

Reading the Poetics of J. M. Synge: Nature and Poetry in *The Aran Islands* and *Riders to the Sea*^{*}

Young Suck Rhee

Abstract: J. M. Synge is probably one of the greatest playwrights Ireland has ever had. But he has often been slighted by many, including Joyce, but Yeats seems to have found him the greatest of all playwrights in his time. The paper claims that Synge was well prepared to write great plays even before he visited Aran, and it offers his prose work *The Aran Islands* as evidence. It is already a great piece of work, very poetic and full of observations and feelings and thoughts, which he draws for the plays he is to write.

Key words: Synge, Yeats, Aran, Riders to the Sea

Author: Young Suck Rhee is professor of poetry and creative writing of poetry in the Department of English, Hanyang University, Seoul, 133-791, Korea. He divides his time between teaching, writing poetry, and painting.

E-mail: ysrhee@hanyang.ac.kr / ranjongrhee@hotmail.com

제목: J. M. 싱의 시학 읽어내기: 『아란 섬』과 『바다를 타는 사람들』에 나타난 자연과 시
우리말 요약: J. M. 싱은 아마 지금까지 아일랜드에서 태어난 가장 위대한 극작가들 중의 하나이다. 그러나 그는 자주 많은 이들에 의해 폄하(조이스 포함하여)되고 있지만 예이츠는 당대에 모든 극작가들 중 최고로 여기는 것 같다. 본 논문은 싱이 아란을 방문하기 전에 이미 잘 준비된 위대한 극을 쓸 수 있었다고 주장하며, 『아란 섬』을 증거로 제시하는데, 그가 나중에 희곡을 쓸 때 사용하는 관찰, 느낌, 생각으로 가득 찬 아주 시적인 위대한 저술임을 증명한다.

주제어: 싱, 예이츠, 아란, 『바다를 타는 사람들』

저자: 이영석은 한양대학교 영어영문학과와 시창작과 영시 담당 교수이다. 그는 시를

* This is an article developed from what I presented, "Yeats and Synge and Aran Irelands," in Yeats Session at the International Conference hosted by the English Language and Literature Association of Korea at Sookmyung Women's University on November 7-9, 2013.

가르치고, 쓰고, 그림을 그리는 데 시간을 배분한다.

... *John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought*
All that we did, all that we said or sang
Must come from contact with the soil, from that
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong ...
W. B. Yeats

I

W.B. Yeats in his 1923 Nobel Prize address, “The Irish Dramatic Movement,” makes special mention of two of his friends: Lady Gregory and John Synge. Lady Gregory was his colleague and an ardent patron of his when Yeats was in difficult times psychologically and physically, being repeatedly rejected by his life-long love, Maud Gonne, and even when Yeats set his hands to writing his early plays, a few of which have both of their names. As an accomplished playwright (who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in recognition of his plays, as well as of his poetry), Yeats thinks Synge, who died in 1909, was “the greatest dramatic genius of Ireland” (*Auto* 138). To some and to me, indeed, Synge is a great playwright, if not the greatest of Ireland. To some, however, that is not so convincing:

Synge’s visit to the Aran Islands in 1898 must be one of the most remarkable examples on record of how a sudden immersion in a new environment converted a man of ostensibly mediocre talent, a complete failure, in fact, into a writer of genius. The decision [for Synge] to go was made at Yeats’s suggestion, ... (Greene and Stephens 74)

When I came across this comment on the caliber of Synge, I became curious to know how “a complete failure, in fact” turned into “a writer of genius.”

