

This is *Whose* Story?
A Re-evaluation of John Millington Synge's Primitivism in *The Aran Islands*

Geoffrey Rayburn

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Signed by the final examining committee:

<u>Jill Didur</u>	Chair
<u>Andre Furlani</u>	Examiner
<u>Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin</u>	Examiner
<u>Michael Kenneally</u>	Supervisor

Approved by _____
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Dean of Faculty

26 November 2010

Date

Abstract

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This thesis considers how the Anglo-Irish writer John Millington Synge idealizes primitive life in his seminal work and travelogue, *The Aran Islands*. I discuss how Synge's representation of the Aran Islands – three islands off the west coast of Ireland, widely considered a repository of ancient Irish culture – finds its model in both a pastoral conception of primitive cultures found in classical and Revivalist literature, and in the evolutionist thinking of late nineteenth century anthropology. The result is a hybrid cultural representation of a specific Irish culture area that at once idealizes the primitive, and at the same time raises alarms to its inconsistency. Chapter one discusses Aran primitivism – or, the idealization of the primitive life Synge envisioned on the islands – as a genre of literature as well as a practice of anthropology, in a summation of the historical, literary, scientific and political influences behind Synge's propensity to empathize with the Aran community's pre-modern sociocultural values. I also show how Synge's primitivism has influenced other representations of Aran written by islanders themselves. In chapter two, my analysis of *The Aran Islands* illustrates how weather and gender determine Synge's representation of Aran as either a *pastoral* culture area of community and environmental congeniality, or as what I call a *prototypical* culture area where the savage elements of Aran life are depicted. In chapter three, I argue that

Synge's primitivism ultimately begins to unravel when he transcribes the islanders' stories and letters into *The Aran Islands*, thereby giving the islanders opportunities to negotiate the production of their own culture with the Revivalist author.

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For Mike Bullistron

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Introduction

The renowned Anglo-Irish writer John Millington Synge started his career with a small travelogue called *The Aran Islands*. It was a reflection on the flora, fauna, and people of the three islands that lay off the western coast of Ireland. Synge's objective in writing the travelogue was to record the “primitive” way of life on the islands, and to give “a direct account” of that which he saw there, “and of what I met with among them, inventing nothing, and changing nothing that is essential” (*TAI* 3). Resulting is a collection of anecdotes, observations, tales, and treatments of a noble – and dissipating – Irish pre-civilization. *The Aran Islands* would come to inspire the corpus of Synge's later and more highly-regarded plays, and would prove to have an outstanding impact on Irish literature in general.

As a focus of study in Irish literature, Synge's romance with primitive society in *The Aran Islands* is hardly new ground. In fact, Synge's *primitivism* – what Sinead Mattar defines succinctly as “the idealization of the primitive” (Mattar 4) – tends to be the primary concern of almost every in-depth analysis of *The Aran Islands* I have encountered. There is good reason behind this. *The Aran Islands* remains a problematic text for scholars, primarily because it is multidisciplinary in its scope, well-seeped in the literary, anthropological, and political traditions of its author's time. Especially now that Synge studies have been so refined, one must consider the wide range of literary *and* scientific influences behind Synge's primitivism when conducting any serious analysis of *The Aran Islands*. Twenty-first century scholarship in particular has opened new doors to

Synge's work by focusing on the specific role anthropology has played in his representation of the Aran Islands, uncovering new and exciting problems in literary interpretation. This thesis, too, takes Synge's primitivism as its object of study, but I depart from trends in previous analyses of *The Aran Islands* by ultimately arguing that Synge eventually begins to reject his own primitivism. I do so by investigating those moments in the text where Synge focuses-in on the “modern” aspects of Aran life, something that scholarship has yet to do thoroughly.

The Aran Islands are three islands off the West coast of Ireland, approximately thirty-five nautical miles west of Galway city. The biggest island is nine-by-two miles in size and is called *Inis Mór*, which means “The Big Island” in Irish (Synge calls this island “Aranmore.” It is also anglicized as “Inishmore”); the middle-sized island is called *Inis Meáin*, (again, Synge anglicizes this as “Inishmaan”); and the smallest island is called *Inis Oírr* (“Inisheer”). At the time of Synge's arrival in 1898, fishing and tourism were the primary industries of Aran. Synge complains that Inis Mór had “been much changed by the fishing industry”, so much so that the industry had robbed the island of its primitive character. “The other islands are more primitive, but even on them many changes are being made...” (*TAI* 3). Today, tourism is the mainstay of the islands' economy. Inis Mór's population of roughly one-thousand will easily double at the height of the tourist season. Most tourists come for the ancient forts that speckle the islands, for a look at a thatched cottage, and to take in the treeless landscapes that are quartered-off from coast-to-coast with limestone fences – a sight that is, for those who know it, Aran's

unmistakable trademark. The islanders accommodate the tourists' insatiable need to experience “traditional Ireland” by providing pony-trap rides, Irish music, tours of church ruins, and stores of the cable-knit sweaters known as “the Aran sweater.” The nucleus of Aran's culture industry is the idea that life here has not changed for hundreds of years – the same sentiment that Synge himself was so eager to promote.

