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Reading Dialogic Correspondence:
Synge's *The Aran Islands*

After one hundred years, how might we read John Millington Synge's *The Aran Islands* anthropologically and ethnographically? The book bears a long history of interpretations by Synge's contemporaries, by literary artists and scholars, and by anthropologists.¹ All of these interpreters critique, correctly, the romantic interests in "primitives" particular to both the Revivalist political aesthetic and to early colonial anthropology—and to its product, fieldwork ethnography. More recently, scholars have salvaged Synge from the Orientalist-cum-nationalist box and argued that he develops an early form of realism from a "displaced nostalgia."² Scholars also note that while conforming to the still-emergent ethnographic conventions of his time, Synge simultaneously challenges these conventions through his autobiographic presence.³

Considered as an ethnographic work, this should not surprise us, if by ethnography we mean "the attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing."⁴ Anthropologists now recognize the dangers of primitivism, and they have internalized the critique of power differentials, including colonial and postcolonial analyses, that condition so many modern epistemologies. And anthropologists have internalized something else: an understanding that ethnography itself is a cultural practice, and a dialogic one at that.⁵

The Aran Islands and the Aran Islands are both historically specific discursive objects—"places" are always arbitrated concepts—overlapping perhaps, but not isomorphic. *The Aran Islands* is certainly fictive, but like all fiction it is constrained by what is possible. Reading it now ethnographically, one can sense a creative agency expressed through particular cultural practices, with linguistic practices being primary. There is little interest in *The Aran Islands* in archae-

1. In the last category, see John Messenger, "Islanders Who Read," *Anthropology Today*, 4, 2 (April, 1988), 17–19.

2. See Oona Frawley, *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth-Century Irish Literature* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005).

3. See Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

4. Sherry Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 42.

5. *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, ed. Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

ological anthropology as Synge is interested in other types of artifacts, among them languages, bodies, and folklore. His physical anthropology, his “ethnometry,” resides in his musings on the supposed correspondence between physical features and personality, an awkward, and to our ears unseemly, traverse of the Cartesian divide.

Reading Synge's text as straight ethnography is problematic, as others have noted.⁶ But Synge's autobiographic and dialogic presence is itself part of the potential ethnography that is *The Aran Islands*. As a writer—as the “graph” of the term “ethnographer”—he shifts from the agent-patient approach of the natural sciences, and instead develops a novel ethnographic disposition, a dialogic disposition. Though there is in *The Aran Islands* the residue of “objective scientific” ambition, there is also the subjective, and ultimately, the more human: for what are we, but subject—or subjected, as Nietzsche would have it—positions?

Of talking with Máirtín, old and blind, Synge's first teacher and guide in Inis Mór, Synge writes,

Then we talked about Inishmaan.

“You'll have an old man to talk with you over there,” he said, “and tell you stories of the fairies, but he's walking about with two sticks under him this ten year. Did ever you hear what it is goes on four legs when it is young, and on two legs after that, and on three legs when it does be old?”

I gave him the answer.

“Ah, master,” he said, “you're a cute one, and the blessing of God be on you. Well, I'm on three legs this minute, but the old man beyond is back on four; I don't know if I'm better than the way he is; he's got his sight and I'm only an old dark man.”⁷

Mikhail Bakhtin analytically describes two forms of Socratic dialogue as “anacrisis” and “syncrisis.” Anacrisis requires, or demands, a response, “the provocation of the word by the word.”⁸ The semantic content of such exchanges includes the formal reproduction of subject positions and differentials. In contrast, syncrisis is the bringing together of perspectives, in Bakhtin's assessment, concordant with his concept of heteroglossia. From my own fieldwork in contemporary spoken Irish in Aran, *ag labhairt* (“to speak”) seems more anacritic and *ag caint* (“to talk”) more syncritic. The mixture of syncrisis stands in con-

6. John Messenger, “Literary vs. Scientific Interpretations of Cultural Reality in the Aran Islands of Eire,” *Ethnohistory*, 11, 1, (Winter, 1964), 41–55.

7. J. M. Synge, *The Aran Islands*, ed. Tim Robinson (London: Penguin Books, 1992 [1907]), p. 12; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (AI 12).

8. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, transl. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.111.

trast to what Bakhtin argues is the monologic impetus of the classical dialectic. Importantly, attention to the dialogic fact of emergence recognizes culture as a practice, and not simply a product; for Synge in Aran, self is a dialogic practice. Synge's response to the Riddle of the Sphinx above is in some ways anacritic, but Máirtín recognizes the opportunity for syncritic dialogue—real dialogue—and from him, we get his subjective assessment of his own position in relation to yet another, the man on crutches in Inis Meáin.

