



Provided by the author(s) and University of Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	J.M. Synge, authenticity, and the regional
Author(s)	Lonergan, Patrick
Publication Date	2013
Publication Information	Patrick Lonergan (2013) ' J.M. Synge, authenticity, and the regional' In: Regional Modernisms. Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press.
Publisher	Edinburgh University Press
Link to publisher's version	<a href="https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-regional-modernisms.html">https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-regional-modernisms.html</a>
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/5916">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/5916</a>

Downloaded 2024-03-13T08:17:55Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



## J.M. Synge, Authenticity and the Regional

At the end of the second book of *The Aran Islands*, John Millington Synge goes on a train journey from Galway to Dublin. His departure occurs on the eve of a celebration in Dublin of the life of Charles Stewart Parnell, the fallen Irish political leader. Synge's train is full of excursionists to Dublin, and many of them are in a festive mood. "A wild crowd was on the platform, surging round the train in every stage of intoxication," writes Synge, who describes the scene as evidence of the "half-savage temperament of Connaught".<sup>1</sup> Synge is not altogether disapproving of the crowd's high-spirits, stating that "the tension of human excitement seemed greater in this insignificant crowd than anything I have felt among enormous mobs in Rome or Paris" (122).

As the train pulls away, Synge takes his seat in the third-class carriage amongst people he has come to know from the Aran Islands, and finds himself sitting beside a young girl. The journey proves raucous: "When the train started there were wild cheers and cries on the platform, and in the train itself the noise was intense, men and women shrieking and singing and beating their sticks on the partitions. At several stations there was a rush to the bar, so the excitement progressed as we proceeded" (122). That excitement culminates in a brawl at Ballinasloe station (the easternmost station in County Galway), when a sailor on the train has a fight with a soldier who is trying to board. "Peace was made," writes Synge, but as the soldiers leave the train:

a pack of their women followers thrust their bare heads and arms into the doorway, cursing and blaspheming with extraordinary rage.... I looked out and caught a glimpse of the wildest heads and figures I have ever seen, shrieking and screaming and waving their naked arms in the lights of the lanterns (124).

As the journey progresses through the night, the mood calms – but Synge is unable to sleep, kept awake by the jokes of the sailor, and by the conversation in Irish of two old men sitting nearby. Gradually, the young girl sitting beside Synge loses "her shyness" and engages him in conversation:

[She] let me point out the features of the country that were beginning to appear through the dawn as we drew nearer Dublin. She was delighted with the shadows of the trees – trees are rare in Connaught – and with the canal, which was beginning to reflect the morning light. Every time I showed her some new shadow she cried out with naïve excitement "Oh it's lovely, but I can't see it". This presence at my side contrasted curiously with the brutality that shook the barrier behind us. (124)

As the journey – and the narrative – concludes, Synge transforms this scene from ethnography to metaphor, writing that "The whole spirit of the west of Ireland, with its strange wildness and reserve, seemed moving in this single train to pay a last homage to the dead statesman of the east". (124)

This is a remarkable passage, and for many reasons. Despite acting as the conclusion to a prose account of Synge's visit to the Aran Islands – a factual

---

<sup>1</sup> J.M. Synge, *Collected Works 2: Prose*. Edited by Alan Price. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), p. 122. Subsequent quotations appear in the text.

travelogue – this section of the narrative is self-evidently aestheticised, not only in its use of such literary techniques as symbolism and metaphor, but also in its allusions – and indeed in its later influences. It is difficult not to be reminded, when reading Synge's final lines, of the paragraph that concludes Joyce's *The Dead*: words that use the figure of a dead Irish male to move the reader from Dublin to the west just as Synge moves us from the west back to Dublin in reference to the figure of Parnell, one of Joyce's heroes. And in the strangely brutal train journey – with its combination of sexual energy, debased femininity, latent violence and brutality – there are echoes of the *Circe* episode from Joyce's *Ulysses* as well as Dante's *Inferno*.<sup>2</sup>

The passage works through a series of sharp contrasts, many of them operating on a symbolic as well as literal basis. To borrow a phrase from Eugene O'Neill (another writer heavily influenced by Synge), this is a long day's journey into night – but also a journey back into the daytime. The west is associated with darkness, and in turn with a range of other negative characteristics: wildness, savagery, drunkenness, a propensity towards violence. The atmosphere is one of deterioration: this is a population that is, writes Synge, "half-savage" and there is a strong sense in which the forces of civilisation are in competition with a latent brutality, as evident not only in the rage of the women but also in their nakedness and blasphemy. In contrast, the east is a place of light, and Synge's journey towards Dublin enables him to reinforce the values of civilisation by educating the young girl beside him who, with characteristically Irish logic (or civility?), tells him that the sights he shows here are "lovely" even though she cannot see them.