The portrayal of Aran as a primitive “culture area” (what Erickson defines as “a geographical area associated with a culture”) started long before Synge's arrival on the islands in 1898 (Erickson 165). Academics have been drawn to the islands since the late eighteenth century, starting roughly with T.J. Westropp's visit and consequent work, *Notes on Connaught and Clare, especially the Aran Islands and Sligo* (1770). Antiquarians continued to make pilgrimages to Aran into the first half of the nineteenth century, as did John Donovan as a representative of the Ordnance Survey, a British colonial power structure that compiled extensive philological accounts of the lives and traditions of western communities (Robinson *Pilgrimage* 15). Martin Harvey's report on Aran life, entitled *The Aran Islands*, was published in 1857 for the British Association; according to Nicola Gordon Brown, it was a document that “provided the sort of structured search for the vernacular which artists, archaeologists and historians would increasingly favour” (qtd. in Sisson 58). British antiquarians, philologists, and archaeologists, and anthropologists increasingly took interest in the primitive culture of the islands, and started visiting the islands in greater numbers. As late as the 1890s, A.C. Haddon and C.R. Browne “set up an Anthropomorphic Laboratory” on the islands

(Robinson *Labyrinth* 182). These early ethnographers produced numerous ethnographic and phrenological records of the islands, measuring islander skulls and facial structures with tape measures, while observing things like the drinking habits and the “sexual passions” of the community (Robinson *Labyrinth* 183). Meanwhile, the islanders were active, though largely unacknowledged organizers of these academic sojourns, assisting in one way or another in the production of these anthropological texts. In some cases islanders acted as guides, teachers, or cultural informants to these visitors. “After the 1850s,” writes Elaine Sisson, “trips began with increasing regularity as local fishermen rowed boatloads of historians, archaeologists, philologists and antiquarians to and from the islands” (58). By the middle of the nineteenth century, the development of Aran's tourist industry, and the production-consumption nexus of its primitive culture, was well under way.

What started as a philologist's treasure-trove eventually evolved into a renaissance site for Irish arts, anthropology, and letters. While it kept its strong allure for colonial power structures that sought to sustain an objective – and subordinating – study of agrarian life in the West of Ireland, Aran was being more frequently romanced by Irish folklorists, politicians, intellectuals and artists as a living repository of ancient Ireland, one that would inform a nationalist ideology of independence. In the 1870s, Sir William Wilde (father of the Irish writer Oscar Wilde) and Jeremiah Curtin visited Aran in order to examine “issues of ethnicity and folkloric culture rather than sites of archeological significance. [Their] works,” continues Sisson, “anticipated the mythic significance the

islands would hold for the Revivalist movements of the next few decades” (58). One of the primary draws for these nation-conscious tourists was Aran's maintenance of the Irish (Gaelic) language. Aran was – and is still – one of the bastions of the Irish language, forming, in John Wilson Foster's words, “the rich rim of the Gaeltacht”, or Irish-speaking area of Ireland (95). Foreign academics, nationalist politicians, and advocates of the revival of the Irish language also turned their eyes to Aran's shores. In 1880, the German philologist and linguist Heinrich Zimmer visited Inis Mór, where he tendered his support for the islanders during a land war against British occupiers (Robinson *Labyrinth* 174). The Irish politician Patrick Pearse made a visit to the islands in 1898 (the same year Synge did), proclaiming that the Irish-speaking Aran, which had survived Ireland's rabid anglicization, would be “a lantern of learning for the Gaels of Ireland once again, as it was in the old days” (qtd. in Robinson *Labyrinth* 176-177).¹ Meanwhile, several fictional works were being produced with the Aran Islands as their setting. The most important of these pre-twentieth century works was Emily Lawless' novel *Grania: The Story of an Island* (1892). Set on Inis Meáin, *Grania* is about a woman's survival in a

¹ In a moment of irony, one islander from Inis Mór sums up just how pure the islanders' knowledge of Irish was compared to that of the scholars who visited them. “I have seen Frenchmen, and Danes, and Germans, and there does be a power of Irish books along with them, and they reading them better than ourselves. Believe me there are few rich men now in the world who are not studying the Gaelic.” (*TAI* 15).

primitive community. The protagonist “Grania”, like her Anglo-Irish author, is considered foreign by her fellow islanders (though she was born and raised on Inis Meáin, Grania's mother was Spanish). Torn between her desire for belonging and for self-autonomy, Grania finally rejects integration into the community by refusing to marry an islander. In the novel, Lawless explores ambiguous paradigms of self/other, woman/man, Anglo-Irish/Gaelic-Irish, islander/mainlander, and primitive/cosmopolitan. In many ways the novel reflects Lawless' own ambivalence towards the nascent Irish state: though she desired full recognition of Irish citizenship, the unionist and protestant Lawless felt alienated by the predominantly Catholic Gaelic-Irish country in which she lived.²

Yet of all the culture-seekers that courted Aran's shores it was the Anglo-Irish Revivalists that would largely come to define the Irish primitivism with which I am here

