy shared a passion for woods, which they demonstrated in their real life commitment. Just as Molloy proudly notes of his having planted 700 trees<sup>10)</sup>, Chekhov took charge of the gardening of the 600 acre estate he bought at Melikhovo, planting eighty apple and sixty cherry trees as well as lilacs and roses and other flowers in the first spring [1892] he spent there<sup>11)</sup>. The doctor in *Uncle Vanya* provides the playwright with a spokesman for this crusade for reforestation. Like Con in *The Wood of the Whispering*, Astrov takes out a map to trace by stages the steady shrinkage of the woodlands in Russia.

“Now, look at this. It represents this part of the country as it was fifty years ago. The light and dark green colouring indicates forest ; half of the entire surface-area is forest. ... Now let’s look down here. As it was twenty-five years ago. By this time only a third of the surface-area is under forest. ... Let us move on to the third section-the district as it is today. There’s green here and there, but it’s not solid, it’s only in patches ; ... Overall it’s the picture of a gradual but incon-vertible decline, which by the look of it will be complete in another ten or fifteen years.”(162)

In *The Wood of the Whispering* the cutting of trees is stayed for the moment by order of the Forestry Department. Molloy, in a way, has created a world of wish fulfillment, with three new matches patched up at the end as if at the stroke of a fairy wand. But according to Con, it is understood that whatever intercession by the government there may be, the fate of the wood will be sealed in a matter of years. In *The Cherry Orchard* the sound of the axe is heard even before the end of the play, as if to reinforce the irreversibility of social change.

The trees are important as a physical presence in both these plays. Molloy, heedful of the limited resources of amateur companies, has stipulated that though the prop for D’Arcy’s grand 18th century gate can be done without, the “branches of trees, bushes, ivy”(114) must be made visible over the demesne wall. Without the influence of the wood, Molloy says, he would not have been able to write the play.

10) The Druid program note, 5.

11) Chekhov, who loved trees and flowers passionately, took on the care of the orchard and the flower garden. (Eliabeth Silverthorne, “Biography of Anton Chekhov”, *Anton Chekhov*, Harold Bloom ed., Philadelphia : Chelsea House Publishers, 2003, 39) The cherry trees were to be chopped down in 1899 by the prospective purchaser. (Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999, 244)

Chekhov, on his part, gave what Michael Frayne calls an “oral trailer” to the actors at the Moscow Arts Theatre in the more than two years before he wrote the play. It merely consisted of four fragments, one of which was “a branch of cherry blossom sticking out of the garden straight into the room through an open window”<sup>12)</sup>. Chekhov had kept in his mind the haunting image of a cherry orchard owned by the parents of his friend in childhood. Frayne surmises, “During the course of the next two years he must have traced that branch out of the window back to the orchard in which the tree was rooted, back to the social history and economic forces which explained why that orchard had been planted and why it was now about to be felled” (lxiii). For both Molloy and Chekhov, one sees that the wood and the orchard were not simply a setting they happened to choose or even a symbol to be made use of, but the very seed of their creative process. The cherry orchard in all its ephemeral splendour created the character of Mrs Ranyevskaya. Molloy’s wood became integrated with the fate of a community permeating the consciousness of the villagers living under its shadows.

The two playwrights, however, differ in the perspective each adopted with regard to the wood/orchard. Whereas Molloy’s consistently remains that of a community formed by the wood, that is, from within the wood itself, Chekhov allows it to be seen from a vantage point outside it. The trees are placed at a distance or against a larger background. In the case of *Uncle Vanya*, the forest motif injects a clear, far-reaching vision, a purpose and an ideal, offering a possible means of escape from the stagnant life at the farm. That is what makes its acolyte Astrov, called a “holy fool”(143) for his “passion for forests”(137), so fascinating in the eyes of the women<sup>13)</sup>. He is a man

