

J. M. SYNGE: A MAN OF ARAN

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John Millington Synge's affinity for the Aran Islands—their rugged beauty, their air of mystery, but especially the spirit and language of their people—cannot be underestimated in any consideration of the development of the playwright's aesthetic. What did Synge believe about the nature and purpose of art? What were his sources of inspiration as a literary artist? And how is his aesthetic reflected in two of his earliest plays: *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen*? Ann Saddlemyer points out that Synge's early background was more musical and linguistic than theatrical. He evolved from musician and "dilettante student of languages and literature" into a "practical man of the theatre" (xii). The impact of Synge's visits to the Aran Islands proved a driving force in that evolution.

Indeed, his five visits to the Aran Islands between 1898 and 1902 were the catalyst that brought Synge's aesthetic into focus for him. He recounts the details of the first four of these visits in his prose work *The Aran Islands* (1907). Alan Price, in a footnote to Synge's introduction to *The Aran Islands*, cites two of the playwright's unpublished letters, in which Synge says:

I look on *The Aran Islands* as my first serious piece of work – it was written before any of my plays. In writing out the talk of the people and their stories in this book, and in a certain number of articles on the Wicklow peasantry which I have not yet collected, I learned to write the peasant dialect and dialogue which I use in my plays. . . . *The Aran Islands* throws a good deal of light on my plays. (II: 47)

As Synge biographers David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens tell us: "The people of Aran had provided him with the material and the idiom with which he could construct an art completely different from any he had even dreamed of" (80).

In Part III of *The Aran Islands* Synge writes: "I have never heard talk so simple and so attractive as the talk of these people" (II: 144), and in "A Letter About J.M. Synge," Jack B. Yeats writes: "I think the Irish peasant had all his heart. He loved them in the east as well as he loved them in the west, but the western men on the Aran Islands and in the Blaskets fitted in with his humor more than any – the wild things they did and said were a joy to him" (402).

In a passage from Part II of *The Aran Islands*, in which Synge tells of an occasion on Inishmaan when a young man and an old woman alternately chant selections from the "Love Songs of Connaught," we get a glimpse of the source of inspiration provided him by the native people:

Several times when the young man finished a poem she took it up again and recited the verses with exquisite musical intonation, putting a wistfulness and passion into her voice that seemed to give it all the cadences that are sought in the profoundest poetry. The lamp had burned low, and another terrible gale was howling and shrieking over the island. It seemed like a dream that I should be sitting here among these men and women listening to this rude and beautiful poetry that is filled with the oldest passions of the world. (II: 112)

An examination of two of Synge's earliest plays, *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen*, reveals his aesthetic put into practice. Synge introduces his use of the peasant dialect in *Riders to the Sea*, the first of his plays to be published and his only play set on the Aran Islands, although the text of the play itself identifies the scene only as "An Island off the West of Ireland" (III: 3). Although Synge does not use the term (coined in 1947), his peasant family and their mourning neighbors speak a hybrid of Irish and English known as *Hiberno-English*. According to Terence Patrick Dolan: "Irish people use and speak English in a distinctive way. In vocabulary, construction, idiom and pronunciation their speech is identifiable and marked. Its characteristics reflect the political, cultural and linguistic histories of the two nations, Ireland and England" (xix). It was this unique blending of the two languages that so appealed to Synge's ear when he encountered it on the Aran Islands.

Riders to the Sea is peppered with examples of Hiberno-English. Consider, for instance, the circular syntax used by Nora when she refers to the scraps of clothing recently recovered from the sea: "We're to find out if it's Michael's they are..." (III: 5). Or Nora's question as she tries to conceal her grief from her mother: "Will she see it was crying I was?" (III: 17). Or Cathleen's almost palindromic "Is it Bartley it is?" (III: 23).

The following speech by Nora illustrates several other characteristics of the dialect: "I won't stop him,' says he, 'but let you not be afraid. Herself does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute,' says he, 'with no son living.'" (III: 5). In this speech we see the use of "says he," with its inversion of standard subject-verb word order and shift of tense from past to present, the use of the reflexive "Herself" to refer to the "woman of the house," Maurya, and the use of the verb "does" (or "do") to indicate customary action, as in "does be saying."

Synge continues to use Hiberno-English in his dialogue in *The Shadow of the Glen* and indeed in all of the remaining plays in his canon. In addition to the features of the dialect described above, we also find the preposition "after" used to indicate action that has recently occurred, such as "He's after dying on me, God forgive him..." (III: 33); the preposition "on" used to indicate a condition or state, as in "It's a queer look is on him for a man that's dead" (III: 33); and the substitution of the reflexive "itself" for the standard English word "even," as when the Tramp says, "Isn't it a grand wonder you're letting him lie there, and he not tidied, or laid out itself?" (III: 33).