² For a broader view of the cultural contexts in which Emily Lawless was writing, see, Calahan, James M. *Double visions: Women and Men in Modern and Contemporary Irish Fiction*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999. For an in-depth look at the interplay of identity, gender, and geography in Lawless' writing see, Hansson, Heidi. *Emily Lawless 1845 – 1913: Writing the Interspace*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2007; and, Belanger, Jacqueline. “The Desire of the West: The Aran Islands and Irish Identity in *Grania*”, in *Ireland in the Nineteenth Century: Regional Identity*, Glen Hooper and Leon Litvack, eds. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000. Pp. 95 – 107.

concerned. Most Anglo-Irish Revivalists descended from the earlier “Ascendancy”, an elite protestant group “who enjoyed access to political power in Ireland during the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (Cairns 167). Painfully aware of their dwindling social status in a revolutionizing Ireland, Revivalists promoted independence from Britain as they sought to consolidate their position within the nascent nation through art production. In their mission to rescue Aran culture from what William Butler Yeats called the “filthy modern tide” of the industrial age, Revivalists saw themselves as protectors of the purity of Irish culture in the face of an industrial and imperialistic Britain (Nolan 160). The Revival’s self-appointed guardianship of Aran – even with its nationalist implications – agitated Catholic nationalists who criticized Anglo-Irish primitivism as being reminiscent of British elitism (as will be explained in the first chapter, Catholic nationalists would hold to their own “hard primitivist” beliefs regarding the peasantry).³ Nevertheless, the Revival's primitivist portrayals of renowned hinterland

³ A further explanation of Irish nationalism in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century is given in chapter one to better distinguish the two generalized camps of the Anglo-Irish Revival and the Catholic Nationalists. In brief, both movements were *nationalist* in that each promoted Irish independence from Britain, even at times suffering in uneasy alliance. Where the Anglo-Irish envisioned themselves as the cultural administrators of and in a new Ireland, however, the Catholic Nationalists saw this privilege as belonging to the burgeoning Catholic bourgeoisie that made up their

enclaves such as the Aran Islands – alongside a broader history of previous anthropological, antiquarian, and folkloric accounts – organized and concentrated national consciousness by depicting these communities as repositories of an authentic, *pure* Irish culture. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Irish dreams of independence from Britain coalesced into a nascent Irish state. The Revivalist's conception of a primitive culture area, far from being jettisoned from public discourse, had become part of a nationalist ideology of independence.

The three most prominent writers of the Revival would all visit the Aran Islands, and all three would attempt to use its primitive society as a template on which to produce their art. Yeats would write (and give up) his mystical novel *The Speckled Bird*, the original draft of which was to be set on Aran (R.F. Foster 174-175). Augusta Gregory would base much of her *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920) on the folklore she collected from her sojourns to Aran (Robinson *Labyrinth* 179). On a visit to the islands in May 1898, while gathering material for her compendium, an agitated Gregory suggests the kinds of clashes occurring over who had the rights to represent the fragile primitiveness of the islands, even amongst the alliances within the Revival.

I was staying there, gathering folklore, talking to the people, and felt quite angry

own numbers. (In both camps, the peasant class was often esteemed as the backbone or heart of the Irish nation, but seldom as its mouthpiece.) For an in-depth history of the Catholic Nationalism's relationship with the Ascendancy, see Cairns 22 – 41.

when I passed another outsider walking here and there, talking also to the people.

I was jealous of not being alone on the island among the fishers and sea-weed gatherers. I did not speak to the stranger, nor was he inclined to speak to me;

he also looked on me as an intruder. I only heard his name (qtd. in Sisson 59).

The stranger was Synge, who was beginning his research for his travelogue; and it would be primarily his writing that would shape Irish primitivism in the modern era.

A definition of primitivism has already been given in this introduction to the recent history of the Aran Islands, which is, in a sense, a history of Irish primitivism in a nutshell. A deeper investigation of the term is necessary, however, in order to thoroughly analyze the many contexts in which *The Aran Islands* is situated. In chapter one, I show how deeply Aran culture has been impacted by primitivist genres by exploring the works of two writers native to the Aran Islands, Liam O'Flaherty and Máirtín Ó Direáin, and show how these authors have been influenced by Synge's primitivism. In light of these representations of island life, I promote the idea of Aran primitivism as a *gestalt*, or an epochal configuration of a specific peasant culture that still influences our views on island life (Erickson 170). Section 1.1 looks at the literary influences behind this *gestalt*. With a focus on the literary form of the pastoral, I discuss the development of Irish literature into the twentieth century, with a particular emphasis on the “soft primitivism” of Anglo-Irish Revivalist literature. In section 1.2, I turn to the other parent of Aran primitivism, this being anthropology. Here, I follow Sinead Mattar's two categories of “romantic primitivism” and “modernist primitivism,” which further diversify

representations of the Aran Islands. For the purposes of clarity, I finally collapse the influences behind Irish primitivism into two final categories: a *pastoral* conception of primitive culture, which has close – but not closed – relations to the salvage project of the Anglo-Irish literary Revival; and a *prototypical* conception of primitive culture, which relies on an anthropological perspective of primitive man as an earlier, more impulsive version of ourselves. My purpose in establishing these two categories is to conduct a cleaner and more in-depth analysis of *The Aran Islands* in the proceeding chapters.

