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Myth and the Journey in *The Well of the Saints*

by KATE POWERS

IN *The Well of the Saints* John Millington Synge presents a dark comic journey into vision. The opening lines of the play, "What place are we now, Martin Dougl?" "Passing the gap," contain the unconscious irony of the travelers who have no awareness of the journey they have begun or the fact that they will not pass beyond the gap until they have descended into the village, tested their vision, rewritten their dreams, and returned to this very spot. Only when they have traveled the full circle of experience will they be able to pass beyond the gap into a world of liberty and risk they freely choose. Throughout the journey they are influenced by myths which they, to some degree, internalize.¹ In this essay I propose to examine the play in the context of myth and journey.

Its story is one of disarming simplicity. At the beginning the blind beggars Martin and Mary Dougl, who have been habitually flattered by villagers about their good looks, discuss appearance as they wait on a mountain road leading south. They are as curious about sight as the approaching villagers are curious about a miracle. The Saint, a wandering friar carrying a can of holy water from the well of the saints, can apparently satisfy everyone by offering the couple a cure. Martin, eager for the miracle, quickly brushes aside Mary's reservations, but sight brings immediate disenchantment: he mistakes the beautiful, young Molly Byrne for his ugly, aging wife, thus exposing himself to Molly's jibes and his spurned wife's fury. Matters worsen as the unskilled Martin, now expected to support himself, labors under Timmy the smith for barest subsistence. Although described as "almost elderly," Timmy, like Martin, has an eye for Molly Byrne, and Molly has an eye for a good provider. They find a common bond in taunting Martin, who exists at the lowest level of their society. As their treatment becomes unbearable to him, Martin loses his sight and returns to Mary who is also blind again. The Dougl's experiment with seeing has been disastrous: they have lost dignity, insight, and each other. Restored to their former blindness, they struggle to reach accord. When the Saint returns, offering them a second—and guaranteed permanent—miracle, Martin opposes enormous pressure from the villagers. He knocks the watering can out of the friar's hand and, warning the

1. In this approach to the play I differ in perspective from Reed Way Dasenbrock who states that it was "Synge's peasant drama that turned the Irish dramatic movement away from mythological subjects toward the peasant drama that for a time became its signature." See "Synge's Irish Mythology," *A J. M. Synge Literary Companion*, ed. Edward A. Kopper, Jr. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1988), 136.

now hostile crowd to leave them alone, departs for the south of Ireland with Mary.

WHAT is the nature of myth in this play, and how does it function in relation to the journey? The first part of the question rejects a single answer because Synge uses three types of myth in *The Well of the Saints*: the societal myth, the racial hero myth, and the personal myth. Although the racial hero myth pervades the play in the character of the anti-hero Martin, it is the shattering of the societal myth which gets the journey underway; hence I shall address this myth before proceeding to that of the racial hero. The personal myth is realized in the culmination of the drama, and I shall save it for the place Synge reserved for it.

Of the three, it is the societal myth which is most fragile. It is myth in the leanest sense which links the Douls to the villagers: village society has offered to Mary and Martin Doul an attractive, if illusory, perspective on life, and to the extent to which the Douls accept the myth of the "beautiful dark woman of Ballinatone" and the "grand, handsome fellow Martin," they are created by society. The myth offers the dream quality of wish fulfillment, and to a large extent they do accept it.² The illusion which at first glance appears innocent enough contains a hidden barb. The societal myth offers them dignity from which they derive only a mock sense of independence, for as long as they accept the offered identity, the Douls's fate is controlled by the villagers, as indeed the villagers prove when they decide to change them by offering them sight. If the myth can exist with sight—and the Douls have little reason to think it will not—then the offer of a miracle is as irresistible as the myth itself.

It is Martin who expresses the greater need for the miracle; the attractiveness of the myth has such a hold on Mary that even Molly Byrne's reported jibes have had no power to assail the fortress of her belief and dignity.³ Martin, however, has a need to learn; he is somewhat skeptical and largely curious, as he reveals in his plaintive comment to Mary:

I do be thinking in the long nights it'd be a grand thing if we could see ourselves for one hour, or a minute itself, the way we'd know surely we were the finest man and the finest woman of the seven counties of the east—(bitterly) and then the seeing rabble below might be destroying their souls telling bad lies, and we'd never heed a thing they'd say.⁴

The journey, then, is to be Martin's journey—it is he who needs to learn that the physical sense of sight cannot identify "the finest man and the finest woman" and he who must gain the concomitant confidence to "never heed a thing they'd say."

