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The Sounds of Aran

by ALAN WATERS

... and to the magical suggestiveness of music—
which is the art of the arts.¹

Joseph Conrad (1897)

When an author regards a certain work as his own first serious achievement we have a mixture of reasons for looking into it closely. A germination process reaches its end and bursts open, something new begins, and the literary work, with the freshness of birth, gives the writer a voice he’d been wanting and needing. Something is hit upon, and from thereon the artist knows at least in which direction to move. A discovery has been made. Such is the situation of J. M. Synge’s book on The Aran Islands.

Synge said that “everything changed”² for him at age sixteen (1887) when he began taking violin lessons with a man named Patrick Griffith of Dublin and music became the important influence in his life. He could already play the flute and piano, and would in a few years win a scholarship from the Royal Academy of Music where he’d studied counterpoint, harmony and composition. To his mother’s alarm Synge appeared to want the career of a musician. In the company of his cousin, Mary, Synge traveled to Germany to continue with music, and while there wrote some immature verse and a fragmentary play. The strength of his conviction that music connects intimately with what is essential in both people and art was recorded in his notebook of 1898: “Every life is a symphony, and the translation of this life into music, and from music back into literature or sculpture or painting is the real effort of the artist.”³ Music taught Synge that the rhythmical movement of sound comes closer than anything else to embodying experience as it is lived rather than as it is conceived. The uniqueness of his plays would have much to do with the way traditional components of drama—plot, character, action—would be equaled in importance, if not overshadowed, by his word music.⁴ When he visited Aran for the first time in 1898 he

³. Ibid., p. 3.
brought to those sparsely populated and barren islands a sensibility acutely attuned to the fluctuating mysteries of melody.

*The Aran Islands* is certainly, among other things, a source book for Synge’s plays. Walking among the antiquities in Inishmore with his blind guide, old Mourteen, Synge came upon a holy well, at the ruin of the church of the Four Beautiful Persons, famous for its water that could cure blindness and epilepsy. When Timmy at last tells his news to Mary and Martin Doul, in *The Well of the Saints*, it is of this “green feny well” near “the grave of the four beautiful saints” that he speaks, with its water able to take away Mary and Martin’s blindness. Pat Dirane, known on Inishmaan as the man who could tell as many lies as four men, related to Synge how it happened that once, rain-soaked, traveling by foot between Galway and Dublin, with evening coming on, he stopped by the wayside at an isolated house at the top of a glen where a woman served him tea in the presence of her dead husband, who was laid out on a table with candles. The setting, and Pat Dirane’s tale that unfolds within it of the unfaithful wife soon caught in bed with a neighbor by her husband, who turns out not to be dead at all, comprises virtually the whole of *Shadow of the Glen*, Synge’s first performed play. And the reckless story of the esteemed father-slayer, that would gain Synge so many enemies when dramatized in *Playboy of the Western World*, came to Synge on Aran as well. The unsettling close to this play might be seen as a variation of the nonsense ending common in the tales Synge heard the Aran islanders recount. Besides discovering ready-to-hand plot material in the form of local stories and anecdotes Synge took in more diffuse aspects of the mood or quality of island life. The tremendous force and danger of the ocean, the maternal grief that comes with the regular drowning of husbands and sons, and pitiful scenes such as the one of a sister piecing together the drenched clothes of a man dragged up from the sea to determine that he’s her brother—such circumstances and emotions, defining the character of peoples’ lives on Aran, generated Synge’s one act meditation on death and loss, *Riders to the Sea*. And there could be no more tangible a transfer from Aran to the Irish National Theatre than that of the pampooties Synge once requested by mail to authenticate his actors’ costumes.

Yet the carry-over from Aran to the stage that was most original and decisive for Synge’s drama was essentially auditory or vocal, and had as its medium Synge’s ear for that which is musical in human speech. In fact, from first sentence to last, *The Aran Islands* is a work about the language Synge heard on Aran, the Gaelic spoken day in and day out by the islanders and in the cadences of which they expressed the essence of their hardened and imperilled life amidst grey rock, limitless ocean and each year’s meagre kelp harvest. “It is only in the intonation of a few
sentences or some old fragment of melody that I catch the real spirit of the island," writes Synge, and to the extent that the book captures and conveys the sounds of Aran it achieves literary merit in its own right.