Read in isolation from the rest of *The Aran Islands* this passage could be seen as implying that it is the journey towards Dublin – into the light – that saves the young Connaught girl from the savagery of the women who stay behind in Ballinasloe, their bodies "shrieking and screaming" in the light of the lanterns. Yet the representation is not quite that simple or simplistic. The journey is not a straightforward passage from darkness into light, since in the west illumination is provided by lanterns while in the east the sights are visible mainly in shadows – that is, there is light in the west and darkness in the east too. The occasions of drunkenness and savagery that Synge witnesses are, it is worth pointing out, a result of a festival being held not in the west of Ireland but in Dublin. We might also detect in the association of Dublin with the dawn a reversal of a pattern in much of the Irish poetry of Synge's time, whereby the west of Ireland was perpetually bathed in a mystical wispy half-light, encapsulated in Matthew Arnold's phrase 'the Celtic Twilight'. Similarly, there is a slight reversal of norms in Synge's situation of the railway (associated with technological advancement) in the west rather than the metropolis. Finally, Synge makes a point of telling us that what he is presenting should be seen as a metaphor for the "whole spirit of the West", drawing attention to the artificiality of what he writes, while also suggesting that this scene is (despite the frequent use of words associated with animals) more "human" than comparable scenes in Rome or

---

<sup>2</sup> There are many important overlaps between Joyce and Synge. Both met in 1903 and Joyce would later stage an Italian translation of *Riders to the Sea*; Joyce also wrote about the Aran Islands in 1912 essays that, as Anne Fogarty shows, owe much to Synge's account of those places. Anthony Roche shows how a key passage from *A Portrait of the Artist* was influenced by Synge, and Fogarty reminds us that one of the contexts for Joyce's composition of *The Dead* in 1907 was his disquiet at the riots that greeted *The Playboy of the Western World* in Dublin. See Anne Fogarty, "Ghostly Intertexts: James Joyce and the Legacy of Synge" in Brian Cliff and Nicholas Grene (editors) *Synge and Edwardian Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp 225-244, and especially p. 231. See also Anthony Roche, "'The Strange Light of Some New World' Stephen's Vision in *A Portrait*" *James Joyce Quarterly*, 25.3 (1988), p. 323-32.

Paris. This regional space, in other words, is more authentic – perhaps even dangerously so – than the metropolis. And, paradoxically, Synge's audience will recognise that scene as authentic not because it seems like a factual account of real events but, on the contrary, because it is so heavily and so self-consciously aestheticised. The overall effect of the passage is thus to draw attention to the literary techniques that are used to make a particular scene seem authentic – and then to reveal the artificiality of those techniques. Synge's passage is not just about the people of the west of Ireland; it is also about the process of *writing* about the people of the west of Ireland.

This paper argues that the work of Synge may be used to sharpen our understanding of the relationships between regionalism, modernity, and dramatic literature. In its entirety, Synge's *oeuvre* achieves its power by creating a tension between the region and the metropolis or, more simply, between core and periphery. That tension is enacted in many ways, some of them evident from the passage above: artistically, aesthetically, politically, linguistically, and so on. My suggestion is that the key component in that tension is Synge's presentation of what we might call the authentic, even if Synge himself did not use that word. Synge's representation of the regional is firmly related to issues of authenticity: authentic representation thus allows Synge to add not only to the artistic status of his work, but also to his reputation as the guarantor of that work's credibility.

This is not to suggest that Synge sought to present the authentic, but instead that his work shows a self-awareness about how literary constructions of the authentic function. Gregory Castle explains this strategy clearly when he writes that:

Synge ... makes the traditional modern by demonstrating that both tradition and modernity suffer from the same debilitating absence of authenticity. Another way to frame this problem, which for Terry Eagleton is constitutive of Irish modernism, is to restate the distinction between tradition and modernity as a distinction between reality and representation. As *The Playboy of the Western World*, 1907] demonstrates, the assumption that the traditional is somehow more real or more authentic fails to consider the role of representation in the construction of tradition. In this sense, Synge reveals the modernity of tradition at the same time that he reaffirms the fundamental importance for the Celtic Revival of traditional material and themes.<sup>3</sup>

Castle is writing here specifically about *The Playboy of the Western World*, a text that he differentiates from *The Aran Islands*, but my suggestion is that the latter text *also* sets out to blur distinctions between the traditional and the modern not (as Castle argues) by revealing the absence of authenticity – but instead by calling attention to the ways in which authenticity is represented. Put simply, my argument is that Synge reveals the fundamental inauthenticity of literary representations of the authentic.