2. For an analysis of the psychology of wish fulfillment see *Abstracts of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Carrie Lee Rothgeb (New York: Jason Aronson, 1973), 119. Alan Price in *Synge and the Anglo-Irish Drama* (London: Methuen, 1961) notes that the Douls's chief source of self-respect is that they are a distinguished couple, a belief which the villagers foster (139–40).

3. Robin Skelton, *The Writings of J. M. Synge* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), offers this commentary: "It may be no accident that Mary Doul calls herself the wonder of the western world, for she is, in her struggle to assert her dignity and in her fantasies of pride, kin to the playboy of the western world who also had a vision of his dignity and found it conflicting with the actual" (101–02).

4. John Millington Synge, *The Complete Plays* (New York: Random House, 1935), 123. All subsequent quotations of J. M. Synge are taken from this volume.

Martin is the artist, and his mythopoetic mode of consciousness cannot be conferred on him by the outside world. It is only through experiencing the paradoxical loss of vision which accompanies his restored sight that Martin can ultimately come to a realization of the value of his poetic imagination and insight and a recognition of his own identity. But Martin's search will demand time and pain. First the light of the miracle reveals the societal myth for the cold lie that it is, and the dignity based on that lie crumbles.⁵ The Douls are forced to realize the harsh psychological and financial dependence which binds them to the villagers who have created and supported them.

Martin's journey is not simply a journey forward—not only does he travel in a circle before he can pass beyond the gap, but he travels backward to the church which he has passed; this regression is paralleled in the diminishing of his vision which occurs, ironically, with the regaining of his sight. Immediately, he allows sight to replace the sense which he has previously shown: he judges with his eyes rather than his mind and heart, and he is unable to recognize his lifetime companion. When he was blind, Martin separated himself both physically and imaginatively from those he referred to as “the seeing rabble below” through his road life and his intrinsically superior status. Now he separates himself from Mary:

Your hair, and your big eyes, is it? . . . I'm telling you there isn't a wisp on any gray mare on the ridge of the world isn't finer than the dirty twist on your head. There isn't two eyes in any starving sow isn't finer than the eyes you were calling blue like the sea. (139)

As Martin changes, his language changes, and the animal imagery he uses to describe Mary spills over into other descriptions—the villagers are a “drove of pitiful beasts” (138) when they will not identify Mary for him. It is with the pitiful beasts, however, that he chooses to go, attempting through his descent to the village to become one of the people “below”; how well he assimilates his new life is shown in his complaint that Timmy, his new employer, will not give him enough food to “keep the life in a pig” (142)—after describing others in bestial terms, he draws attention both to the difference between himself and a pig and to his perception that socially the difference doesn't seem to matter much. Mary's reply to his assessment of her—“It's the devil cured you this day with your talking of sows; it's the devil cured you this day, I'm saying, and drove you crazy with lies” (130)—shows a degree of perception of which Martin is no longer capable. Her immediate awareness of dark vision causes her to reject it as evil. At this point in the play she shows the greater wisdom, and he has become a fool who must experience a painful journey before he can attain—and then surpass—the vision he formerly had.

The sighted Martin Doul is unacceptable to the closed society of the village. His dislike for hard physical labor, his desire for a woman who is beautiful and young, and his insistence on presenting reality as he sees it combine to make him a misfit. More importantly, he is a misfit because he is working against his

5. Of this passage Leslie D. Foster observes: “The symbolism is clear: The church [sic] shows man to himself as ugly and calls it a miracle.” See “*The Well of the Saints*,” *A J. M. Synge Literary Companion*, 52–53.

intrinsic nature. At the beginning of Act II, Martin states that he is “destroying himself” through hard work; the expression as he uses it is a common enough figurative phrase in Irish usage, but it is true for Martin in an ironically literal sense. Martin cannot become one of the villagers without destroying himself because organic to Martin’s personality is the myth of Oisín. Here Synge uses myth with a difference. Since the Oisín myth springs from the roots of Irish culture, the characters participate in it rather than create it. With the age of heroes dead, the only way Martin can realistically embody the mythic personage is through ironic deflation. For Oisín liberty was a *sine qua non* for life, and until Martin can realize the primary value of liberty in his own life, he will continue to destroy himself.⁶