Synge's *The Aran Islands* is not merely a travelogue: it is the gem of his work that shines forth brilliant through an age; I am not the only one that thinks so. T. R. Henn is one of the first that saw the greatness of Synge as writer, though he touches on this book in passing, just as W. B. Yeats touches on Synge here and there, without mentioning the book. Henn's "General Introduction" to *Synge: The Complete Plays* is probably the best introduction to the real Synge, though there is some reservation in it, when he discusses his language. Henn's concluding analysis of Synge's rhythm is closed with a quote of Yeats's insight into Synge's [dramatic] language. What follows is what Henn says with a support of Yeats:

Yet any attempted analysis of technical devices is no more than a gesture that may draw attention to the subtleties of the language; which only attains its full life when spoken in the theatre by those who can command its strange harmonies and overtones. It is true that the strong rhythms may become monotonous in the reading; but even in amateur productions it will come to life if the imagination allows the prose to speak for itself. On this we may quote Yeats:

Synge found the check that suited his temperament in an elaboration of the dialects of Kerry and Aran. The cadence is long and meditative, as befits the thought of men who are much alone, and who when they meet in one another's houses—as their way is at the day's end—listen patiently, each man speaking in turn and for some little time, and taking pleasure in the vaguer meaning of the words and in their sound. (*CPLI* 19; *Essays and Introduction* 334)

It seems to me that Henn discusses the language in Synge's plays (whose subtleties it is difficult to catch unless it is on stage) while Yeats talks about Synge's literary language, in general, that is under the influence of Gaelic the Aran islanders speak in the quotes above.

And I thought I have to agree with Yeats, who claims that Synge was

“the greatest dramatic genius of Ireland,” and that, reading his prose *The Aran Islands*, Synge is indeed a truly great poet, who has so aesthetic an eye and so sensitive an ear and so tender a heart to observe and sympathize with the people and nature in the islands and the sea and the sky; see and hear the slightest changes in and the smallest movement of animals and plants; and smell and feel keenly all that surround him living there.

What is noteworthy is the fact that along with this “profound love and understanding of nature and the Irish people,” there is “a dispassionate realization of its cruelty, loneliness, and the uncertain menaces of mountain and of sea” (Henn 7). Yeats also finds this characteristic in Synge: “he [Synge] told me [Yeats] once that when he [Synge] lived in some peasant’s house, he tried to make those about him forget that he was there, and it is certain that he was silent in any crowded room. It is possible that low vitality helped him to be observant and comtemplative...” (Henn 7). His “dispassion” makes him observe well all about him—nature, animals, and people on the islands. Singe is like the fisherman in Yeats’s “The Fisherman”:

A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream
(*VP* 348)

With this realization, the playwright is to write a good work, *Riders to the Sea*, but when you read *The Aran Islands*, you will know that what is to flower in the play has already been fully displayed in this very prose work. Thus, here I aim at reading *The Aran Islands*, his supremely beautiful prose pieces, and comparing what’s been observed in *The Aran Islands* with what’s become art in a greatest one-acter in the last century, *Riders to the Sea*.

Synge describes the Aran Islands¹):

The geography of the Aran Islands is very simple, yet it may need a word to itself. There are three islands: Aranmor, the north island, about nine miles long; Inishmaan, the middle island, about three miles and a half across, and nearly round in form; and the south island, Inishere- in Irish, east island,- like the middle island but slightly smaller. They lie about thirty miles from Galway, up the centre of the bay, but they are not far from the cliffs of County Clare, on the south, or the corner of Connemara on the north. (Synge, *The Aran Islands*, xi: hereafter, only the pagination is given; for his other works shortened titles are used, as in Works cited.)

This is the first paragraph of his three-paragraph Foreword to his book, *The Aran Islands*,²) which was published in 1911³) after he died in 1909. The two paragraphs are almost as short as this paragraph. This foreword seems to me to be a glimpse of his characteristic style, which is to flower in his plays later on. Let me show the first and last of the book's paragraphs:

The first two one-sentence paragraphs:

I am in Aranmor, sitting over a turf fire, listening to a murmur of Gaelic that is rising from a little public-house under my room. (1st paragraph)

The steamer which comes to Aran sails according to the tide, and it was six o'clock this morning when we left the quay of Galway in a dense shroud of mist. (2nd paragraph) (1)

Then the third keeps describing the shore line of Galway in dense fog, poetically and calmly, and then the passengers; then the fourth paragraph begins the description of his first contact with Aranmor that comes in sight. His unusually perceptive and enlightening observations of the people, animals, plants, and the sky and the sea of the three islands are unfolding in an enchanting way through the whole book, and finally, the book ends in a

one-sentence paragraph. But could the story ever end, with so much reverberation in our heart, like this story?