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12) *Chekhov: Plays*, London: Methuen, reprinted 1991. All subsequent references to the play are from this edition. By 1902 the playwright had the title of the new play. Chekhov’s idea for Act 1, as he wrote to his friend Danchenko was “cherry blossoms seen through the windows, an utterly white orchard. And the ladies in white dresses. But in Act 2”, he adds, “you must give me a real green field and a road a distance that is unusual on stage”. (Rayfield, 244)

13) Being a doctor, his lengthy discourse on the forest, echoed by devoted Sonya, refers not only to its beauty, but covers such things as its effects on climate and biodiversity. Sonya becomes effusive in representing the forest as all that classical humanism strove for: “Forests adorn the earth, ... teach man to appreciate beauty and give him an intimation of majesty. Forests moderate the harshness of the climate. And in a gentle climate, human beings spend less of their strength on the struggle with nature; they become gentler in their turn. In places like that people are lithe and beautiful, with quick responses, and well-turned speech, and graceful movements. Their arts and sciences flourish, their philosophy is never sombre, they treat women with grace and honour” (138).

of integrity doing positive good, while all around him one sees evidence of disintegration<sup>14</sup>. “[I]f a thousand years from now human beings are happy then it will be just a tiny bit my fault”(138-9), Astrov says. Yelena later restates this as: “It means being a free spirit, it means having boldness and wide horizons... He plants a sapling, and he has some notion what will become of it in a thousand years time; he already has some glimpse of the millennium.” (156) A broader and more objective, almost telescopic, time scale is introduced here, in sharp contrast to the humdrum cares of domestic affairs. Astrov’s concern for the animals and culture that forests sustain, however, does nothing to alleviate the suffering of the characters in the play. The vision opened up by the forest in *Uncle Vanya* remains in the end set apart from the rest of the drama – like a map Astrov displays to Yelena and then rolls up as he leaves.

In *The Cherry Orchard*, the cherry trees pervade the entire play, hovering at the back of our mind as we watch the characters’ fate unfold before our eyes and the once gracious household break apart<sup>15</sup>). They are something profoundly beautiful that lie just outside the window, and yet prove as elusive as the bonding of individual characters in the play. The cherry trees flower before the leaves come out, transforming themselves into a luminous haze of white for a brief moment. On the stage the depth of space beyond is conveyed by such off-stage sounds as the crying of starlings (293, 301), the shepherd’s reed pipe (307), and by the image of an avenue stretched out

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14) Yelena is quick to pick up this theme of destruction Astrov’s campaign is pitted against, as she is precise in perceiving the source of his attraction as the long-extending vision he possesses. After hearing Astrov question, “why *destroy* them?” “Man is endowed with reason and creative powers to increase and multiply his inheritance, yet up to now he has created nothing, only destroyed” (138), Yelena turns on Vanya: “You do exactly the same with human beings – you recklessly destroy them, and soon, thanks to you, there will be neither faithfulness nor innocence left in the world, nor any capacity for self-sacrifice... in all of you there lurks a demon of destruction. You’ve no pity for forests, nor for birds, nor for women, nor for one another” (140). Her accusation of Vanya is quite unfair, but the point is that in her sudden conversion, Astrov’s cause, as it did for Sonya, has come to represent everything positive as opposed to waste, like Vanya’s love to Yelena.

15) Beginning with the landlord Ranyevskaya’s return after five years abroad and ending with her departure for the last time, the play is so structured to bring the sale of the orchard into sharp focus. In Act I Lopakhin sets down the deadline: the auction on the twenty-second of August. In Act II he urges Ranyevskaya to accept his proposed idea to avoid the catastrophe. In Act III people wait for the result of the auction, only to hear Lopakhin is now the new owner.

straight like a ribbon (301) with a white-dressed woman walking through it.(301) The association extends even further away to far-off cities like Moscow and Kharkov, to where cartloads of dried cherries used to be transported (298). The orchard can be a gateway to spiritual freedom as well as cultural refinement, but only to those admitted inside. That such an exclusive world of the pastoral, built upon the sacrifice of many, has become untenable is indicated in part by the movements of the characters and the wider landscape against which it is placed in subsequent acts.