The evidence of Martin as an Oisín figure is ample. Like Oisín who spent three hundred years of his life in Tir na nÓg, the Land of Youth, Martin has been blessedly unaware of many of the effects of aging; his blindness has largely protected him from the knowledge of graying hair, withering skin, rotting teeth—the signals of human decay and approaching death. Like the Oisín who engaged in the great debates with Patrick, Martin who engages in a great argument with the Saint is old as well as blind.⁷ Along with these physical traits, there are some personality traits which Martin shares with Oisín from the beginning of the play: his love of beautiful women and his ready wit are apparent early. Other traits which relate him to Oisín lie dormant until Martin becomes a self-realized character; prime among these is a conscious need for liberty and an expressed passion for nature.⁸

A brief passage from David Krause’s “The Rageous Ossean” presents a thumbnail sketch of the hero in a dialogue with Saint Patrick in which Oisín defends his father Finn’s right to Liberty: traces of Martin Doule are visible.

... Patrick falsely declares that Finn is in bondage in hell because he committed treachery and oppression. No one was ever more generous and freedom-loving than the noble Finn, Oisín replies, and there are innumerable illustrations in the legends to support him. With characteristic fairness, as well as a naive innocence that knows no fear, Oisín insists that no God should be a tyrannical master of man. Why, he wants to know, can’t Finn and God be equals like the honorable warriors; why should God want to put a hero like Finn in hell? There is a turn of comic irony in his sly innocence during the exchange: and when, after claiming that his son Oscar would easily defeat Patrick and smash his crozier, he concedes that even if God managed to bring Oscar down in a fair fight, Oisín would openly praise God for his strength. But this would simply prove that God was a brave warrior and certainly no better than his equal number, the Fenian chief Finn.⁹

6. Joseph Holloway, who saw the 1905 performance, wrote of this play in *Abbey Theatre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1967). “To call it Irish is distinctly a libel on our race and country” (41). This observation fails to take into account not only the use of the Oisín myth but the existence as well of an analogue in Irish folklore. Sean O’Suilleabhain’s “Synge’s Use of Irish Folklore,” *J. M. Synge Centenary Papers 1971*, ed. Maurice Harman (Dublin: Dolmen, 1972), reports that the basic theme of the blind man who, having been cured, wishes to be blind once more occurs in a folk story (21). In the story the man chooses blindness that he may not sin; if sin is viewed at its most elemental as a betrayal of self, Martin is perhaps making the same choice for the same reason.

7. Anthony Roche, in “The Two Worlds of Synge’s *The Well of the Saints*,” *Genre*, 12:439–50, notes that the world of blindness has a parallel in Oisín’s Other World: both are avowedly illusionistic.

8. Images of nature are almost nonexistent in Act I, although the rich nature imagery of Act III indicates reflections on previous blind experience. It seems reasonable to conclude that Martin has always had an appreciation of nature but that he does not begin to express it—in both its beauty and its horror—until he begins to develop as a poet through his painful experiences of Act II.

9. *Modern Drama*, 4 (1961–62): 275. In his well-known poem, “The Wanderings of Oisín,” William Butler

The passage exhibits four basic characteristics: a desire for fairness and the personal liberty which fairness demands, a willingness to test a pagan vision against a Christian one, a sense of delight in the fight, and—most of all—an irreverent comic spirit. Martin's personality is not realized in terms of these characteristics until the final act of the play, when he is at last able to create the personal myth, or myth of self. The final myth is both a creative act and an act of recognition which together make up the will to be. Martin denies his potential while he lives in the village because he is blinded to his own identity.

After suffering the loss of the societal myth and the humiliation which his romantic dream about Molly brings, Martin experiences a terrifying ordeal when he is forced to live without illusions; it is at the same moment that he loses his sight.

Is it a storm of thunder is coming, or the last of the world? (*He staggers toward Mary Dou, tripping slightly over a tin can.*) The heavens is closing, I'm thinking, with darkness and great trouble passing in the sky. (*He reaches Mary Dou and seizes her left arm with both his hands—with a frantic cry.*) Is it darkness of thunder is coming, Mary Dou! (153)

The world he has known since the miracle, that of the "seeing rabble below," has in this moment had its last end for him, and when he is no longer blinded by sight he turns instinctively to Mary Dou.¹⁰ But because of the humiliation she has suffered from Martin, Mary, eager for revenge, rejects him. Humiliated, bereft of his dream and of all social support, Martin refuses to become a victim. With all joy gone, the only satisfaction left him is the perverse pleasure of invective, and at this he is highly skilled:

Yet if I've no strength in me I've a voice left for my prayers, and may God blight them this day, and my own soul the same hour with them, the way I'll see them after, Molly Byrne and Timmy the smith, the two of them on a high bed, and they screeching in hell. . . . It'll be a grand thing that time to look on the two of them; and they twisting and roaring out, and twisting and roaring again, one day and the next day, and each day always and ever. It's not blind I'll be that time, and it won't be hell to me, I'm thinking, but the like of heaven itself; and it's fine care I'll be taking the Lord Almighty doesn't know. (156)

The passage is a blend of comedy and pain, and it is in his comic attitudes that Martin alleviates pain and hopes to transfer it to Molly and Timmy. In his agony Martin has finally learned the defense that Mary had adopted soon after the miracle: that of defiance against an unacceptable reality. But emotionally he is caught; although he can defy reality, he is still trapped by it—his is a hell of imprisonment. Martin, not yet able to follow Oisín who chose hell because it meant freedom from the tyranny of God, chooses hell because only hell can give

Yeats has Oisín recount his story to St. Patrick: the Fenian hero defines himself as the antithesis of the saint by expressing his delight in sensuous beauty of both the land and the gentle Niamh. Then he continues, "But now two things devour my life: / The things that most of all I hate: / Fasting and prayers" (*The Collected Poems*. New York: Macmillan, 1956).

10. Foster has difficulty understanding why for Martin and Mary sight is not a desirable solution. Martin, when he returns to Mary, tells her that he has begun to appreciate her even though she lacks physical beauty: if he can learn that, Foster feels, he can learn what he needs to be sighted (56). Part of the answer, however, lies in the experience from which he has derived this wisdom: eyes that cannot be trusted add nothing to the identity toward which he is struggling. In a larger context seers and poets, from Homer and Teiresias to Milton, have seen truth without eyes.

him the revenge he wants on Molly and Timmy. His damning of Molly, Timmy, and himself is the dream which temporarily replaces the one Molly has just shattered. His projected enjoyment of the twisting, roaring, and screeching of Molly and Timmy, an illustration of the Freudian wish fulfillment principle, is great enough so he can will to reject his own pain through laughter. But the dream is a wrong one: even though it is he who has created it, it clearly shows society's control over him which negates the possibility of self-fulfillment and freedom. Even so, hope for Martin's future development is there in the emerging Oisín traits—in his stand against a society represented by Molly and Timmy and in the comic irreverence which allows him to make his prayer a curse and to hide his motives from God. Martin Doull will not be crushed.

But pain and tension still pervade Martin's being in the opening of Act III as he struggles toward a freedom which he cannot yet conceptualize. For Mary the liberating concept is that of a beautiful old woman with soft white hair.¹¹ She has created a new dream. Dreams—or myths—of personal identity cannot be shared, however, any more than they can be conferred. Mary can indicate the way, and Martin, no longer deceived by appearances, can learn from Mary, who, in the face of pain and disappointment, has found a palliative measure for dealing with unacceptable reality.¹² Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* lists three such measures: powerful deflections, substitute satisfactions, and intoxicating substances. Mary has chosen the second, a measure which Freud further elucidates by saying: "The substitute satisfactions, as offered by art, are illusions in contrast with reality, but they are none the less psychically effective, thanks to the role which phantasy has assumed in mental life."¹³ Martin's earlier attempt at a "powerful deflection" hasn't functioned to make him happy; through his revenge motive he is still tied to society and controlled by it. He turns to Mary, hoping to adopt her new badge of dignity for his own; fittingly, he meets with nothing but scorn—if she did share her new identity, it would be conferred on him as the societal myth was, and it would be as worthless.

In *The Irish Dramatic Movement* Una Ellis-Fermor states, "... Synge sees that the genius for myth-making finds its supreme expression in creating the most satisfying myth of all, that of personality."¹⁴ Until this point Martin has shown artistic development, but it is in the creation of self that he emerges as the true artist. There is an exuberant joy in his realization of his artistic identity:

I've this to say, Mary Doull. I'll be letting my beard grow in a short while, a beautiful, long, white, silken, streamy beard, you wouldn't see the like of in the eastern world. . . . Ah, a white beard's a

11. Price, after tracing Mary's revelation of her new dream, examines the significance her dream has for Martin: "Taken with this notion, and not knowing whether to prize more her new comeliness or her agility of mind, Martin cries out: 'You're a cute thinking woman, Mary Doull, and it's no lie.' His admiration is mingled with relief; he begins to see a way out of the impasse: a woman with such an appearance, and with such a facility of fancy and expression, would make an excellent partner; infinitely better than the icy, concealed Molly" (152–53).