Far from being a uniformed representation of an uncivilized, ennobled society, *The Aran Islands* continues to be a textual chimera that a good number of critical analyses, including the one I make in chapter two, are trying to re-position. Synge's primitivism is of such complexity that it refuses any stereotypical primitivist representation of Aran. There are no neanderthals rollicking in caves, no peasants singing folk-songs while they till rich soils, no pagans flashing in the mist; and, in the end, there are no clear archetypes or stereotypes by which we normally register primitive life in literature. Instead we are presented with a collage of island experiences, wrought from the uneasy history of literary and scientific attention Aran had received since the eighteenth century. In a recent trend established predominantly by the critics Sinead Mattar and Gregory Castle, I continue to disinter those moments in the text where anthropology plays a fundamental role in Synge's primitivist perspective on Aran life. By the end of chapter two, I show how *The Aran Islands* consistently alternates between the aforementioned pastoral and prototypical conceptions of primitive life, to give us a

hybrid primitivism that does not settle easily with a purely Revivalist or nationalist ideology behind pastoral representation.

Threaded through the *The Aran Islands* are moments, however, where Synge surprises the reader with anecdotes or observations that directly challenge the illusion of primitive life. Undoubtedly, Synge insists on the primitive infrastructure of Aran; but he also hints that the spinning wheels, funeral “keenings” and cable-knit sweaters exist within a context of railways, government bureaucracies, and, as I focus on in detail in this chapter, the global phenomena of the postal system. Synge does not tell *this* story of Aran outright—instead, he gets an islander to tell it for him. Chapter three finds the indigenous island voice from what Joep Leerssen – paraphrasing Gérard Genette – calls the “paratext” of a literary artefact: a kind of feedback that occurs in cultural transmissions from Ireland’s West to East (7). By indigenous voice, I mean the literal voice of an island native who is personally subject to island cultural practices. I argue that the indigenous voices found in the paratext of *The Aran Islands* disrupt the pastoral/prototypical formula of Synge's primitivism by reconfiguring Aran as a progressive cultural space that interacts with, rather than distances itself from, the national life of Ireland. The examples I look at are letters written by Synge’s island confidant and Irish teacher, which are included verbatim in *The Aran Islands*. These epistolary discourses, far from being “frozen” exhibits in a “museum” of primitive culture (Frawley 87), actively re-negotiate the production of culture with the Revivalist literary authority. These small but unquestionably significant spaces have not yet

received full attention in scholarship. In chapter three, I give these spaces this much needed attention, and show how they breach Synge's primitive world by implying how self- and nation-conscious Aran society is becoming.

My interest in this project stems primarily from the intermittent two years I spent on Inis Mór between 2001 and 2004. The idea that Aran was a primitive culture area was still very palpable when I was there six years ago, as, I presume, it still is. Over one-hundred years since his first visit, Synge has become very much part of island life and culture: one reads him in the local souvenir shops, hears him in island anecdotes and stories, sees him in plays performed in the local community centre. I would go so far as to say that the culture industry of Aran is largely crafted around the primitive world (or anti-primitive world, as is sometimes the case) portrayed in *The Aran Islands*. But as this thesis demonstrates, this culture area is a complex space with many different authors, some desperate to find the primitive, others eager to escape it.

Chapter 1

What is Aran Primitivism?

Only other men's nostalgias offend.
-Raymond Williams (12)

The notion of primitive society posits an unavoidable anachronism that troubles primitivist texts: if these people are primitive, aeons removed from our own “civilized” time and place, how can we now be presiding amongst them? For the anthropologist Adam Kuper, this paradox points the way to the myth of primitive society, a construct that reflects our own desires for a more simplistic, pre-lapsarian mode of existence that is the antithesis of our own; a society that, despite its palpability, “does not and never has existed” (8). The “essential” part of Aran life that Synge seeks to quarantine and catalogue is a self-projection that, in the words of Sinéad Mattar, “has little to do with the 'realities' of savage existence” and all to do with Synge's imagination (3). Primitivism becomes, then, the forum through which we re-organize a people to fit personal and political paradigms that are useful to us. At its mildest, primitivism is a naïve and perhaps beautiful process of nostalgia; at its worst, it's the subordination, often racial, of the *Other*, to what ends history continues to demonstrate.

J.A. Cuddon defines *primitivism* as “a nostalgia for a primitive (or pre-civilized) way of life” (697). Mattar's definition is more succinct, stating that primitivism is “the idealization of the primitive,” a process that is “more reflective of the person or society doing the idealizing than it is of the people or culture being idealized” (3). Within the

context of Ireland, Irish primitivism concentrates on the peasants who populate the West of Ireland. The Aran peasantry – the islanders – are especially relevant in studies of Irish primitivism because of the long-standing romantic perception that the Aran Islands are geographically removed from the rest of Ireland, and thus harbour a unique monoculture. This chapter investigates the primitivism within the context of those authors, both foreign and native, who have represented the Aran Islands in their works.