The next day I left [Inishmaan] with the steamer. (125)

Just prior to this last paragraph, Synge describes his last party on Inishmaan, to which he will never come back again, again in one sentence:

A little late when the party broke up downstairs my old men got nervous about the fairies—they live some distance away—and set off across the sandhills. (125)

In *The Aran Islands*, Synge never loses his sense of balance in form and matter, not to mention love and passion for nature and people in these islands. The whole prose—can't we call it a prose poem?—is a well-made piece of music itself, from start to finish. None of the rhythm in the language is out of key, as he has a keen ear for music,

II

Now I would like to focus on the two aspects in Synge the poet: the visual and the aural. First, Synge is sensitive to the music in languages. As a matter of fact, sometimes he plays a violin to accompany the dancing of the islanders who enjoy dancing. He has once wanted to be a musician, as he says, "In my sixteenth year everything changed. I took to the violin and lost almost completely my interest in natural science, although the beauty of nature influenced me more than ever." (*A Notebook of 1896-8*. Rqtd. Skelton 19) As in the first paragraph of Part I (the book consists of four parts, with illustrations by Jack Yeats, the younger brother of W. B. Yeats), Synge is

busy hearing and looking, a visitor who for the first time has just landed on the north Island, Aranmor, “listening to a murmur of Gaelic” (1). And six paragraphs later:

A little after midday when I was coming back one old half-blind man spoke to me in Gaelic, but, in general, I was surprised at the abundance and fluency of the foreign tongue. (2)

Then on page four:

They [two little girls] spoke with a delicate exotic intonation that was full of charm, and told me with a sort of chant how they guide ‘ladies and gintlemins’ in the summer to all that is worth seeing in their neighbourhood, ... (4)

At the beginning of the book we learn that the highly aural Synge then decides to leave Aranmor for Inishmaan, the middle island, where Gaelic is generally spoken and the life is, he thinks, lived in most primitive ways:

In spite of the charm of my teacher, the old blind man I met the day of my arrival, I have decided to move on to Inishmaan, where Gaelic is more generally used, and the life is perhaps the most primitive that is left in Europe. (5)

Synge is to stay and live in a cottage, on Inishmaaan, for a few weeks each year from 1898 and 1902—he died in 1909—hearing the people speaking Gaelic every day:

I am settled at last on Inishmaan in a small cottage with a continual drone of Gaelic coming from the kitchen that opens into my room. (7)

Not only that, but also Synge gets used to the way of life on Inishmaan. One day he learns to walk the way man first walked on rocks and in fields; he has never realized this when living in other places, like Dublin or elsewhere, where life is adapted to new ways, which have long become part of our life today. He walks the way primitive men walked:

At first I threw my weight upon my heels, as one goes for nearly a mile jumping from one rock to another without a single ordinary step; and here I realized that toes have a natural use, for I found myself jumping toward any tiny crevice in the rock before me, and clinging with an eager grip in which all the muscles of my feet ached from their exertion.

The absence of the heavy boot of Europe has preserved to these people the agile walk of the wild animal, while the general simplicity of their lives has given them many other points of physical perfection. (16)

III

Synge has a keen eye, observing everything around him, from the very beginning of the travelogue to the end. The observations are subtle and in full detail, which find expression in his plays. How he begins his first sailing to the islands is depicted in the third paragraph of Part I:

A low line of shore was visible at first on the right between the movement of the waves and fog, but when we came further it was lost sight of, and nothing could be seen but the mist curling in the rigging, and a small circle of foam. (1)

We can imagine the steamer leaving the Galway quay and soon in the middle of the sea. Then the highly sensitive Synge is all over the pages, of the book, a feast to the eye: so many exquisite portrayals encountered, of the people, animals, birds, the sea and waves, the sky and clouds, and the sun

and rain, and so on:

The rain has cleared off, and I have had my first real introduction to the island and its people. (3)

As I was going across the sandhills one dun-sailed hooker glided slowly out to begin her voyage, and another beat up to the pier. Troops of red cattle, driven mostly by the women, were coming up from several directions, forming, with the green of the long tract of grass that separates the sea from the rocks, a new unity of colour. (19)

Not only the nature around him, but also the ways these islands people live, as he illustrates their use of time in life:

The general knowledge of time on the island depends, curiously enough, on the direction of the wind. Nearly all the cottages are built, like this one, with two doors opposite each other, the more sheltered of which lies open all day to give light to the interior. If the wind is northerly the south door is opened, and the shadow of the door-post moving across the kitchen floor indicates the hour; as soon, however, as the wind changes to the south the other door is opened, and the people, who never think of putting up a primitive dial, are at a loss.

This system of doorways has another curious result. It usually happens that all the doors on one side of the village pathway are lying open with women sitting about on the thresholds, while on the other side the doors are shut and there is no sign of life. The moment the wind changes everything is reversed, and sometimes when I come back to the village after an hour's walk there seems to have been a general flight from one side of the way to the other. (17)

Synge, being tender-hearted, depicts meticulously the people, animals, plants on the islands.

The island is sometimes dull and sometimes beautiful. Dull:

A week of sweeping fogs has passed over and given me a strange sense of exile and desolation. I walk round the island nearly every day, yet I can see nothing anywhere but a mass of wet rocks, a strip of surf, and then a tumult of waves. The slaty limestone has grown black with the water that is dripping on it, and wherever I turn there is the same grey obsession twining and wreathing itself among the narrow fields, and the same wail from the wind that shrieks and whistles in the loose rubble of the walls. (23)

Beautiful:

It has cleared, and the sun is shining with a luminous warmth that makes the whole island glisten with the splendor of a gem, and fills the sea and sky with a radiance of blue light.

I have come out to lie on the rocks where I have the black edge of the north island in front of me, Galway Bay, too blue almost to look at, on my right, the Atlantic on my left, a perpendicular cliff under my ankles, and over me innumerable gulls that chase each other in a white cirrus of wings. (24)

People and their custom are what he has observed with deep interest, the observation of which is to find full use in his play in *Riders to the Sea* and other plays. The funeral customs:

After Mass this morning an old woman was buried. She lived in the cottage next mine, and more than once before noon I heard a faint echo of the keen. I did not go to the wake for fear my presence might jar upon the mourners, but all last night I could hear the strokes of a hammer in the yard, in the middle of a little crowd of idlers, the next of kin laboured slowly at the coffin. ... Then the coffin was carried out sewn loosely in sailcloth, and held near the ground by three cross-poles lashed upon the top, As we moved down to the low eastern portion of the island, nearly all the men, and all the oldest women, wearing petticoats over their heads, came out and joined in the procession.

While the grave was being opened the women sat down among the flat

tombstones, bordered with a pale fringe of early blacken, and began the wild keen, or crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in the leading recitative, seemed possessed for the moment with a profound ecstasy of grief, swaying to and fro, and bending her forehead to the stone before her, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs.

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.

In Inishmaan one is forced to believe in a sympathy between man and nature. (25-26)

One day Synge happens to see a few rowers fighting with the rough sea, his eyes riveting alternately on one huge wave after another thrashing against the fragile animal skin boat and on the people in it:

Late this evening I saw a three-oared curagh with two old women in her besides the rowers, landing at the slip through a heavy roll. They were coming from Inishere, and they rowed up quickly enough till they were with a few yards of the surf-line, where they spund round and waited with the prow towards the sea, while wave after wave passed underneath them and broke on the remains of the slip. Five minutes passed; ten minutes; and still they waited with the oars just paddling in the water, and their heads turned over their shoulders.