12. M. J. Sidnell observes as a possible weakness in the play that Mary's function "becomes a passive one after the reciprocal viewing of the first act." See "*The Well of the Saints and the Light of the World*," *Sunshine and the Moon's Delight: A Centenary Tribute to John Millington Synge 1871–1909*, ed. S. B. Bushrui (Dublin: Colin Smythe, and Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1972), 56. Mary's lead is, in fact, key to Martin's self-discovery.

13. *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1962), 22.

14. *The Irish Dramatic Movement* (London: Methuen, 1939), 176.

grand thing on an old man, a grand thing for making the quality stop and be stretching out their hands with good silver or gold, and a beard's a thing you'll never have, so you may be holding your tongue. (161)

This moment is Martin's epiphany: for the first time he realizes that working solely with his poetic imagination he can create a beauty that will color his life. The beauty of his imaginative construct, a beard which waxes long, silken, and streamy under his verbal powers, enables him to restore his confidence. He is also able to create in his imagination the economic gain which will come with his new dignity—whether in reality he will have gold and silver to sustain him is inconsequential here; for the moment, poetic imagination will sustain him, and the moment is all the time he has to deal with. To crown his triumph, he realizes that the new beauty which gives him identity is his alone—Mary can have no part in it. Martin Doul has created the myth of his own personality.

And he richly deserves the wholehearted acceptance Mary offers: "Well, we're a great pair, surely, and it's great times we'll have yet, maybe, and great talking before we die" (161). In her answer Mary cheerfully reasserts the bond between them. But she, despite the new identity her beautiful soft white hair will give, is not wholly caught up in the optimistic world of imagination as Martin is; it is he, after all, who is the poet. Her reply—with its awareness that although great times are possible, death is certain—foreshadows the darkness they will face when they cross the gap and enter the outer world.

There is only one more challenge Martin must meet before he is truly free: he has returned to the gap because society rejected him—to attain liberty, it must be he who rejects society. The villagers and the Saint provide the opportunity for him to do so almost immediately by offering a second miracle. When they hear the bell, Mary's "The Lord protect us from the saints of God!" (162) sums up a major irony of the play: the Christian society with its Patrician heritage, in a mock enactment of the Patrick-Oisín struggles, has tried so hard to save Martin that it has almost destroyed him; the only beneficial miracle for the Douls is the one they can create of themselves.

After attempting to hide, attempting to run away, and asking to be left alone, Martin enters—at first unwillingly—into the debate; the Saint rouses him by speaking of the "wonders of the world" which Martin does not see. Challenged and irritated, Martin is willing to test his pagan poet's vision against that of the Christian Saint.

Is it talking now you are of Knock and Ballavore? Ah, it's ourselves had finer sights than the like of them, I'm telling you, when we were sitting a while back hearing the birds and bees humming in every weed of the ditch, or when we'd be smelling the sweet, beautiful smell does be rising in the warm nights, when you do hear the swift flying things racing in the air, till we'd be looking up in our own minds into a grand sky, and seeing the lakes and big rivers, and fine hills for taking the plow. (167–68)

In the light of his new poetic consciousness, Martin has begun drawing for the Saint a picture of ironic balance between reality and the poetic imagination. If the former held dirt and disappointment, the latter holds the magic of "swift flying things racing in the air" and the fertility of the "fine hills for the taking of the

plow"—to look into their own minds is to look up; Martin and Mary see a higher world than the one available in reality, and with instinctive wisdom choose to stay in the world they can see through blindness.¹⁵

Martin's willingness to test his vision is one of the attitudes which reveals in him an integration of the Oisín myth and the personal myth which he has created; another of these attitudes is the passion for nature which he shows in this passage. He has given play to his attitude of comic irreverence in his damnation speech for Molly and Timmy.¹⁶ Oisín characteristics yet unaccounted for are the desire for fair play and the personal freedom which fairness demands and a sense of delight in the fight; these traits Martin demonstrates most clearly in his two final speeches:

Let you walk on now with your worn feet, and your welter knees, and your fasting, holy ways a thin pitiful arm. For if it's a right some of you have to be working and sweating the like of Timmy the smith, and a right some of you have to be fasting and praying and talking holy talk the like of yourself. I'm thinking it's a good right ourselves have to be sitting blind, hearing a soft wind turning around the little leaves of spring and feeling the sun, and we not tormenting our souls with the sight of the gray days, and the holy men, and the dirty feet is tramping the world. . . . Keep off now, the yelping lot of you, or it's more than one maybe will get a bloody head on him with the pitch of my stone. Keep off now, and let you not be afeared: for we're going on the two of us to the towns of the south, where the people will have their kind voices maybe, and we won't know their bad looks or their villainy at all. (*He takes Mary Dougl's hand again.*) Come along now and we'll be walking to the south, for we've seen too much of everyone in this place, and it's small joy we'd have of living near them, or hearing the lies they do be telling from the gray of dawn till the night. (171-73)