Coming to terms with an “Aran primitivism” is necessary because *The Aran Islands* is so often called a primitivist work (Castle; Gibbons; Gilmartin; Fleming; Frawley; Mattar; McCourt) that the term, yielding slightly different meanings with each perspective, needs further elucidation. The primitive's manifestation in Irish literature ushers in several representations of the primitive that are sometimes at-odds with one another, making Irish primitivism a hybrid concept that idealizes its peasant or landscape subject in various ways. In response to this plurality, scholarship has attempted to find patterns of representation in Irish literature and label them under different categories of primitivism. Luke Gibbons suggests that early modernist Irish literature falls into two categories of “hard primitivism” and “soft primitivism,” categories that differentiate between the primitivism of the Revival and that of Catholic nationalists. John McCourt similarly classifies two dogmas by which the peasant is represented in modern Irish literature, “Celtic primitivism” and “Catholic primitivism,” the former being associated with paganism (as manifested within the works of the Anglo-Irish Revival), the latter with Catholic nationalism (20). Mattar organizes a different diptych of Irish

primitivisms, finding Synge's "Romantic primitivism" and "Modernist primitivism" within currents of anthropological thought. Mattar's categories are more complex as they do not lend easily to particular literary or political movements in Ireland; instead, they explain a paradigm shift that occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century, roughly when Charles Darwin's theory of evolution gave cause to re-evaluate accepted beliefs regarding the diffusion and evolution of peasant cultures in the modern epoch.

The following chapter is not a history of Irish primitivism as much as it is a brief summation of its disparate character, of its tendency to antagonize essentialist assumptions about the Irish peasantry rather than confirm them, and finally, of its awkward positioning within Synge's mythologizing of the Aran Islands. I demonstrate below that Synge's multi-layered primitivism has become deeply integrated into Aran's literary mythos, to be emulated by writers native to Aran, such as Liam O'Flaherty and Máirtín Ó Direáin. In light of the influence Synge has had on the production of Aran culture, I have found it helpful to recast Synge's primitivism into two new categories that more specifically reflect the play between a literary conception of primitive culture and an anthropological conception of primitive culture. I call these categories *pastoral* culture and *prototypical* culture. My reasoning behind this re-organization of concepts is to calibrate the analysis I make of *The Aran Islands* in chapters two and three, by insisting on the literary and anthropological heterogeneity of Aran primitivism.

1.1 The Pastoral Aran

Luke Gibbons gives us two different models of primitivism by which to trace the progress of Irish literature from the mid-nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. “Hard primitivism” refers to the strategy by which Catholic nationalists extolled the “production ethic” of the peasant class that would play “a crucial role in the transition from feudalism to capitalism” (Gibbons 29). The primary subject of the Catholic nationalist writer was the tenant farmer who made up the most prominent social class in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century (Cairns 43). The social network of the nineteenth century tenant farmer, what David Cairns and Shaun Richards refer to as “familism,” was a patriarchal family system, mediated by the Catholic church, in which farm land was passed down from father to son (42). “Familism,” particularly in regards to its prompting by the church, also played a role in mediating sexual relationships by zealously encouraging pre-marital chastity and post-marital monogamy – lest claims to land fall into unintended hands (Cairns 42). Alternatively, “soft primitivism” promoted an “ethic of consumption” favoured by Anglo-Irish Revivalists (Gibbons 29). In contrast to the production ethic of hard primitivism, soft primitivism evoked a bygone pagan world of non-conformist societies, with a strategic emphasis on romantic, rather than regulated, sexuality.

Regardless of literary alliance, writers at the turn of the century had to make some reference to the Catholic church “if they were to forge a sentimental connection with the people-nation” who were predominantly Catholic (Cairns 63). Revivalists often depicted

peasant society as being only superficially Christian; at their core, these pagan societies were free of the social constrictions levied by the Catholic church. Cairns and Richards continue, stating, “whether portrayed as image of pagan vitality or Catholic morality the figure of the peasant continued to dominate the literary terrain, and the struggle for control of the connotations of the peasant marks distinctly the divergent views of the Ireland by the conflicting factions” (85). For “hard primitivists”, plays like John Denvir's *Life Story of an Old Rebel*, and Terence's *Fireside: or The Irish Peasant at Home*, with their consistent references to Catholic iconography and familism, celebrated the sentimental connections the peasant had to the Catholic church and to the farm (85). These catholic nationalists would take a negative view of the Revival's “soft primitivism.” The nationalist Daniel Corkery's study of Synge's work epitomizes the sentiments of Catholic nationalism, while he chastizes the “exoticism” of the Revival.

If one approaches 'Celtic Revival' poetry as an exotic, then one is in a mood to appreciate its subtle rhythms, and its quiet tones; but if one continues to live within the Irish seas, traveling the roads of the land, then the white-walled houses, the farming life, the hill top chapel, the memorial cross above some peasant's grave – memorable only because he died for his country – impressing themselves as the living pieties of life must impress themselves, upon the imagination, growing into it, dominating it, all this poetry becomes after a time little else than an impertinence. (qtd. in Brown 65)

The divergence of primitivisms became a matter over who had the right to represent Irish

geographic space. For Catholic nationalists, this space belonged to the specificity of “crosses” and “chapels”, that “grow into” public identity and “dominate it.” The Revival remains foreign or “exotic” to this space. In his study of the Revivalists, Edward Said comments on the depth of this project to “recover” space that was previously the jurisdiction of the British Empire.