In making such an argument, I could be accused of saying something that has been said (too) many times before. Synge's international reputation is largely founded upon *The Playboy of the Western World* and the riots that greeted it when it premiered in 1907 at Dublin's Abbey Theatre. As scholars such as Chris Morash and Ben Levitas have shown, those riots were provoked by a variety of tensions – not just about Irish nationalism, but also about social class, gender, regional development

---

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Castle, *Modernism and The Celtic Revival* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) 134-5. His reference to Eagleton and Irish modernism is from *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995).

within Ireland, sectarianism, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Yet one of the major complaints of protestors was that Synge's representation of the west of Ireland was inauthentic: "that's not the West" was the rioters' rallying-call.<sup>5</sup> Those events have been well recorded and thoroughly debated, so I do not wish to rehearse old arguments about whether Synge's work is realistic in its depiction of Ireland and its people. Instead, my aim is to suggest that, for Synge, the construction of the authentic was an aesthetic strategy – one that was distinct from such considerations as realism or verisimilitude, even if he was preoccupied with those literary devices too.

Before beginning, it is necessary to establish a working definition of authenticity, a term that means radically different things to different people. An immediate need is to differentiate between what we might call objective and subjective understandings of the authentic – too very different ways of using the same word, and often confused with each other. One way of speaking about the authenticity of a work of art is to confirm its provenance: to state, based on objectively verifiable evidence, that a painting or manuscript or composition is undoubtedly the work of the artist who claims to have created it. Hence, it is possible to examine a manuscript that is purportedly by Synge and to use various forms of evidence to declare it an authentic work by that author. Yet more often when we speak of authenticity we have in mind something close to the notion of 'being true to oneself' – and hence when we seek out authenticity in a work of art, what we demand of it is a subjective experience that *either* enables us to feel more attuned to our 'real selves' *or* that represents the world to us in such a way as to persuade us that the artwork is not simply realistic but also more 'pure' and less mediated than objects or events familiar from our everyday lives. Thus, the key components for this subjective experience of authenticity are, almost paradoxically, *recognition* and *unfamiliarity*. To judge an artwork as authentic means that we perceive in it something that accords with our sense of personal value or truth – yet we must also perceive in it something that is outside our ordinary experience.

In thinking about the authentic in these ways, I am drawing on the work of Charles Guignon, who in his book *On Being Authentic* critically examines what he calls our "self-help culture" by providing an historical account of the development of ideas about authenticity.<sup>6</sup> He traces the popularisation of that concept to Rousseau, who does not use the word "authentic" but writes that it is:

no longer a light undertaking to distinguish properly between what is original and what is artificial in the actual nature of man, or to form a true idea of a state which no longer exists, perhaps never did exist, and probably never will exist; and of which it is, nevertheless, necessary to have true ideas.<sup>7</sup>

Rousseau's words show that the concept that we now understand as 'authenticity' does not always have an objective correlative; instead, the concept is applied to something that we subjectively believe to be true. Hence, a play is seen as authentic when its audience subjectively considers it to *be* authentic. This is probably what

---

<sup>4</sup> See Chris Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Ben Levitas, *Theatre of Nation* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Morash, p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Preface", *On the Origin of Inequality*.  
[http://www.constitution.org/jjr/ineq\\_02.htm](http://www.constitution.org/jjr/ineq_02.htm)

Marie Jones had in mind in her play *Stones In His Pockets* (1999), which pokes fun at Hollywood filmmakers on a west of Ireland film-shoot when they complain that the local cows don't "look Irish enough". Underlying that joke is Jones's suspicion that a film audience will not care whether cows *really* come from Ireland, but instead will demand that they *look like* they come from Ireland.<sup>8</sup> *Stones in His Pockets* shows that to call a play or film "authentic" is to state that it accords with the ideas we had about its subject matter or setting before we entered the theatre. To state that a film seems authentically Irish is not to say that I have learned something new about a country that is unfamiliar to me ("I never knew that Irish cows looked like that"); it is to say that the film is exactly what I expected it to be ("those cows look just like I thought Irish cows would look"). The authentic, thus, is on some level always a confirmation of our expectations, however deep-seated they may be.

We can expand this understanding of the authentic by considering one of the best known discussions of it – that offered by Lionel Trilling in *Sincerity and Authenticity*. In that work he states that authenticity involves a:

more strenuous moral experience than "sincerity" does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant view of the social circumstances of life... [M]uch that was once thought to make up the very fabric of culture has come to seem of little account, mere fantasy or ritual, or downright falsification... Conversely, much that culture traditionally condemned and sought to exclude is accorded a considerable moral authority by reason of the authenticity claimed for it, for example, disorder, violence, unreason.<sup>9</sup>

Trilling is not writing specifically about our apprehension of art, but his description can be applied to the study of drama and other forms of literature. For such writing to be considered authentic, it must, following Trilling, create a vision of life that is separate from social convention, and which seems different from mass-produced culture. And a play can also seem to be representing something authentic if it attempts to forego rationalism – through disorder, violence or unreason, as Trilling puts it. Such definitions can readily be applied to the works of Synge, which are without exception set on the margins of societies – focussing on a pair of blind beggars who live in a perpetually uneasy relationship with a village community in *The Well of the Saints* (1905), or on the tramp and unfaithful wife who leave the respectability of a secure lodging for the open road in *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), among other examples. Likewise, *The Playboy of the Western World* gains much of its moral force from Synge's treatment of violence and the irrationalities that provoke it.