I was beginning to think that they would have to give up and row round to the lee side of the island, when the curagh seemed suddenly to turn into a living thing. The prow was again toward the slip, leaping and hurling itself through the spray. Before it touched, the man in the bow wheeled round, two white legs came out over the prow like the flash of a sword, and before the next wave arrived he had dragged the curagh out of danger. (79-80)

Syngé is excited to have watched the island people coping with nature. Generally he at once marvels at the wisdom of these people and feels so sorry that people in Aranmor are no longer the same as in Inishmaan. He notices fine change in Aranmor and Inishmaan, the north island a bit modernized.

I am in the north island again, looking out with a singular sensation to the cliffs across the sound. It is hard to believe that those hovels I can just see in the south are filled with people whose lives have the strange quality that is found in the oldest poetry and legend. Compared with them the falling off that has come with the increased prosperity of this island is full of discouragement. The charm which the people over there share with the birds and flowers has been replaced here by the anxiety of men who are eager for gain. The eyes and expression are different, though the faces are the same, and even the children here seem to have an indefinable modern quality that is absent from the men of Inishmaan. (61)

Before he leaves the Aran Islands, Syngé keeps in mind all that he has seen and felt, as exquisitely recorded in *The Aran Islands*: it is full of visual, musical beauty, and strong feelings of islanders in dire conditions of the sea and islands; it is moving and fires the imagination of many who will come to the islands. It is a paean to people, animals, plants, nature in Aran.

IV

Now a few comparisons between *The Aran Islands* and *Riders to the Sea* can display how Syngé makes use of his material in his play. I am interested in how the things he has seen and recorded in the collection of the essays fit in the play: how parts cohere as a whole.

About the language of the Aran islanders, Syngé talks a lot in this book,

as discussed above. Henn points to the three aspects of Synge's dramatic language: idiom, imagery, and rhythm. He says "the idiom requires some familiarity" but that it does not "present any difficulty in understanding" (14). For instance, "the way" means "so that," as in "Give me the ladder, and I'll put them up in the turf-loft, the way she won't know of them at all" (*Synge* 4); it also means "so that s/he can or should," "as" or "as if," and (in "what way") "how could" (*Synge* 188).

In the early part of the book of the essays, what interests Synge greatly is a canvas canoe he is in. Here's his description:

Early this morning the man of the house came over for me with a four-oared curagh—that is, a curagh with four rowers and four oars on either side, as each man uses two—and we set off a little before noon.

It gave me a moment of exquisite satisfaction to find myself moving away from civilization in this rude canvas canoe of a model that has served primitive races since men first went to sea.

.....

The sail is only used as an aid, so the men continued to row after it had gone up, and as they occupied the four cross-seats I lay on the canvas at the stern and the frame of slender laths, which bent and quivered as the waves passed under them. (8-9)

In the play *Riders to the Sea*, there is a mention of this canoe when the old woman, Maurya, is now recalling all the men lost, as his last son is just gone to the sea:

MAURYA [*in a low voice, but clearly*] It's the little the like of him [the young priest] knows of the sea Bartley will be lost now, and let you call in Eamon and make me a good coffin out of the white boards, for I won't live after them.

.....

MAURYA [*continues without hearing anything*] There was Sheamus and his

father, and his own father again, were lost in a dark night, and not a stick or sign was seen of them when the sun went up. There was Patch after was drowned out of a curagh that turned over. . . . (CPL2 10)

Here we could imagine that when Synge was first in the curagh, he felt the waves under him and he must have felt that when the wind rises and the sea is rough, life in it is merely at the mercy of nature, which finds expression in Maurya: it is just what Maurya has experienced, as she says, “It’s the little the like of him [the inexperienced priest who is new to the islands] knows of the sea” While she is drifting into the past nightmares, the body of Bartley is being carried into the room: she asks, “Is it Patch, or Michael, or what is it at all?” Thus, the past (Patch) and the present (Michael) are mixed up as if her mind is muddy, with the two—or three (inclusive of her last son Bartley, whose body she will now see in a moment, the severest blow to her life)- last deaths staring her in the face. And I think it proper to touch on one masterly stroke of Synge as dramatist:

NORA [*in a whisper to Cathleen*] She’s quiet now and easy; but the day Michael was drowned you could hear her crying out from this [room] to the spring well. It’s fonder she was of Michael, and would any one have thought that?