[T]here is a pressing need for the recovery of land that, because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, is recoverable at first only through the imagination. Now if there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism it is the primacy of the geographical in it. Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of his or her colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss to an outsider of the local place, whose concrete geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. (76-7)

Though Said's observation is made of Yeats' work, this project can be easily applied to Catholic nationalists seeking to reclaim territory lost to British landlords. Under the prospects of independence, rethinking the Irish populace's relationship with the land became a primary concern for Irish writers. To belong to a country meant to belong to the landscape: “soil” and “territoriality” become, in the nomenclature of nationalism, necessary “components of citizenship” (Kuper 9). Ireland's national allegory of a Celtic David versus a Saxon Goliath positioned the peasant as a counter-ego to the Behemoth

Briton. Deepening the allegory, the peasant's language is agrarian (sling and stone), where England's is industrial (sword and shield). Rebellion promised Home Rule, which the allegory envisions as a pastoral reconciliation between the Irish and the land of their ancestors, so often portrayed by nationalists as Eden (Clifford 113).

The novelist and Aran Islands native Liam O'Flaherty would satirize the use of hard primitivism in his novel *Thy Neighbour's Wife* (1923), the second novel to be written about Aran life following Emily Lawless' *Grania*. *Thy Neighbour's Wife* is set on "Inverara", a loose pseudonym for O'Flaherty's native island of Inis Mór (Calahan 29). Tongue firmly in-cheek, O'Flaherty describes Inverara using terms of hard primitivism.

[Kilmurrage] had seven different street levels, which was a great achievement for a small town like it. The lowest level was reached by the residence of the Protestant minister, a beautiful place surrounded by trees, in a glen, and the highest level was reached by the parochial house, where Fr. O'Reilly the parish priest lived. The natives of Kilmurrage, being ninety-nine and a half percent Catholic, reasoned from this contrast that the protestant vicar was down in the hollow because he was well on the road to Hell, and the parish priest was on a height because he was well on the road to Heaven" (7).⁴

⁴ Beyond its apparent symbolism, Kilmurrage's layout has a historical reference. Hugh Campbell points out that, whereas urban churches were traditionally built to suit their environmental ambit, rural churches were often fixed gawkishly at high points in the

The town's gradations speak of a deep-seated hegemony, one that reaches into islander consciousness. O'Flaherty's satirical use of hard primitivism to describe Aran landscape alerts us to class divisions in Christian geo-cultural space (O'Flaherty's frequent description of cathedrals, country churches, houses, *shebeens*, forts, paddocks, dining rooms, and playing fields are all heavily invested with class-tensions) that usher in the complicated ambivalence the Catholic bourgeois feels regarding its proximity to the other, whether he or she be the protestant land-owner, the Anglo-Irish Revivalist, or the primitive peasant. Here, the novel's protagonist Father McMahon looks down upon the island peasants from a literal – and symbolic – height.

The scenery and the delicious calm of the day appealed to his poetic nature. His body was enjoying the warmth of the sun. When he turned the corner of the road and came in sight of the church, he felt a sudden surging of piety and zeal for his priesthood and pride in himself and his flock. The peasants were coming along the grey limestone road that stretched straight to the west, coming in a long straggling line. They walked in groups, with shoulders thrown back and arms swinging, with the loose rhythm that is peculiar to peasants. The women were dressed in black grey and white homespuns and the women in red petticoats and heavy cashmere shawls of many colours. The curate, looking at them proudly, felt that they would

landscape. “The message of such siting was unambiguous: Catholics were in the majority, and were finally free to proclaim their presence” (Campbell 289-290).

make a wonderful picture, and then he felt a wave of fervent nationalism sweep over him. Those peasants they were his, to train, to educate, to rouse, to make the vanguard of the great Catholic Republic of Ireland (29 – 30).

McMahon's egotism invites our criticism, while his self-imposed, hypocritical distancing from the peasants is hard to empathize with. Luckily, his ecumenical habit of literally positioning himself above the peasant community allows us entirely different vantage-points than the oblique horizons we see in Synge's *The Aran Islands*. McMahon is drawn towards hard primitivist views of Ireland – his voyeuristic perch atop the ancient fort of *Dun Aengus*, his cliff-top muses, his pulpit in the village church – vantages that give him control over his environment and at the same time offer him relief from his tenuous proximity to the primitive parish and the sex, drink, and money it proffers. He is a self-proclaimed Christ atop Mount *Pisgah*, surveying the carnal temptations that the devil antagonizes him with, trying not to give in to these temptations. Convinced that his “communion with God put him on a pedestal above the level of the rest of mankind”, McMahon struggles to avoid the profane, excitable vistas where peasants dwell up-close and personal, “thinking of nothing but the simple pleasures of the flesh, song and dance and laughter” (*Neighbour's Wife* 72). The title “*Thy Neighbour's Wife*” itself implies both a geographic and sexual tension, instilling a prosaic kind of voyeurism in which people are peeking at fellow members of the island community from different social grades, pulpits, and windows.