Although the Hiberno-English dialect can be challenging for performers and audience alike, mastery of the dialect is essential to any successful production of a Synge play. Consider, for example, the poetic quality that might imbue the following speech of Maurya's if spoken "trippingly on the tongue" by a talented performer: "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 for them that do be old" (III: 13).

Just as Synge found the stuff of art in the local talk of the Irish peasants, he also believed that the best art is produced when the artist is in spiritual communion with nature. As the mad fiddler of *Étude Morbide* puts it: "All art that is not conceived by a soul in harmony with some mood of the earth is without value, and unless we are able to produce a myth more beautiful than nature – holding in itself a spiritual grace beyond and through the earthly – it is better to be silent...." (II: 35).

Synge's visits to the Aran Islands heightened his sense of the sympathy between man and nature. For example, in Part I of *The Aran Islands*, as he recounts his attendance at the burial of an old peasant woman, Synge writes: "The morning had been beautifully fine, but as they lowered the coffin into the grave, thunder rumbled overhead and hailstones hissed among the bracken. In Inishmaan one is forced to believe in a sympathy between man and nature..." (II: 75).

Not surprisingly, Synge's favorite poet was the English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth (Greene and Stephens: 29). The *Encarta Online Encyclopedia* entry for Wordsworth reveals striking similarities between Wordsworth's and Synge's views of the relationship between nature and poetry. The entry states:

Wordsworth's finest work is permeated by a sense of the human relationship to external nature.... He felt deeply the kinship between nature and the soul of humankind. His premise was that the source of poetic truth is the direct experience of the senses.... He maintained that *the scenes and events of everyday life and the speech of ordinary people were the raw material of which poetry could and should be made.* [Emphasis added.]

Certainly nature, in the form of stormy seas and howling winds, is at center stage in *Riders to the Sea*. Nature almost takes on the role of a character in the play, intruding on the expository dialogue at the beginning of the play by blowing the cottage door open with a gust of wind (III: 5), driving the action of the play to its tragic conclusion. The script is permeated with references to the condition of the sea, the strength and direction of the winds, the turning of the tides. Clearly, this family's fortunes and those of their community are inextricably bound to their natural environment. In her elegy toward the end of the play Maurya expresses the heavy toll nature has taken from her family: "Bartley will be lost now.... I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house – six fine men... – and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them..." (III: 21).

In *The Shadow of the Glen* nature again plays a pivotal role, albeit a less violent one. The scene in this play is "the last cottage at the head of a long glen in County Wicklow" (III: 30), a remote, mist-enshrouded environment in which the natural can often evoke the supernatural. As the Tramp describes to Nora, this environment can play tricks on the imagination: "Is it myself, lady of the house, that does be walking round in the long nights, and crossing the hills when the fog is on them, the time a little stick would seem as big as your arm, and a rabbit as big as a bay horse, and a stack of turf as big as

a towering church in the city of Dublin?" (III: 37). Thus, it is no surprise that in such an environment the characters react as they do at the sight of Dan Burke "rising from the dead."

But the natural environment plays a much more important role in the way it shapes the life of Nora, the lonely, love-starved younger wife of the "dead" man. In the following speech, as she begins to count out her inheritance in the form of a stocking filled with coins, Nora bemoans the fact that she married for wealth, rather than love:

I do be thinking in the long nights it was a big fool I was that time, Micheal Dara, for what good is a bit of a farm with cows on it, and sheep on the back hills, when you do be sitting, looking out from a door the like of that door, and seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, and the mists again, and they rolling up the bog, and hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain. (III: 49)

Contrast Nora's bleak depiction of "cabin fever" with the much more inviting pastoral landscape painted by the Tramp as he makes his bid for Nora to abandon her "living death" with her lifeless "cold" husband and to join him for a life of adventure on the road:

Come along with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm, and it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a talk of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing the like of a sick sheep close to your ear. (III: 57)

Some twenty-five years after Synge's death filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty produced his own tribute to the people of the Aran Islands: his documentary "Man of Aran" (1934). "Reading" Flaherty's film as a "text" in an intertextual relationship with Synge's *Riders to the Sea* reveals several points of affinity between the two works.