CATHLEEN [*slowly and clearly*] An old woman will soon be tired with anything she will do, and isn’t it nine days herself is after crying, and keening, and making great sorrow in the house? (CPL2 12)

The youngest daughter Nora, as well as Cathleen, hardly understands her mother, their misunderstanding of their mother arousing the audience’s intense sympathy over the humanly unbearable tragic burden on Maurya. Her daughters are not sympathetic to their mother Maurya who has made all the efforts to save her last son Bartley: she is not less fond of him than Michael. Maurya now loses everything, and she has nothing left: she speaks to herself

and the world, which to me is the grandest monolog a Modernist one-acter could have achieved in the twentieth century:

MAURYA [*puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, and lays her hands together on Bartley's feet*] They're all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn [*bending her head*] ... and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world. 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 for ever, and we must be satisfied.

[She kneels down again and the curtain falls slowly]

THE END (CPL2 12)

This surely is the sublimest moment of an old woman, who prevails over all –the whole world of the Aran Islands and metaphorically even over the Almighty God and Nature: God and Nature can't stop her making the greatest speech preaching all living or dead, Him and Nature. Yet, on a human level, it seems it is still a great pity the old woman without any single son left is thankful to the Almighty God for Michael having had “a clean burial in the far north” who had been “a great rower and fisher” (8). She is still thankful to God for Bartley now “[having] a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely” [with the aid of the rope]. The play does not leave any room for the audience weeping in the tightly woven space of one act, with most intense dramatic effects rippling every instant from start to finish the audience's mind and heart.

In this final monolog by Maurya there is a stage direction in the middle: “[*She pauses, and the keen rises a little more loudly from the women, and*

then sinks away. Continuing].” Synge has seen the island [Inishmaan] for a week: “I walk round the island nearly every day, yet I can see nothing anywhere but a mass of wet rock, a strip of surf, and then a tumult of waves” (23). Then he describes the wind; it is as if we are hearing the keen of the women, in this play, that accompanies her last monolog:

The slaty limestone has grown black with the water that is dripping on it, and wherever I turn there is the same grey obsession twining and wreathing itself among the narrow fields, and the same wail from the wind that shrieks and whistles in the loose rubble of the walls. (23)

All that Synge has seen in the Aran Islands become part of the play, which makes it so moving a play, just as we experience in this last monology.

Notes

- 1) I was fortunate enough in coming to stay on Aranmor for a week and in visiting Inishmaan for one afternoon in the summer of 2013 to wander about to see the cottage Synge stayed in and many other things on the island, including the Dun Conor: “one of the largest Duns, or pagan forts, on the islands, [which] is within a stone’s throw of my cottage, and I often stroll up there after a dinner of eggs or salt pork, to smoke drowsily on the stones.” (Skelton 48)
- 2) Synge, born in 1871 in a Dublin suburb, of Anglo-Irish Protestant landowning stock, first went to the Aran Islands in 1898, and then visited the islands several times. He completed his two masterpieces, *In the Shadow of the Glen* and *Riders to the Sea* in the summer of 1902, the year he visited the islands for the last time, on the basis of material he has collected on the islands. See the General Introduction by T. R. Henn, *J. M. Synge: The Complete Plays*, 1-21.
- 3) In fact, it must have been published before 1911, in different form, because Synge is happy that “Roberts says about 600 *Aran Islands* have gone, that is very good I think.” See a letter by Synge to Molly Allgood dated Kingstown August 21 (evening) [1907]. (L 184)

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Manuscript peer-review process:

receipt acknowledged: Nov. 7, 2013

revision received: Dec. 20, 2013

publication approved: Dec. 25, 2013

Edited by: Beau La Rhee