Synge, on the other hand, avoids Aran's many gradations and cliff-tops, along

with the hard primitivism these vistas warrant. Tim Robinson points out that Synge consistently overlooks geological formations that “insistently raise the question of origins, of the processes of time; it is as if [Synge] wanted to generalize his island into elemental simplicity and atemporality” (TAI xlii). Only briefly mentioning recognizable geographic sites, Synge concentrates almost exclusively on the valence of Aran’s flora, fauna, and geology – its consistent grey tones of sea, stone and mist. When he escapes these oppressive topographies, Synge frequents more intimate settings that bring him closer to the peasants: the cottage hearth, the drifting *curach*, the fussing circles of women, Pat Dirane’s fireside tales, and Michael’s handwritten letters. In further distinction from O’Flaherty’s McMahon, Synge does not evade the sexual tension spurred by the presence of island women, but invites it. Upon showing a “beautiful young woman” a photograph he had taken, Synge observes that, “[t]he complete absence of shyness or self-consciousness in most of these people gives them a peculiar charm, and when this young and beautiful woman leaned across my knees to look nearer at some photograph that pleased her, I felt more than ever the strange simplicity of the island life” (TAI 60). It is no coincidence, perhaps, that Synge is showing the woman photos he took of a “hand” or a “leg” of an islander, what he calls “fragments” of island life (TAI 61). Such intimacy with the peasant is an essential component of the Revival’s project to recover pieces of an Ireland they would have a primary role in disseminating. At the same, Gibbons notes that there is a personal objective behind Synge’s acknowledged propinquity to the islanders: “the recourse to the west in Ireland is impelled by a search

for community, a desire to escape the isolation of the self and to immerse oneself in the community of others” (13). Revivalists sought a community in which to embed themselves, to make their own. Contrary to the closed system of familism, Synge valued and celebrated the openness of Aran's peasant communities. In this sense, Synge's soft primitivism “stands as a direct antithesis to an aesthetic ideology of duty, discipline and self control” espoused by hard primitivists (Gibbons 42).

In its evocation of the highly sensual world of rural Ireland, soft primitivism inescapably finds its mode of expression in pastoral literature, so much so that the terms “pastoral” and “soft primitivism” can be seen as identical in their romancing of rural space. Pastoral is a literary form that finds its origins in Greek and Roman antiquity, particularly as represented in the poetry of the Roman poet Virgil as the “idealization of shepherd life” and the hatred of urban complexity (Cuddon 644). In pastoral representation, nature and natural landscape is idealized as pure and timeless, as well as being at “implicit or explicit contrast to the urban,” which is portrayed as profane and destructive (Gifford 2). Oona Frawley finds the influences of “Irish pastoral” – what she argues is the primary mode of expression for Yeats and Synge – as far back as the seventh century, when Virgil was “being translated into Irish” and inculcated into the Irish (Gaelic) literary tradition by Christian scribes (8). Frawley then traces the history of Irish pastoral through the medieval ages (8-34), through its tenuous relationship with English pastoral in the late Romantic era (35-48), to find intense political expression in the pens of the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival, as sponsored by the so-called father of the

Revival, Standish O'Grady (48-56), and later by Yeats, Synge, and Augusta (Lady) Gregory. In medieval Ireland, the main theme of Irish pastoral – the celebration of Ireland and the condemnation of the Eastern civilizations that threaten it – underwent a fundamental change when “the representation of nature [came] to signify a loss of culture” (14). Unlike the landscape of roaming shepherds in Roman antiquity, nature was seen by thirteenth century Irish bards as being eroded by the currents of history. Paradoxically, nature became a *culture area* with which the poet could empathize, where civilized space signified a destroyed culture area. Here, pastoral enters into the “nostalgic mode” of expression, a longing for a place and time that can no longer be recovered in the modern world (Frawley 4). The nostalgic mode would carry on into the works of the Romantic English poets, and then into the Revival—particularly in the works of Yeats, who adopts a political strategy of Anglo-Irish inclusion behind his pastoral representations.

“Yeats' poetry reflects not only the influence of Romanticism,” writes Frawley, “but also partakes of the larger Irish tradition of writing about place as a way of memorializing – and so reviving – lost culture.” Under the pen of Yeats, nostalgia becomes “a pointed political tool that allows him to recover Irish traditions eclipsed by years of colonialism” (57-58). Idealizing the west of Ireland as the natural uncivilized world while condemning modernity (particularly its urban, British character) yielded both a propensity towards national protectionism and to myth-making. In Yeats' view, the Revival had the cultural know-how to wield pastoral as a political tool, which made its