A further consideration is that artistic production is itself considered a mode of authenticity. As Charles Taylor reminds us:

Artistic creation becomes the paradigm mode in which people can come to self-definition. The artist becomes in some way the paradigm of the human being, an agent of original self-definition. Since about 1800, there has been a tendency to heroize the artist, to see in his or her life the essence of the human condition, and to venerate him or her as a seer, the creator of cultural value.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Marie Jones, *Stones in His Pockets* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 62.

Taylor's remarks explain why, when we cannot connect authentically to the work of art, we will often seek to connect authentically to the artist himself or herself. Those connections by audiences are at root acts of self-definition: the things we recognise as valuable in the author represent the things we value in ourselves. Taylor's statement helps us to understand the presentation (and self-representation) of Synge, but it can also readily be mapped onto Christy Mahon in *Playboy*, a character whose tales of parricide make him seem far more full-blooded than any other man in the west of Ireland community that he happens to enter. That is, the authenticity of artistic production, as understood by Taylor, can apply equally well to Synge as to his creations. We can also read Christy's status by reference to Trilling's observation that "much that culture traditionally condemned and sought to exclude is accorded a considerable moral authority by reason of the authenticity claimed for it." (11) Christy's appeal to Pegeen and the other women in *Playboy* lies precisely in the beautified narration of his transgressions, the presumed murder of his father in particular.

I will return to Synge's writings in more detail but the thrust of these definitions is to establish "the authentic" as referring to something that is perceived as being different from the everyday – even as it is seen as familiar. And a second related paradox is that the desire for authenticity in art arises from a sense that the real world has become fantastic, and from a related belief that fiction can reveal a truth.

These definitions in turn determine the representation of the regional as authentic. To represent a space as "regional" is immediately to mark it as outside the ordinary experiences of a metropolitan audience – and when that representation is the regional is represented in terms of the authentic, it is (again somewhat paradoxically) not necessarily being represented as a real place, but instead as a place that corresponds to the expectations of audiences in the metropolis. Hence, the regional space often becomes a representation not of the real place (the Aran Islands, Mayo, etc) but instead of the expectations – and indeed the desires – of the metropolitan audience. And that in turn explains why it happens that, whenever a representation of the region is dubbed authentic, we quickly see the emergence of a series of counter-claims, often coming from the region itself, that seek to assert a "truth". Those truth-claims often gain currency for a time before they too lose their integrity.

This dynamic of validation and counter-claim was evident from a very early stage in Synge's career, notably in his particular association with the Aran Islands. He visited the islands five times between 1898 and 1902, gathering the material that he would publish in *The Aran Islands* and adapt for many of his plays. The association of Synge with Aran is so frequently drawn as to be axiomatic, but it is important to point out that Synge was certainly influenced by other places too: by Wicklow, where he spent much of his childhood; by Paris, where he spent several months each year; and indeed by Dublin. Of Synge's seven plays, only one is set on the Aran Islands – *Riders to the Sea* (1904). Four of the others are located in Wicklow; one in Mayo; and the other, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910), in the north of Ireland and in Scotland. Nevertheless, it is the Aran Islands that Synge remains most strongly associated with.

The association between Synge and Aran probably owes most to W.B. Yeats's preface to Synge's 1905 play *The Well of the Saints*, in which Yeats claims to have changed the younger man's destiny by telling him to go west.

Give up Paris, you will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symonds will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Arran

Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression.<sup>11</sup>

Synge, of course, did *not* give up Paris for Aran; in the year 1899, for instance, he spent eight months in Paris and only one on Inishmaan. Nevertheless, thanks in large part to Yeats's subsequent mythologisations of Synge, it remains widely believed that Synge's artistic breakthrough occurred when he abandoned the cosmopolitan space of Paris for the regional space of the Aran Islands.

What is interesting here is how Yeats's remarks position Synge in relation to the people of the Aran Islands. Synge should live not *as* one of the people, but *as if* he were one of the people, wrote Yeats – who then cast Synge not as artist but as agent: as someone who will give voice to what is already there. There is a fascinating tension between the real and the artificial in Yeats's lines: Synge's role is to act *as if* he is something that he is not – but through that performance he will reveal and express an underlying truth. Synge's task, as conceived (retrospectively) by Yeats was to retrieve something original from the regions and to convey it in a form that can be understood in metropolitan and cosmopolitan literary centres.