Synge most identifies with people in Aran, not when he is clinically and voyeuristically observing Celts—a race of people outside of historical change—but when he is talking with Irish people living in the flow of persistent habits and contingent conditions. There are many such moments in *The Aran Islands*, and increasingly as the text goes on, the dialogic axis around which this meaning emerges is the Irish language, both as practice and as metapractice. In a well-known passage Synge's elderly friend in Inis Meáin relates the encounter he had with Synge's uncle years before in Dublin: he and his companions were brought to this Synge Senior's house,

“and he gave us another glass of whisky, and he gave me a book in Irish because I was going to sea, and I was able to read in the Irish.

I owe it to Mr. Synge and that book that when I came back here, after not hearing a word of Irish for thirty years, I had as good Irish, or maybe better Irish, than any person on the island.”

I could see all through his talk that the sense of superiority which his scholarship in this little-known language gave him above the ordinary seaman, had influenced his whole personality and been the central interest of his life. (AI 99)

Soon after, Synge and his interlocutor turn to the social presence of the Irish language:

I asked him what he thought about the future of the language on these islands.

“It can never die out,” said he, “because there's no family in the place can live without a bit of field for potatoes, and they have only the Irish words for all that they do in the fields. They sail their new boats—their hookers—in English, but they sail a curagh oftener in Irish, and in the fields they have the Irish alone. It can never die out, and when the people begin to see it fallen very low, it will rise up again like the phoenix from its own ashes.” (AI 101–02)

Elsewhere, Synge attends to aspects of colonial economic relations—for example, by discussing land evictions—but here he characterizes the man's thinking as “medieval” (presumably meaning “weak,” Duns Scotus notwithstanding). His assessment here, as in other instances, is telic, unforgiving. Yet the old man recognizes the political economy of language during the colonial period: social distance is indexed and reproduced through the language one speaks,

through linguistic practice. Political economy and cultural meanings are intricately bound up with one another.

Spending time with a younger boy in Inis Meáin, Synge describes how when reading, the boy vacillates between an Irish-language text and facing-page translation in English:

In most of the stories we read, where the English and Irish are printed side by side, I see him looking across to the English in passages that are a little obscure, though he is indignant if I say that he knows English better than Irish. Probably he knows the local Irish better than English, and printed English better than printed Irish, as the latter has frequent dialectic forms he does not know.

(AI 84–85)

Remarkably, this vacillation could also represent Synge's relationship with the productive tension between Irish and English. He continues:

A few days ago, when he was reading a folk-tale from Douglas Hyde's *Beside the Fire*, something caught his eye in the translation.

"There's a mistake in the English," he said after a moment's hesitation; "he's put 'gold chair' instead of 'golden chair.'"

I pointed out that we speak of gold watches and gold pins.

"And why wouldn't we?" he said; 'but 'golden chair' would be much nicer."

It is curious to see how his rudimentary culture has given him the beginning of a critical spirit that occupies itself with the form of language as well as with ideas.

(AI 85)

This last sentence could apply equally to Synge, of course; for him it is like looking in a mirror—if that mirror were one that reflected contrast.

Most pronounced is Synge's relationship with Michael, his friend from Inis Meáin who has since moved to Galway town seeking work. Michael wrote to Synge in both Irish and in English, and while Synge's knowledge of formal written Irish, or *Gaeilge leabhar* or "book Irish" may have been secure, Michael's ability to write it may have been less so.⁹ Declan Kiberd has shown that a fair bit of the epistolary dialogue between Synge and Michael is about Irish itself. Consequently, it is also about both of them negotiating their positions relative to each other and relative to the politics of language use in Aran at the time. Both sense that the Irish language is compositional to their identities, but they sense this about the practice of the language, not its venerated, valorized, and effete form. Michael writes,

Dear John Synge—I am for a long time expecting a letter from you and I think you are forgetting this island altogether. . . . Tell me are you learning Irish since

9. Declan Kiberd, *Synge and the Irish Language* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979). Notably, Synge changed the names of many of his contacts from Aran.

you went. We have a branch of the Gaelic League here now and the people is going on well with the Irish and reading.