Like Synge's play, Flaherty's film casts the sea as a central character pitted against the Man of Aran whose struggle for survival is played out against the backdrop of a barren merciless environment. As the film's introductory banner scrolls up and out of frame, the audience reads: "In this desperate environment the Man of Aran, because his independence is the most precious privilege he can win from life, fights for his existence, bare though it may be. It is a fight from which he will have no respite until the end of his indomitable days or until he meets his master." there is a delay here, as the last phrase nears the top of the frame. Then the scrolling stops completely, and following another brief pause, the final words of the introduction appear: "— the sea." Now, all but the words "the sea" fade out, driving home the message that, while the film may bear the title "Man of Aran", the sea shares top billing.

The film focuses on a small family, consisting of father, mother, and son. While not nearly as large as Maurya's family, these are clearly descendants of Maurya's brood, eking out their meager subsistence in a hostile environment. We see the young man fishing off the high cliffs, the father breaking rocks in the hot sun to build a stone wall around his potato crop, the mother harvesting seaweed from the surf and soil from the crevices of the rock to create a seed bed for the potatoes. Scenes like these and a few interior shots of the cottage are the only domestic scenes in the film. Flaherty devotes most of his footage to thrilling scenes of men battling the waves and the denizens of the deep.

Flaherty uses long shots of the immense rolling ocean pitching and tossing the toy-like curragh at its will. The filmmaker uses tight close-ups of the Man of Aran to show his determination in the face of overwhelming adversity. He intercuts shots of the mother anxiously gazing out of the cottage window at the sea as she awaits some sign of the returning fishing party. This mother is not as histrionic as Maurya, but then she has not lost a husband, a father-in-law, and six sons to the sea; her only son sits safely by the hearth eating potatoes. In the climactic scene of the shark hunting expedition, in order to capture the thrill of the hunt, Flaherty uses several quick cuts from shark to harpooner to coiling rope to churning waves and back to shark.

When the shark hunters are required to endure "two long days of struggle to win the shark's oil for their lamps," and when a storm awakens the young boy in the middle of the night while his father is still at sea, Maurya's lament in Synge's play echoes over the roar of the sea: "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" (III: 21).

Unlike Synge's play, however, Flaherty's film ends on a positive note. Although the curragh capsizes and is smashed to bits on the rocks, the crew manages to escape unharmed, salvaging the harpoon and the rope as they do. The family unit remains intact. Close-up profiles of the Man of Aran and his son show that they remain undaunted and will survive to battle the sea another day. The film concludes as the family walks into the sunset toward their cottage as their nemesis roars behind them.

Clearly, Flaherty's film presents a much more romantic, idealized view of life on the Aran Islands, in sharp contrast to Synge's bleak, fatalistic view. The final image of Flaherty's film is a world away from the final moment in Synge's play: Maurya stands at the feet of her dead son, Bartley, flanked by her surviving daughters, the old women keening in the background. Maurya prays: "Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely.... What more can we want than that?... No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied" (III: 27).

Yeats' famous imperative to Synge to abandon a fruitless career as a literary critic in Paris and seek inspiration in the Aran Islands is recorded in Yeats' "Preface to the First Edition of *The Well of the Saints*": "Give up Paris.... Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression" (III: 63).

And so he did. For in the barren landscape of the Aran Islands Synge found the subject matter and the language that would allow him to fully realize his aesthetic principles during his all too brief writing career, to express the essence of life: its joy and sorrow, beauty and ugliness, pleasure and pain.

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Watching JM Synge's plays brought to magnificent new life by the great Druid Theatre Company of Galway, you see generations of dramatists in a different light: from Beckett, who suddenly looks less of a metaphysician and more of a social recorder, to Conor McPherson, with his drinkers and dodgy stories, and Martin McDonagh, whose scabrous work is an extended argument with Synge. All six of these plays were written in the decade before Synge's death at the age of 37. Each of the rarer Aran plays has quality. The Tinker's Wedding, never staged in Synge's lifetime, is forthright in its anti-clericalism. Man of Aran is a 1934 Irish fictional documentary (ethnofiction) film shot, written and directed by Robert J. Flaherty about life on the Aran Islands off the western coast of Ireland. It portrays characters living in premodern conditions, documenting their daily routines such as fishing off high cliffs, farming potatoes where there is little soil, and hunting for huge basking sharks to get liver oil for lamps. Some situations are fabricated, such as one scene in which the shark fishermen are almost J. M. Synge was primarily a playwright, best known for his play *The Playboy of the Western World*, and one of the leading lights of the "Irish Revival" movement of the late 1800s-early 1900s. The Revival fixated on the Aran Islands as representing the pure, Irish-speaking world it sought to revive, and Synge, an Anglo-Irishman whose uncle had served as the Protestant clergyman to the islands almost fifty years before, went to Aran off and on during the years 1898-1902 to study the Irish language (his Irish is good). He was also an assiduous collector of stories, poems and other folklor