In the first passage Martin simply recognizes that freedom is a right for all and claims a share for Mary and himself. Since his view of freedom is a celebration of life in nature and since he is not willing to deny the flesh through fasting, prayer, and hard work, he stands against the mores of Patrician society and angers his listeners. Martin shows no streak of violence here—he picks up the stone only after the villagers have thrown things at him—but there is a vociferous will to defend his hard-won freedom, and there is a joyous victory of the human spirit in his ability to do so despite infirmity and age.¹⁷ Perhaps the greatest sign of his victory lies in his new-found sense of presence which will not allow victimization: there is no stage direction for him to throw the stone. Unlike that other Sygne anti-hero, Christy Mahon of *The Playboy of the Western World*, who must at the conclusion change his role of oppressed for that of oppressor, Martin—true to his

15. Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, discussing palliative measures for dealing with disappointments first suggests that one could become a hermit, then continues: "But one can do more than that; one can try to recreate the world, to build up in its stead another world in which its most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by others that are in conformity with one's own wishes. But whoever, in desperate defiance, sets out upon this path to happiness will as a rule attain nothing. Reality is too strong for him. He becomes a madman, who for the most part finds no one to help him in carrying through his delusion" (28). Mary and Martin are among the fortunate "victims" of madness: not only do they belong to the society of "lovers, poets, and madmen" who have artistic vision, but they have each other to help in carrying through the "delusion" (in this case an illusion of their choosing), a task which might become too difficult for a single person faced with the overwhelming burden of reality. Martin's insistent defense of Mary's freedom when she herself has grown weak is elucidated by Freud's commentary.

16. Further evidence of Martin's comic irreverence may be found in his excited speech to Molly, whose identity he has mistaken: ". . . for it's grand hair you have, and soft skin, and eyes would make the saints, if they were dark awhile and seeing again, fall down out of the sky" (137).

17. Yeats's lines from "The Wanderings of Oisín" might serve equally well to describe Martin's spirit at this moment: "And in a wild and sudden dance / We mocked at Time and Fate and Chance."

Oisín heritage—has no desire to dominate even for a moment those around him. His “Keep off now, and let you not be afear’d” uses the conjunction “and” to create a balance between his rights to freedom and theirs.

Finally liberated from the gray dawn and lowering skies of village life among the people of Patrick, Martin and Mary are going, not to where bad looks in reality will not exist, but where the Douls will not have to know them. This distinction is important because it separates delusion from illusion—it is in the latter they have chosen to live. Martin is a poet with a touch of madness rather than a madman with a touch of poetry. With the illusion created by poetic imagination, the Douls are able to escape much of the unhappiness which has threatened them; through it they find the strength to reject sight and society. Freud states:

We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men.¹⁸

The Douls have removed, to the degree that it is possible, the first and third sources of suffering: in choosing blindness they will not have to watch themselves grow old and decay, and in rejecting society they escape from lies and unkindness. The second source of suffering, however, is one which cannot be removed. Mary shows a realization of this fact in her answer to Martin’s final speech:

That’s the truth, surely; and we’d have a right to be gone, if it’s a long way itself, as I’ve heard them say, where you do have to be walking with a slough of wet on one side and a slough of wet on the other, and you going a stony path with a north wind blowing behind. (173)

The world into which they will now journey offers no security; instead it holds the chill of the north wind, a danger of sudden drowning, and eventual death. But death is inevitable. The world they choose is one in which they can be human, beautiful, and artistically creative—and if the prize is freedom, the risk is worth all costs to them. In choosing freedom they choose never again to be victims of a society which can create and uncreate them at will through a cruel myth; they choose to be creators of their own myth, the myth of personal identity, and to participate on a reduced scale in the heroic myth of Oisín. In the final speech of Act II when Martin has just lost his sight, he plays a mock Oisín figure in his choice to go to hell; at that time he chooses bondage. At the end of Act III the anti-hero Martin makes a truly heroic choice: the world he will go to is indeed a hell, but it is free. Unlike his body which is little, old, weather-beaten, and ugly, his spirit shows the beauty of heroic stature in this choice.

18. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 24.

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