Yeats's remarks have been influential, but we know that Synge himself saw his role rather differently (though he did not object to Yeats's preface). He certainly *did* seek to express the voices of the Aran Islanders, but he also changed and re-shaped what he found there. This re-shaping of the raw materials on Aran is probably most obvious in Synge's relationship with Pat Dirane, the ancient storyteller who can be seen as having provided the stories that inspired *The Shadow of the Glen* and *Playboy of the Western World*.

In order to consider how authenticity functions in Synge's works, I want to discuss the story by Dirane – recounted in *The Aran Islands* – that was adapted for *The Shadow of the Glen*. In the first book of *The Aran Islands* Synge tells us how, one day, he was sitting in a cottage on Inishmaan. Pat was present, and so were a group of local women, who were visiting the house because there was a baby there who had become ill. The child's mother had gone to the mainland for a long visit, so some of the local women who were nursing their own children at the time came to the house to restore the baby to its 'natural food' as Synge puts it (70). This, as Eilis Ni Dhuibne writes, is "fascinating material":

providing us with a luminous insight into the life of the island. There are not many accounts by folklorists of the detail of child-rearing, at this date or later. That women were prepared to breastfeed their neighbour's child, on a casual basis to help the child, is not something I would have been aware of, even though I have collected a good deal of information about childbirth and the care of babies from women in Kerry. <sup>12</sup>

So before Synge recounts Pat's story, he takes a moment to include this significant ethnographic detail, and this passage is a fine example of how *The Aran Islands*

---

<sup>11</sup> .M. Synge, *Collected Works, Volume 3: Plays 1*. Edited by Ann Saddlemyer (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> Eilis Ni Dhuibhne, "The Best Field Worker: John Millington Synge and Irish folklore" in Patrick Lonergan (ed), *Synge and His Influences* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011), pp. 93-110. p. 98.



provides a keenly observed factual account of the life of the Aran Islanders. Also notable, of course, is Synge's concern for the welfare of the child, providing us with another example of how his *Aran Islands* is also an act of self-representation.

As Ni Dhuihne shows in her essay, the story Pat tells is quite common in Irish folklore; versions of it have been collected throughout Ireland. Like most traditional Irish storytellers, Pat puts himself at the heart of the tale he wants to tell. He says he had been walking one night from Galway to Dublin, and had been invited into a house by a young woman. When he walked in, he saw before him the body of an old man laid out on the table – the woman's husband, who had died earlier that day. The woman wanted to leave the house to tell her friends that the husband was dead, she said, and asked Dirane if he would sit with the corpse. To encourage him, she offered him a pipe, and some whiskey – so he agreed readily enough. When she had left, the husband opened his eyes, telling Dirane not to be frightened. "I've got a bad wife", he said, "So I let on to be dead the way I'd catch her at her goings-on".<sup>13</sup> Half an hour later the woman returned, bringing a young man with her. She gave the young man tea and, observing that he looked tired, told him to go the bedroom and take some rest. Soon after, the woman rose herself. "Stranger," she said to Dirane, "I am going to get the candle out of the bedroom: the young man will be asleep by now". She went into the bedroom, said Dirane, and of course she stayed there. In a little while, the dead man got up, took up a stick, handed Dirane another stick, and burst into the bedroom. According to Dirane, he "hit the young man with the stick so that his blood leapt up and hit the gallery". And that was the end of Dirane's story.

There are four important features of Pat's story that I want to identify, all of which relate to his authority as the storyteller, and thus to the authenticity of his tale. The first is that he aims to give the story credibility by claiming to have been the witness of the events he recounts: rather than being an artist who is inventing – or a storyteller who is putting a personal stamp on a tale handed down to him – he is merely a witness, recounting what really occurred. Second, he aims to boost further his credibility by providing specificity of location, telling Synge that the events happened to him while he was walking to Dublin. That choice of location was almost certainly made due to Synge's presence: Pat may simply have been trying to involve Synge in the story by naming Synge's hometown – or perhaps he was trying to assert his equality with Synge by saying that he too was familiar with Ireland's largest city. But in any case the reference to Dublin appears to be an improvisation motivated by Synge's presence. A third method of boosting his credibility is Pat's reference to *things*, to material objects: the apparently irrelevant details that he supplies about the things in the cottage – the candles, the blackthorn sticks, the whiskey and bread: all aim to authenticate his story, precisely because they appear irrelevant. And the fourth and most interesting feature of Pat's story is that his authority is immediately challenged. Synge writes that when Pat finished the story, he found himself entering into a "moral dispute" with one of his listeners – perhaps one of the nursing women, perhaps someone else. Synge could not follow the debate because it was being conducted in Irish at a very fast pace – which implies that the dispute was heated. And it was a dispute, furthermore, that "caused immense delight to some young men who had [also] come to listen to he story," writes Synge (70). So Synge witnessed not just the technique of the storyteller; he also witnessed the power of the story to excite

---

<sup>13</sup> The story is summarised from *Prose* 70-73.

debate amongst its audience – and then he saw too that this debate could further be enjoyed as a kind of spectacle.