In Act II characters from each side of the social barrier are let loose in the open fields. The coming of a new age is intimated by telegraph poles and a town in the distance while an old shrine lies crumbling by the tombstones. The audience is given a singular opportunity to behold a moment in time on the brink of change, the fate of the estate objectified in the exterior as it were, but held still for a moment in the transparency of the evening in “very fine clear weather”. Yet a feeling of imminent danger is in the air, with the rather abrupt mentions of a gun and a revolver carried by the servants. The characters appear in small groups divided by their social class: first the servants, then the masters, the older and the younger, with Lopakhin freely moving in between. The servants, however, seem on edge, being confined to their prescribed place. They have become even disconnected from each other. Each character seems set afloat, in a balloon of their own private preoccupation, with complete indifference to the fate of the orchard hanging over them. Charlotta, an ultimate *déraciné*, mulls over her mysterious origin; Dunyasha contemplates the whiteness of her hands that does not befit her station; Yasha thinks of nothing but the pleasures of an epicurean life in Paris, while Yepikhodov cannot keep his mind off his slightly bookish despair. They are enjoying their evening’s repose relieved of their respective domestic chores. The bonds have been cut, as the old loyalist Firs would say, “chippety-choppety” (316).

As for the masters, they reveal themselves to be totally inadequate to the time whether in the eyes of the liberal capitalist, the progressive political thinker, or the oppressed classes. Ranyevskaya’s coins are scattered. Gayev is better off “silent”(318, 9). Set against their orchard are the “immense forests, boundless plains, broad horizons” (318), the mother Volga singing the litany of men’s groans and the overflowing “people’s sea of pain”. To Ranyevskaya such a landscape is “frightening” if not unreal, as we find in Gayev’s vapid ode to Nature. She does not realize that it is her orchard that has been reduced to a “fairy-tale” and not the other way around, with all the



“giants” stalking the rest of the country<sup>16</sup>). After the ominous beggar passes on laughing, the Act ends with the younger generation, ready to turn “All Russia” into their “orchard” (322), hearing the footsteps of the new age. The dominant tone, however, is still melancholy with the moon rising to replace the setting sun.

If Act II can be described as the close-up shot of the characters in profile projected onto the open background, Act III may be thought of as a cross-section of society viewed from above, say, the ceiling of the drawing room. With a masterly stroke of brilliance, the playwright chooses to have the characters face the day of the auction with a ball made complete with the grotesque incongruity of Charlotta's circus tricks, in a desperate effort to recapture the past for a fleeting moment. The idea wafted over from Act II when Rasnyevskaya heard an old-fashioned Jewish orchestra in the distance. The characters that appeared in stratified groups in Act II, now move in a haphazard manner, as though unraveled from the ties, in a further disruption of the social fabric. The waltzing couples pair and repair in quick succession: the hostess with her child's former tutor, the landowning neighbour with the governess, each of the daughters with their plebian guests, then the two sisters together, Anya with Trofimov, Pishchik with Rasnyevskaya, the maid with the postmaster. Yasha the footman and Yepikhodov the estate clerk, trespasses on the masters' billiard game and the latter even talks back to Varya when reproached with their intrusion (328, 335). Anya and Varya jump out from behind a rug. You never know what cards, whose voices, what snatches of a song or a poem, even a stick raised to hit, will crop up from where, and then disappear. One man tumbles down the stairs (331). In the meantime at the auction in town the orchard has slipped from between their fingers, and with its announcement the quiet is to be regained, “a quiet, deep, joy like evening sunlight” (339), as Anya hopes.

Chekhov's cherry orchard, set against the vast Russian landscape, is reflected in the dual image of the landlords who failed to hold on to it and the slaves who for so long had been denied entry. Molloy's wood, on the other hand, embodies the playwright's idea of the community as it should be. The play is set right in the middle of the wood<sup>17</sup>. The viewpoint is consistent: that of the people. The landlord, in fact,

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16) Lopakhin “ living in it all we ought properly to be giants.”