In *The Aran Islands* there are probably more observations by Synge on what he heard, on how things were spoken, on vocal qualities, than on any other single topic in the book. The opening sentence of Part One situates the first-person narrator next to a turf fire in Aranmore, "listening to a murmur of Gaelic that is rising from a little public-house under my room." When an astute fifteen year old boy who would occasionally read Irish aloud to him discovered a mis-translation in the book he was reading, Synge noted approvingly the beginnings in the boy of a preoccupation with language as well as with ideas. Synge could observe this only because he knew the difference so well himself. When he wrote in a notebook of 1908 that all theorizing is bad for the artist, he meant that the only ideas an artist should pursue are those entirely submerged in some sensuous form. In Aran he sought them in the intonation of peoples’ voices. Walking the stubbled paths of the islands with young boys and girls, perched for hours on the cliffs with distant figures below pulling nets or boats along the sand, or seated beside a hearth where old men spoke endlessly of tides and fishing, Synge heard a speech "so little abstract ... and so rammed with life" (W. B. Yeats) that it could still express "strange archaic sympathies with the world." In making an excursion for several days to the south island, Inishere, Synge says he is anxious to compare the language and temperament there with what he knew of the other islands. The temperament bred by such a remote and primitive way of life, and which could in turn prove strong enough to sustain communal traditions of labour and magic at the extreme border of Europe, would reside most purely for Synge in the timbre and grain of vocal patterns.

Synge’s own prose style in *The Aran Islands* conforms to the image of Aran life that it wants to communicate; it is as much a part of the substance of the book as any information that might be given about habits, history, geography or climate. It’s at the level of style, as well as content, that Synge reproduces his impressions of all of these. Paragraphs have frequently been honed to single, balanced sentences. An example:

All round the graveyard other wrinkled women, looking out from under the deep red petticoats that cloaked them, rocked themselves with the same rhythm, and intoned the inarticulate chant that is sustained by all as an accompaniment.

The morning had been beautifully fine, but as they lowered the coffin into the grave, thunder rumbled overhead and hailstones hissed among the bracken.

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7. Ibid., p. 49.
In Inishmaan one is forced to believe in a sympathy between man and nature, and at this moment when the thunder sounded a death-peal of extraordinary grandeur above the voices of the women, I could see the faces near me stiff and drawn with emotion.  

The delicately worked economy and concision so evident in the plays are likewise in effect here. People and the material things and physical places that make up their immediate world predominate. A distance from minute details is preserved in order to avoid the clutter of independent clauses, lists and too many adjectives. Images connect not with associated concepts but with other discrete impressions, each one simplified in itself to a sufficient and finished state. Synge's language is able to dwell so much within the things it describes because it is not the language of generalization. Explosive emotions do not dart through, the vocabulary remains unburdened by complex passions or broodings, and the syntax is unstrained by speculation. Events are reported with just the tiniest bit of journalistic flatness. The desire to write "like a monochrome painting, all in shades of one colour," which Synge expressed once to Willie Fay, was not a desire to say little, but rather a desire to suggest immense things through rhythm and phrasing, and through the use of short simple words simply and euphoniously arranged. ("Phosphoresence" stands out at one point as atypical.)

One of the really remarkable feats of Synge's prose is that it should be able to so implicitly grant dignity and stature to the people and places it depicts by being as uncomplicated as they are. "A young married woman I used often to talk with is dying of fever—typhus I am told—and her husband and brothers have gone off in a curagh to get the doctor and the priest from the north island, though the sea is rough." As the people of Aran are taken up with the essentials of living, the way Synge writes about them need only intervene as little as possible to render in tact the main quality it wants to encompass. Because Synge's prose does so little, so to speak, we as readers are able to hear so much.

Probably nowhere else in the book is Synge's writing more in the service of that direct account of what he met with on the islands (which he gives as his intention in the Introduction) than in those passages given over entirely to natural description. As a boy Synge had been fascinated by all kinds of plants and animals, had assiduously collected and identified specimens, and had even become the youngest member of a naturalist club in order to hear technical reports delivered at meetings. Walking for hours through fields and hills would remain one of Synge's lifelong pleasures, and his powers of observation compress into usually just a

11. Ibid., pp. 74-75.
12. Cited in David H. Green and Edward M. Stephens, J. M. Synge, 1871-1909 (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 175. Notice also what Yeats has written on rhythm. "The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monosyll, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in the state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the will is unfolded in symbols." "The Symbolism of Poetry," Essays and Introductions, p. 159.
13. The Aran Islands, CW, II, 158.
few carefully poised descriptive sentences the enormous shapes and 
colours of ocean, land and sky. He displays a thorough familiarity with 
what Thoreau called "the discipline of looking always at what is to be 
seen." Synge aims at a concentrated perception of landscape and envi­
ronment as an end in itself.

The morning was fine, and seemed to promise one of the peculiarly hushed, pellucid 
days that occur sometimes before rain in early winter. From the first gleam of dawn the 
sky was covered with white cloud, and the tranquility was so complete that every sound 
seemed to float away by itself across the silence of the bay. Lines of blue smoke were 
going up in spirals over the village, and further off heavy fragments of rain-cloud were 
lying on the horizon.