This story eventually formed the basis for *The Shadow of the Glen*, the one-act comedy which was staged in 1903. Synge follows Pat's story fairly closely, but he does introduce some significant changes. Probably the most important is that rather than having the tramp help to beat the unfaithful wife, Synge instead has her leave with the tramp. Dirane's tale implicitly seems to approve of the violent response of the farmer to his wife's infidelity (and this is true of most versions of the story, as Ni Dhuibhe shows), but Synge shifts the focus (and the audience's sympathies) from the farmer to his wife – and uses her forced departure from the family home to criticise the structures of rural Irish society. This alteration of Dirane's tale, together with the fact that Synge named his heroine Nora, led many of his first audiences to make the perfectly understandable assumption that *Shadow* was inspired by Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, another play about a woman called Nora who leaves her husband. So instead of being seen as someone who had brought a story from the west of Ireland into the metropolis, Synge was instead seen as having written an Irish version of a decadent European play. He was seen, in other words, as being more influenced by Paris than Pat Dirane.

As a result, like Ibsen, Synge found himself being attacked on moral as well as artistic grounds. The Sinn Féin leader Arthur Griffith calling the play “decadent” “corrupt”, “cynical”, and, worst of all, “no more Irish than the *Decameron*”.<sup>14</sup> Griffith immediately set about writing a counter-play, called *In a Real Wicklow Glen*, which sought to show that no Irish woman would leave her husband, even if the marriage was loveless. So again we see here the pattern of validation and counter-claim evident in this debate over the authenticity of Synge's presentation. One of the interesting features of this criticism is not just that Synge was accused of being inauthentic – but that this lack of authenticity was mediated through a sense of the national. For Griffith, Synge's work was not “real” because it was like the *Decameron*, because it was like Ibsen – and so the title of his own play emphasises not just the reality of his vision, but the geographical specificity of it – it takes place *in Wicklow*.

Synge famously – and indeed repeatedly – was forced to defend himself against the accusation of being un-Irish or of misrepresenting Irish people, and thus he began to assert the authenticity of his source material, even as such plays as *Well of the Saints* and *Playboy* were challenging the construction of the authentic in literature. Responding to comments from Frank Fay about *The Well of the Saints*, Synge stated that “I am quite ready to avoid hurting people's feelings needlessly, but I will *not* falsify what I believe to be true for anybody”.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, he made a similar point: “What I write of Irish country life I know to be true and I will not change a syllable of it because A, B, or C may think they know better than I do”.<sup>16</sup> Synge's most famous defence of himself is his Preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* – remarks that are worth quoting here:

---

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Clery, ‘The Philosophy of an Irish Theatre’, *Leader*, 31 October 1903. p. 155. Quoted in Irina Rupp Malone, *Ibsen and the Irish Revival* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> John Millington Synge, *The Collected Letters* Volume I. Edited by Ann Saddlemyer (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 91. Emphases appear in the original text.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 91.

When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen*, some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen. This matter, I think, is of importance, for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form. In the modern literature of towns, however, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life.<sup>17</sup>

The language of the *Shadow*, he claimed, was certainly poetic, but it was a poetry rooted in what he calls very deliberately ‘the reality’ of country life, as he himself had witnessed and recorded it, listening through a chink in a floorboard. Once again, he is suggesting that he is expressing something that is already there, and that image of Synge with his ear to the floor allows us to imagine him burrowing down in a fashion that that positions Synge somewhere between the archaeologist and the voyeur. But what is important here is that despite the dispute between Synge and his attackers, what they all share is a sense that what is authentic comes from the regions of Ireland – that the town is less authentic – and that to be seen as non-Irish is also to be seen as lacking in authenticity.

Also interesting about the Preface is that Synge is not just defending his plays, but seeking to create an image of himself. He does something similar when he repeats Pat’s tale in the *Aran Islands*. Just as Pat had placed himself at the centre of his own tale, so does Synge recount for his readers his own presence in the Aran Islands, hearing the story that would later become one of his plays. Just as Pat provides a specific geographical location for his story, so does Synge in *The Shadow of the Glen* mention countless real places: its second line refers to the Wicklow towns of Brittas and Aughrim, and we hear later of Rathvanna and Dublin and Rathdrum. And particularly notable is that the relations of those places are geographically consistent: the route from Brittas to Aughrim is long, but could conceivably be travelled on foot – something that is not so true of the route from Galway to Dublin.