Rasnyevskaya “A lot of use giants would be. They're all right in fairy-tales. Anywhere else they're frightening” (318 9).

17) There is, for example, the tree-trunk that Mark, Stephen and others sit, Major D'Arcy's tree (hidden from view), under which Hotha plays his fiddle.

has ceased to be relevant, except in so far as the memory of his atrocity is sealed in the cursed tree or in the ghost of one of his victims that nightly frightens Mark. The ruling class has left the wood behind, and the locals have emotionally appropriated it as their own.

At the centre of the stage is Sanbatch's camp in the wood. In this most spartan of dwellings are condensed all the Irish countryman's ideas of home and hearth. It is almost iconographic in the way it epitomises the values that keep life going. There is the fire, the life of each household, as Estyn Evans explains: "The kitchen and the hearth are the very core of the Irish house, and the turf fire burning continuously day and night, throughout the year, is the symbol both of family continuity and of hospitality towards the stranger. When it goes out, it has been said, the soul goes out of the people of the house<sup>18)</sup>." Opposite it, equal in prominence, lies a coffin, or a box of the same shape, offering rest and refuge<sup>19)</sup>. Four poles stand on guard around these symbols of life and death: a kettle hangs on an iron rod, Byzantine Madonna on a sheep-crook, an Old Moore's Almanac and Rosary Beads on a dungfork, and a cap on a hay-fork. These are the ensigns respectively of household work and hospitality, faith, status and pride (as the former chief sheep herd), and fealty to the community's tradition and calendar. Sanbatch is called "the lord of all this wealth". Life can subsist on the barest of necessities if supported by faith and community.

The play opens with Sanbatch, a character not unlike a doyen or a guardian spirit of the wood, delousing at his camp, musing on the numerical ramifications of perhaps the only thriving species in the wood.

"'Tis me that'd be rich, Leggy, if there was any kind of a middling price going for them at all. And to think I hadn't wan in all my life's day till I was over sixty! Still, if we thin them middling often, we'll keep from scratching when the neighbours are around, and they'll never find out that we have them at all. And another thing: according as we're getting more starved in the blood and in the body these divils'll have less to get, till at last they might resign from us

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18) *Irish Folk Ways*, London: Routledge, f. p. 1957, reprinted 1989.

19) According to Molloy's friend Michael Leyden, the eccentric homestead is based on a real-life model. There was a recluse living in a bacon's box in Castle McGuarra's woods. The King brothers were based on Dunmore characters over 60 years of age, Peter and William McGrath, who walked one behind the other and always with a packet of bullseyes. (told to the author in an interview)

altogether..."(115)

The monologue prepares the ground for many of the play's themes. All that Molloy's characters look for is a "middling" life, which would be happiness enough for them, but even that much is often hard to come by in this world. The world is not made up of heroes, villains, or men of power and intellect. One's "neighbours" are no less important and, therefore, their efforts not to be "thinned" out of existence.

Living in a remote western village of Milltown, Molloy took the problem of depopulation to heart: "The death of a village, like the death of an individual is usually a painful business," as he confides in his Preface. And employing the figure of the tree, he warns that, "The Anglo-American plutocracies... [would] destroy us root and branch through mass emigration"(111). The vehemence of his anger at the government for their lack of concern, on top of his passionate plea to repopulate the country, is startling, coming from the writer of this gentle play. He sees the political leaders' acquiescence in the exodus as evidence of their slave-born mentality and fears that it will leave the country defenseless against attack and colonization it may seem rather naïve now but we must remember that WWII was a recent memory then. Citing the decline of amateur drama<sup>20</sup>, he concludes that "Every activity is hit by a falling population; and every activity is helped by an expanding population"(112).