I will write the next letter in Irish to you. Tell me will you come to see us next year and if you will you'll write a letter before you. All your loving friends is well in health.—*Mise do chara go buan.* (AI 56–57)

Immediately after that, Synge writes:

Another boy I sent some baits to has written to me also, beginning his letter in Irish and ending it in English:

Dear John,—I got your letter four days ago, and there was pride and joy on me because it was written in Irish, and a fine, good pleasant letter it was. . . . Write soon and let you write in Irish, if you don't I won't look on it. (AI 57)

We can read these exchanges now as evidence not of an “ancient primitive Gaelic society,” but as evidence of a community where social identities were produced within the historical tension that obtained between Irish and English. I believe that it is these tensions and these metapragmatic moments that most animate the text. They make manifest agents assessing, asking for correspondence, recognizing something of themselves in others. The dialogic, unlike the dialectic, neither negates nor consumes, but like dialectic, it is productive.

Tim Robinson has lamented the layers of interpretation to which the Aran Islands have been subjected.¹⁰ Yet, the first people who hewed a tree there more than five thousand years ago simultaneously began the interpretation and formation of Aran. For Synge, Aran serves as a touchstone to test the quality of his modern romantic sensibilities; but his text reflects a more complex experience. And some of Synge's other descriptions—his ethnography—have ongoing contemporary resonance, particularly the practices he describes: the *béaloideas* or folklore; the systems of local naming; the fishing—(*comórtas iascaireachta* or fishing competitions) that still take place off cliffs in Inis Mór; the rowing in currachs, again seen in present-day competitions, during the Patrún festival each summer; the acts of walking alongside and talking with friends, which are not insignificant cultural practices in Aran or elsewhere; the ever-emergent occlusion of Gaelige by Béarla in Cill Rónáin, for Synge's Revivalist contemporaries a diagramming model for the whole of Ireland; and the “tourist husbandry” of the Gaeltacht by contemporary planners who unconsciously echo Synge, which attracts so many out to view this eclipse. While some of the current iterations of these practices may seem replicas of Synge's primitivism, such an interpretation would have to be predicated upon an “authentic, essential”

10. Tim Robinson, “Place/Person/Book: Synge's *The Aran Islands*,” in J.M. Synge, *The Aran Islands* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. xvii.

meaning that Synge necessarily missed. But if we think of Synge as artist rather than index, even sensitive index, we might see the culture he collaboratively produces and reproduces in our very reading of his text.

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Shawn Gillen
Synge's *The Aran Islands*
and Irish Creative Nonfiction

Synge's self-described "first serious work"¹ shares many characteristics with what we today call creative nonfiction—a loosely defined, popular, and controversial genre that extends to first-person travel accounts, memoir, spiritual autobiography, literary journalism, and more. However hard it may be to define creative nonfiction, most theorists agree that it often draws on techniques employed in other literary forms: dialogue, a dramatic storyline, and reportage, for instance. Lee Gutkind has said that "creative nonfiction heightens the whole concept and idea of essay writing. It allows a writer to employ the diligence of a reporter, the shifting voices and viewpoints of a novelist, the refined wordplay of a poet and the analytical modes of the essayist."² These words well describe Synge's at-times-inscrutable narrative maneuvers in *The Aran Islands*, a book that should be read as an early masterpiece of the genre. A pastiche of lyricism, reportage, precise description, and dramatic vignettes rendered in journalistic detail, *The Aran Islands* stands near the front of an evolving Irish nonfiction tradition.³

1. Synge wrote to Leon Brodzky on 12 December 1907, "I look on the 'Aran Islands' as my first serious piece of work—it was written before any of the plays. In writing out the talks of the people and their stories in this book—and in a certain number of articles on Wicklow Peasantry which I have not yet collected—I learned to write the peasant *dialect* and *dialogue* which I use in my plays." *Collected Letters of John Millington Synge, Vol. II: 1907–1909*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 103.

2. Lee Gutkind, 2007. "What is Creative Nonfiction?" *Creative Nonfiction*, 2007. <http://www.creativenonfiction.org/thejournal/whatisconf.htm> For more detailed discussion of what creative nonfiction is and for examples of its practice, see also: Lee Gutkind, *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); Bill Roorbach, *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: The Art of Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Philip Gerard, *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Writing Stories of Real Life* (Cincinnati: Story Press, 1996).

3. There is no readily available anthology of Irish essays suitable for classroom use, but Irish memoir has flourished in recent years, helped along by the enormous popular success of Frank