"Peculiarly hushed, pellucid days," "tranquility" and "silence of the 

bay" work toward an ambience, while "rain in early winter," "the sky . . . covered with white cloud," "lines of blue smoke" and "heavy 

fragments of rain-cloud" tie the whole vision to an actual morning in a 
physical locale. This balancing of emotion and clear depiction is charac­

teristic, and distinguishes Synge's representation of nature from that, 
say, in the journals of Dorothy Wordsworth or the later journals and 

essays of Thoreau, where virtually no emotion is imputed to the scene 
and detail is all.

The impact of a particular setting could at times overwhelm Synge. It 
is a rare and inward sensibility that comments after wandering alone in a 
storm along cliffs showered with the foam and spray of waves: "the 
suggestion from this world of inarticulate power was immense, and now 
at midnight when the wind is abating, I am still trembling and flushed 
with exultation." The wildness and vitality that Synge believed were an 
urgent requirement for modern literature, especially for the stage, were 
present in real life here on these islands where people lived in such 
proximity to untempered nature. Using the precise names of birds, 
"curlew" and "pipit," and including specifics of local topography, 
such as "a long neck of sandhill that runs out into the sea towards the 
southwest," joins the chronicle of people and emotions always to a 
detailed place. Synge once flatly refused the suggestion that to make 
Aran seem more exotic and hopefully more marketable the real names 
of the islands should be omitted. A relevant comparison here would be 
with Hardy, whose pastoral and agricultural Wessex differed in so many 
ways from Aran, but who correlated human sentiment with rural geog­
raphy in a way similar to Synge. (The bond between Deirdre and Naisi 
draws resilience from those many dark nights they spent whispering 
together beneath "the snipe and plover . . . among the clear trees of 
Glen da Ruadh.") But from amidst all his impressions of Aran those

15. The Aran Islands, CW, II, 139.
16. Ibid., p. 110.
17. Ibid., pp. 108, 51.
that stood out most persistently were of the Gaelic tongue he heard. It becomes a central reference point, as when even the plaintive wailing of the gulls is compared with it.

The raveled diction that comprises the dialogue of the plays—e.g., "It's great jokes the people'll be making now, I'm thinking, and they pass me by, pointing their fingers maybe, and asking what place is himself, the way it's no quiet or decency I'll have from this day till I'm an old woman with long white hair and it twisting from my brow."—poses an extremely difficult task of oral articulation for the actors. As writer and director what Synge wanted produced on the stage was a primitive and melodious rhythm that would lend the words, beyond their literal meaning, a tuneful character which might more appropriately be called verbal or musical rather than linguistic. Although he was constantly jotting down words and idiomatic phrases he came across during his travels in Aran and elsewhere, the language of the plays, and for that matter of the Aran book or any of the other essays as well, is certainly not a verbatim copy of what he heard. Lorna Reynolds has written on exactly this question:

Regarding his language by way of syntax, idiom, figure of speech and rhythms, one might say that Synge altered least the syntax of the English that used to be spoken and can still be heard in those parts of Ireland most affected by the native language, Irish. It seems that he often heightened metaphor and simile, . . . certainly he altered the effect of Irish speech by concentrating and packing metaphor more thickly than would be found in natural speech, but what Synge most worked on and changed were rhythms of the spoken language, altering the accidental and casual, introducing regularity of cadence that almost takes the place of rhyme, and gives to his characters a speech that has a sweet, hypnotic monotony and a compelling dignity, or a harsh, repetitive emphasis. 20

Synge's posture was never that of Zola who, with pencil and notebook, had scoured Parisian slums making lists of colloquial swear words. Literal duplication would hardly have met his purposes. It could almost be said that Synge took from Aran precisely that which could not be written down. It was not so much the meaning of what his fellow oarsmen were saying, but the almost tactile quality of their audible gestures, that brought Synge to reflect, passing by boat between islands, that "their ancient Gaelic seemed so full of divine simplicity that I would have liked to turn the prow to the west and row with them for ever." 21 Synge was content to admit the mysteriousness of this quality, to listen, and to revel in it. His listening and reveling were creative, and quite possibly were among the fullest moments of his life. To try and designate this quality with phrases about language crossing over into music perhaps doesn't help.

On some days Synge felt the island to be a perfect home, while on

21. The Aran Islands, CW, II, 142.
others his distance from the islanders seemed unconquerable. "I can feel more with them than they can feel with me" (a remark that would also prove sadly appropriate to the love affair of his final years with Molly Allgood). His tremendous self-consciousness and wide learning created a chasm painful only from his side. There could be a catalogue of instances since the Enlightenment when cultivated literary people have bemoaned "the manifold and beautiful life we have all missed who have been born in modern Europe." The paradox of finding deep meaning in the lives of primitive people whom one can never join, save imaginatively, was all too familiar to Synge. Self-expression would seem to mean something unutterably different in a society that knows no division of labour and in which art and craft are indistinguishable. Yet Synge glimpsed an affinity between the emotions of the islanders, in constant, direct contact with the horror and splendour of nature, and the awareness of an artist. In both cases experience has been sharpened through contact with what we call "the sublime." This was Synge's egress.