Emigration is a recurrent topic in Irish literature. Many stories and songs depicting the heartrending sorrow of parting have been written. But never before has the problem of depopulation been dramatized in such plain terms as the question of life and death for the community. We do find just as searing a denunciation of the forces that drive youngsters from home in Keane's *Many Young Men of Twenty*. But Keane's focus is more on the emotional implications of emigration than its effect on a community. This is even truer with more recent plays like *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer's Assistant and Philadelphia, Here I Come!* Bryan MacMahon's *The Song of the Anvil* is another play, contemporary with Molloy's, that is concerned with the lack of marriages and its effect on the community, but MacMahon treats it in more elliptical terms as the villagers' tendency to escape into fantasy and not so much as an issue of sheer survival.

Molloy's solution to the problem of depopulation, in the down-to-earth way country

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20) Molloy gives an informed treatment to the changing fate of amateur drama in another comedy *The Will and the Way*.

people think, is simple and practical: more marriage. At the end the play brings off three marriages. The number counts: for people and for trees as for lice. Marriage in this play does not come as the consummation in all-round felicity and good will that provides a convenient ending to romantic comedies. In such plays a sequence of misadventures that give rise to all the mirth and anguish along the way are somehow straightened out and society returns to the wholesome state that a wedding ritualizes. Molloy's treatment of marriage in *WW* is more pragmatic. It is an urgent means for a community to survive. In fact, so persistently is marriage discussed that the play reads almost like a treatise on marriage: what benefits it brings, yet why people resist it and what happens as a result. Sanbatch plunges right into the topic as soon as he catches hold of a newcomer, Con. The roof of his house fell because he did not have a wife whose constant nagging would have kept him dutifully at work.

Act I can almost be taken as a casebook of the illnesses resulting from a lack of marriage. Except for Sheila and Kitty, who comes in at the end of Act I as "the last bright little face that's left" (133), as Sanbatch says, "There isn't a man keeping a house... but is part crazy." The cause is the same; they have "lost" themselves for "want of married life" (135). The denizens of Molloy's wood parade before our eyes, tinged with varying degrees of "craziness", as if affected by the whispers of the disappearing trees. Each is marked by a certain peculiarity in movement and speech. The impression we get is reminiscent of *The Cherry Orchard* with its gallery of idiosyncratic characters whose fate hinges on one orchard. The movements of Molloy's characters are never as intricately or subtly choreographed as in Mrs Ranyevskaya's dance party, in which members of different social classes are made to cross paths, mingle and part. They are introduced one by one, as in a mummers' play, when they stop for a moment in the wood to confide in a stranger, Con, their story of distress.

Sanbatch is "gone very odd these late years" (121) His "bad clothes" force him to stay within the bounds of the wood, where his only companions are a sheepdog and the ghosts to whom he imparts all his thoughts. He is seen "talking his head off" (139) by himself. Communication is essential for the health of individuals as well as a community. Sadie exemplifies an extreme case of deprivation in this sense: a disappointment in marriage has left her a virtual mute, deprived of the will to speak. Moreover, the external world has been so dimmed out of her senses that any reactions to a new idea or a change in the surroundings takes a few moments to form in her mind. Sadie's furtive motions, ranging from utter listlessness to frightened agitation,

are then matched by the wretched conditions of Stephen's entrance "leaning heavily" on his stick and "hardly able to bring his legs" (120). Worse still are the frantic movements of the next to appear, Mark, a young man 'poisoned' by the bread he has to bake himself because there is no woman in the house. He dashes in and out, constantly peering into the side where, he has been tricked into believing, long-absent Sheila was to appear for a rendezvous. He shoos a stranger away; and directly calls him back. One moment he sinks onto a tree-trunk in "bitter reflections"; the next he jumps up, hopping "this way and that" (123).

The most aggravating of all are the King brothers, a grave warning to all bachelors: a superannuated lady-killer and a drudging misogamist. They "meander" in a fixed "formation" (125) keeping a distance of 6~8 yards between them. The same rule applies to their speech. That is, they speak by carefully measured turns, one of the pair shutting himself off from any conversation that goes on around him while he waits for his turn. Bringing up the rear of this lot is Hotha, who "slips in", with his "large battered hat" held "at an outlandish angle" (130), a sign perhaps of certain mental unbalance. He is so obsessed with his desertion of Sadie that he seems to imagine any mention of her name is a calumny against him.