Then there are the validations offered by the presence of real things. Just as Pat draws attention to apparently trivial material things to boost his own credibility, so too does Synge. As with Pat’s story, there are references to such ordinary objects as food and drink; there is a turf stack, and so on. There is also the needle that the tramp asks for when Nora asks him to watch over her husband’s corpse, saying that “there’s great safety in a needle”. That line probably would not have made much sense to Synge’s original audience, but again is taken from Pat, who in the *Aran Islands*, tells Synge that placing a needle under the collar of one’s shirt can ward off ghosts. This is an example of how, as Paige Reynolds puts it, in Synge’s works, “things are imbued with magical powers, a quality attributable in part to long-standing spiritual beliefs.”:

When Pat warns Synge to put a sharp needle beneath the collar of his coat in order to protect himself from fairies, he maintains that this banal object is

---

<sup>17</sup> John Millington Synge *Collected Works IV: Plays 2*. Edited by Ann Saddlemeier. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), pp. 53-4. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

infused with incredible power, the authority to ward off evil (36). Like this needle, the objects in [Synge's plays] are charged with meaning that well exceeds their actual value.<sup>18</sup>

Synge also placed actual material objects from the Aran Islands in his plays, most famously asking a friend from Inishmore to send him real pampooties for the premiere performance of *Riders to the Sea*.

And then, finally, just as Pat found himself in a moral dispute after telling his story, so too was Synge forced to defend his art, not only from those who objected to it on moral grounds, but also from the disinterested bystanders who found themselves immensely delighted with the controversies provoked by Synge's work.

What I am drawing out here is the extent to which both Pat *and* Synge use precisely the same strategies to emphasise the authenticity of their outlook, even if Synge is also keen to draw attention to the artificiality of his work. For both, the authenticity is invested in authorial presence, in the reference to real places, and in the inclusion of material objects. And for both, the ability to move between core and periphery is seen as inherently valuable: whether it's Pat walking from Dublin to Galway, or Synge giving him Paris for Aran. Yet for Synge, it is always important to reveal these strategies *as* strategies, to show that the authentic is not to be confused with the real.

As such, both storytellers can be considered in relation to Colin Graham's explanation of the construction of authenticity during the Irish literary revival. Graham points out that authenticity is always something sought for rather than something definitively achieved. He also implicitly points out how individuals present themselves as authentic through various kinds of performance. One example of such performances, for Graham, is Yeats's collection of folklore and fairytales in the Irish countryside. Graham suggests that:

Yeats's folk and fairy tales are not remarkable but typical in the way that they attempt to construct an Irishness which is from outside the social and sectarian remit of the collector, who through the act of collection, cataloguing, publishing and the accumulation of knowledge sees a potential for becoming 'of' what is collected.<sup>19</sup>

Authenticity, writes Graham, is "constituted by a rhetoric of showing, claiming and confirming, which both vindicates the colonised while implicating and elevating the collector of this authenticity in the vindication" (143). The collector of the folk story is thus both inside and outside the story. The story's value is enhanced by the objectivity of the collector, who is, as Graham says, outside of the social and religious structures of the storytellers' society and thus (apparently) unbiased. But the act of naming something *as authentic* also boost the authenticity *of the collector* himself: the ability of Yeats and Synge to identify something as authentic in turn identifies each of them as having an authenticity of their own. This explains again Yeats's preface to *the*

---

<sup>18</sup> See Paige Reynolds, "Synge's Things: Material Culture in the writings of Synge" in Patrick Lonergan (editor) *Synge and His Influences* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011), pp. 73-92, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland* (Edinburgh University Press, 2001), pp. 141-2. Subsequent citations appear in the text.

*Well* – Synge could act *as if* he was one of the people, and his ability to express their lives would in turn be used to authenticate the integrity of his own artistry.

For the development of Synge's reputation, it was crucial for him to construct a meta-critical apparatus that would help to identify him as authentic – showing him *not* as the disciple of Ibsen, and *not* as someone who lived more often in Paris than in Ireland – but as someone who seeks always to retrieve stories from their origins. Synge does not invent; he takes down customs that have been handed to him by people like Dirane. And then he brings them back to the centre, where they are validated as authentic.

That dynamic might help us to understand Synge the anthropologist, but it also helps us to understand Synge the artist. Almost all of his plays function through creating a dynamic between inside and outside, between core and periphery. Synge's task as an artist is almost always to present the hierarchical structure of a given society, and to subvert the values he finds there. Hence, the patriarch in *Shadow of the Glen* is made to seem powerless and pathetic. In *The Tinker's Wedding*, a society's most respectable member – a priest – is placed in conflict with its least respected members – a family of Travellers – and although in the end it is the priest who holds the stage, the audience's sympathies will lie firmly with the outsiders. That is true also in *The Well of the Saints*, and in a more complex way in *The Playboy of the Western World* when the arrival of someone who should be an outcast – the parricide Christy Mahon – has a transformative impact on a community, albeit for a short time.