Aran did not become, for Synge, a platform from which to level criticisms at his own society, as perhaps the South Seas did for Gauguin. While W. B. Yeats's quip that Synge was incapable of even thinking a political thought may go a little too far, certainly it can be said to have been wise on Synge's part to manage the differences between himself and the islanders aesthetically rather than polemically. Synge's account of the government evictions is surely bitter: "These mechanical police [from the mainland] . . . represented aptly enough the civilisation for which the homes of the island were to be desecrated." But the book is not intended to persuade. The prose genre to which it belongs, one frequently thought peripheral beside the treatise, the novel or the expository essay, won't allow for this. Combining elements from the travel-book, the autobiography, private letters and the personal journal (in a tradition that includes William Cobbett and E. B. White), The Aran Islands could declaim on moral and social issues only at the expense of the singular, disinterested vision of everyday life which is the core of its focus. Synge undoubtedly believed that advanced civilization had cut itself off from something vital that was still in evidence on Aran; but The Aran Islands does not teach this. The impulse to change or reform anything, to make assertions or engage in debate, would hinder Synge's attempt at an unassuming portrayal of the natural estate of poetry, to take a fortunate phrase from Edwin Muir.  

22. Ibid., p. 113.  
24. The Aran Islands, CW, II, 89.  
25. Edwin Muir, The Estate of Poetry (London: Hogarth Press, 1962), Ch. 1, "The Natural Estate." In his Autobiography (London: Hogarth Press, 1954), p. 14, Muir writes, in describing his boyhood on the Orkney Islands: "The Orkney I was born into was a place where there was no great distinction between the ordinary and the fabulous; the lives of living men turned into legend."
 Appropriately Synge gives a central place to the islanders' stories, and to their telling of them. Giants, fairies, and monstrous birds and fish populate these tales. Young men enact heroic deeds to win the hands of beautiful maidens, ships full of people vanish at sea, musical rabbits appear atop stone walls from nowhere and weeping dogs foretell human suffering. The archaic symbolism currently so interesting to the human sciences abounds. Synge perceived that the fantastical narratives in which the islanders recounted their experience provided a way of coping with "the terror of the world."

Where the natural and the supernatural are not separate the continual retelling of tales subdues the otherwise unmanageable forces that circumscribe Aran life, literally as the sea encircles an island. Small bits of the past are rescued and repeated. Rather than "explain" its world to itself—we grow slightly baffled at this point—the community takes hold of remembered episodes in the form of tales, spins them readily into phantasies, and thus manages to steal portions of uniquely human meaning from an indifferent environment likely to grant none. In extremity, spiritual subsistence has to be wrestled from nature like food and shelter. The storyteller on Aran, in rehearsing incidents from a fabulous past, helps the group simply to persevere.

Synge does not state all of this, but it is implied in his inclusion of numerous Aran stories and in the interest he shows in those who tell them. The closing pages of the book, covering the last days of Synge's fourth and final visit, cite several long doggerels that Synge transcribed into English. Although in print, Synge admits, they seem incoherent or grotesque, when crooned in the way he heard them these rhymes retain their true character as chants. Synge spent these last days in the company of storytellers, and in exchange for the stories they gave him, and which he wrote down, he played the fiddle while they drank. The whole sketch of Aran comes around full circle when Synge once again, and for the final time, hears voices and songs rising from beneath his room, "some of them in English, . . . but most of them in Irish." The following day he departed by steamship.

The islanders were fond of Synge. His presence was unobtrusive and watchful. His writing, restrained and quiet, reflects this. Sentimentality and nostalgia are kept to a minimum, suppressed by Synge's respect for "small things" and for the hardness and ordinariness of others'
lives. The literary circles of Paris and Dublin would remain strange to him in a way that Aran never was.

It is difficult, if not hopeless, to try and say what we would make of *The Aran Islands* were we to know nothing of Synge’s dramatic works. Probably it would slip into neglect. Its liveliness is of a different sort than what Synge would achieve in the theatre. Its drama is that of an artist coming into his own, of Synge discovering tools of verbal craftsmanship suited perfectly to his grip. And its theme is the aesthetic education of its author. When George Moore remarked in *The Irish Times* that one listens to *The Well of the Saints* “as one listens to music,” Synge must surely have been delighted, for it was as music that he had learned, on Aran, to hear other people and nature; and it’s the music in Synge’s re-creation of that encounter that we, as readers, are left to discover in his book about Aran.

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