In Act II of Molloy's play, things get moving, with a series of hurried and tentative attempts made at matchmaking. The intervening summer months seem to have provided time for things to ripen: the mutual affections have deepened between Con and Kitty. Mark is in better health and Sadie on the road to recovery. The characters, who appeared singly in Act 1, now come in twos and threes, eager to break free from the malaise of single life, though most of the potential pairings entertained prove to be false starts, last-ditch efforts born of despair<sup>21</sup>). What is remarkable, however, is that

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21) (1)Kitty and Con: they like each other and discuss the possibility, or rather impossibility, of marrying in practical terms.

(2)Mark and Kitty: thinking that Sheila's boyfriend in London has written to her, Mark makes an advance toward Kitty. This move is in accord with Sanbatch's plan. Sanbatch wants each of the two propertied candidates to be allocated to the houseless and pull off the double pairings.

(3)Mark and Sheila: Mark learns that the letter was written by her female friend and switches tack back to his original love.

Hotha and Sheila, Kitty, or Sadie: Doesn't matter who, Hotha makes a shot at all.

Kitty and Jimmy: A plain joke, but with the practical end to rid Sheila of the nuisance of Paddy's advances.

In the end the young come together for a confab at which they glibly agree that they

all these stirrings to mate take place against the background of Stephen's steady decline as the play moves from an evening in early May, when trees put forth their leaves, to a time after nightfall in late September, when the leaves begin to fall. These are the two seasons, Stephen says, people are likely to succumb to cancer. The wood in its changing seasonal aspects provides a fitting backdrop to the play that treats marriage and death as two sides of the same cycle. One function of marriage that Sanbatch preaches over and over again is that it ensures one generation succeeds another, that the young are there to bury the old. Stephen shows no resistance to what he accepts as the natural course of events, and is levelheaded enough to prepare himself for his end not only by signing his will, but by asking absolution from Sadie and then paying his last tribute to the pub. By Act III he is already dead, a fact that is only incidentally mentioned.

Nature by itself can be inimical to one's well being the darkness, the lonesomeness and the trees, Sanbatch says, have together robbed Sadie of her speech. The darkness should be kept at bay through a community of people working and talking. Otherwise, it will engulf waylaid individuals like Brehony, who chose to hang himself rather than to drag on a "cheer" less existence. Light and dark, day and night, life and death inhabit a continuous space and should be left undisturbed, each respected for what it is. That is the advice Sanbatch gives as he tells Sadie to quench the candle before she goes to bed at night "for the night never likes anywan to interfere with it". He warns, "Look at young Mark Tristnan below ; he's sleeping in the day and stopping up all night with the lamp lit, and look at how the night is wasting him away and maddening him!" (136). We see light and shade play quivering and flickering under the branches of trees but never truly intruding on each other. So are the light and dark aspects of our life woven into the texture of Molloy's play, existing side by side, as the trees, the coffin box and the fire do on stage. When an equilibrium is reached, we may, like Molloy's heroes, find ourselves at ease with death. Death is "only the brother of sleep" (150), Sanbatch says. "For we won't be always miserable, Leggy. We'll

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are born bachelors and maids, goading the one dissenter Mark into abandoning his farm. The old, on their part, are brought together to witness Stephen's will, which would leave Sheila free to sell her farm. It seems all the eligible young couples are deserting the wood and the only flicker of hope by the end of Act II seems to lie in the emotional coming together of Hotha and Sadie, if not the miracle invention Sanbatch keeps tantalizingly referring to.

die at last... . That much is sure. God never refused Death to any wan!" (137). After all the others have run off to a drink-shop to celebrate the sudden rush of marriages, the play ends in quiet reflection of the coming death.

"In the English Army as soon as wan man is killed they enlist another ; and that's God' plan, too: for each person that dies, a child to be sent into the world. ...and maybe soon He'll bestow children on the village again. If He does, we'll have nothing more to want or to do, only wait for the death, and then die happy because we will be leaving room for more" (177).