Graham's analysis of authenticity in the Irish literary revival considers it as arising from a colonial context. The reason that authenticity was at issue was because nationalism sought to present a newly-realised 'authentic Ireland', Graham suggests. I do not believe that these are terms that Synge would readily have endorsed or even used, but I do think that Synge's artistic energy was boosted from entering into debates about what an authentic Ireland might look like, even as he constantly warned his audiences about the dangers that arise when an abstract idealisation (such as "authenticity") is applied to everyday life.

Graham goes on to present two further modes of authenticity – one achieved after Irish independence in 1922, and another arising from postmodernity. He refers to the authenticity constructed in the revival as 'Old Authenticity'. After Irish independence, he writes:

Authenticity's ability to coexist with the market had not only enabled it to survive after decolonisation but has allowed it to become, in some circumstances... a 'mythologized and fetishized sign' ... The tourist industry is an obvious site for the peddling of the authentic in an explicit and populist way. (144)

Synge himself became a victim of that tourist trade, even in the Aran Islands, where the cottage that he spent most of his time in was renamed Teach Synge.

As that 'new authenticity' became more frequently reproduced through tourism and mass culture, it began to lose both aura and authority, writes Graham. Eventually, Irish authenticity became ironised: presented in a fashion that suggests that there is still an original Irish identity – one which is separate from the urban – but which is also sceptical of the search for authenticity in the first place. This happened from an early stage in the development of Synge's reputation, even as early as 1909 when Gerard Griffin suggested that the search for authenticity can only ever lead to a performance when he wrote *The Mist That Does be on the Bogs*. We see this

phenomenon too in Martin McDonagh's re-imaginings of Synge in *The Leenane Trilogy* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (all 1997). And, as Brian Singleton has shown, Synge would remain trapped within a canonical – or museumised – mode of production right up to the mid-1980s, when his work was retrieved by Galway's Druid Theatre.<sup>20</sup>

Yet these debased presentations of Synge in many ways prove the point laid out in *The Aran Islands* and elsewhere: the representation of the regional to a metropolitan audience will always require a negotiation of the relationship between reality and audience expectation. Synge managed that tension better than many other Irish writers of his era, not by asserting the authenticity of his narrative but instead by asserting the authenticity of his own outlook as an artist. This self-consciousness, this strategic use of a constructed version of the authentic, are examples of how we can think of Synge as a modernist writer. And they show too his ongoing relevance to our own times, when the struggle between region and metropolis has been reconstituted as a clash between the local and global.

#### TEXTS CITED

- Castle, Gregory, *Modernism and The Celtic Revival* (Cambridge University Press, 2001)
- Eagleton, Terry *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995).
- Fogarty, Anne, "Ghostly Intertexts: James Joyce and the Legacy of Synge" in Brian Cliff and Nicholas Grene (editors) *Synge and Edwardian Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp 225-244
- Graham, Colin, *Deconstructing Ireland* (Edinburgh University Press, 2001).
- Guignon, Charles, *On Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- Jones, Marie, *Stones in His Pockets* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1999).
- Levitas, Ben, *Theatre of Nation* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Morash, Chris, *A History of Irish Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2003)
- Ni Dhuibhne, Eilis "The Best Field Worker: John Millington Synge and Irish folklore" in Patrick Lonergan (ed), *Synge and His Influences* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011), pp. 93-110.
- Reynolds, Paige, "Synge's Things: Material Culture in the writings of Synge" in Patrick Lonergan (editor) *Synge and His Influences* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011), pp. 73-92.
- Roche, Anthony, "'The Strange Light of Some New World' Stephen's Vision in A Portrait" *James Joyce Quarterly*, 25.3 (1988), p. 323-32.
- Ruppo Malone, Irina, *Ibsen and the Irish Revival* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008).
- Singleton, Brian 'The Revival Revised', in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Drama*, ed. Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 258-270.
- Synge, J.M. *Collected Works II: Prose*. Edited by Alan Price. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982)
- , *Collected Works, Volume 3: Plays 1*. Edited by Ann Saddlemyer (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982)
- , *Collected Works IV: Plays 2*. Edited by Ann Saddlemyer. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982)

---

<sup>20</sup> Brian Singleton, 'The Revival Revised', in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Drama*, ed. Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 258- 270.

-----, *The Collected Letters* Volume I. Edited by Ann Saddlemeier (Oxford University Press, 1984)

Taylor, Charles, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Trilling, Lionel, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972)