artists essential to the project of recovering Ireland's cultural self. Yeats' poem "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" illustrates a classic theme of pastoral and soft primitivist idealizing of nature's culture area, as the poet mourns the loss of the old world while desperately trying to find courage to course the new. "The woods of Arcady are dead, / And over is their antique joy; / Of old the world on dreaming fed; / Grey Truth is now her painted toy" (Yeats 1). Frawley contends that Yeats' is no simple nostalgia: "modernity has forced the poet into accepting truths about the world that utterly contradict the traditional pastoral dreamworld of the shepherd" (65). Under the burden of nostalgic desperation, however, Yeats' soft primitivism is still recalcitrant. In its husk-like insulation, the *Ancien Régime* still dwells on the far Western reaches of Irish space, to be extrapolated by Revivalists. The poem continues: "Go gather by the humming sea / Some twisted, echo-harboured shell, / And to its lips thy story tell / And they thy comforters will be... / For words alone are certain good..." It would be with a similar unheeded desperation, perhaps, that Yeats would tell Synge in 1897 to "Go to the Aran Islands. There express a life that has yet to find expression" (*TAI* xxi). Largely untouched by industrialism, alongside its unique agrarian culture, Aran would be a prime site for the pastoral impressionism of the Revival.

Native Aran writers would be more sympathetic to the pastoral registers of soft primitivism than to strokes of hard primitivism. Writing in Irish, the poet Máirtín Ó Direáin would take on the pastoral mode in his own reflections on his native island of Inis Mór. In his poem "The Western Spring" ("*An tEarrach Thiar,*" in Irish), Ó Direáin

reflects on the island of his youth in several tableaux depicting Inis Mór's past agrarian splendor.

A man throwing

A basket off his back,

And the redweed

Glistening

In sunshine

On a white shinglebank:

A lustrous sight

In the western Spring.

Women in pools

At the lowest ebb

Their petticoats tucked up,

Reflections beneath them:

Peaceful trance-vision

In the western Spring.

Languid hollow strokes

Of oars

A currach full of fish

Coming to shore

On a slow golden sea

At the end of the day;

In the western Spring. (trans. by Robinson *Pilgrimage* 177)

The focus on the traditional labours no longer toiled on Aran – seaweed collecting, *currach* fishing – conjures up a world that has passed by, only to be realized in memory. The poem is drawn taut with the passage of time, which moves with the setting of the sun, from noon to dusk. Ó Direáin begins the poem “In the mild quietness / Of the heat of the day” (trans. by Robinson *Pilgrimage* 176-177); and the poem progresses throughout the day, to “the lowest ebb” of the retreating tide, to “a slow golden sea / At the end of the day”. The sight of “languid hollow strokes” matches the “slow” pace of the sea to give the impression of a ponderous life unfamiliar with the rush of city-life. Unlike Synge's vistas, Ó Direáin's tableaux are filled with colour that make the islanders stand-out against a muted backdrop. Like Synge, Ó Direáin's voyeurism – particularly in regards to his witnessing of the women “with their petticoats tucked up” – elicits an

erotic intimacy the poet has with the community, in that he operates unnoticed within the community, despite the fact that he is distinctly foreign to that world and time. Here is the dream of soft primitivism, which Robinson tries to sustain in his translation, explaining that the Irish word *thiar* can have two meanings: “one is connected with west' and the other with 'back,' as relative position in space or time... Indeed the whole [of Ó Direáin's] book, like all possible books on Aran, could be read as a footnote to the full explication of these two simple Irish words” (176).

The categories of hard primitivism and soft primitivism can help us understand the cultural development Aran has undergone within pastoral registers of cultural production. Keeping in-tune with the Revival's project of cultural recovery, Aran representations eschew or satirize hard primitivism in favour of the nostalgic modes elicited by soft primitivism. Rather than investing interest in the social or topographic structures of the Aran Islands, portrayals of Aran have largely been invested in developing an intimacy with island society, with specific attention paid to the sensuality of the islanders, particularly the island women. These influences inscribe what I have been calling Synge's *pastoral* conception of the peasantry.

Although pastoral has had a definitive influence on *The Aran Islands* and on the native literary expressions that followed the travelogue, we now turn to the other primary influence behind Synge's conception of island life. In the following discussion, I do not mean to suggest that an “anthropological” conception of Aran can be read as distinct from a “literary” conception; as will become clear, these two fields often conflate and

inform one another. Instead my object is to temporarily separate an “anthropological” from a “literary” understanding of Aran, to better show the other major influence behind Synge's primitivism: what I call his *prototypical* conception of the Aran Islands.

1.2 The Prototypical Aran

Sinead Mattar defines two broader categories of primitivism at play in Synge's work. “Romantic primitivism” prompts “a pure vision of European society”, in which agrarian cultures are viewed as a gentle, naïve peoples, untroubled by the ennui of modern civilization (4). Aside from capturing the imagination of a European public intrigued by the exotic, the image of the “virtuous peasantry,” writes Mattar, “became inscribed in the ideology of nationalism precisely because they provided counter-images of the primitive origins of the race” (12). Opposed to the simian savages often portrayed by colonial scientists, adherers to romantic primitivism depicted the Irish peasantry as an agrarian people naturally inclined towards social harmony and peace, as well as towards sentiments in art, music, and poetry. Romantic primitivism played a crucial role in the mythologizing of the West of Ireland as the country's aesthetic and cultural foundation.

According to Mattar, romantic primitivism defined the cultural ideology of a few sociocultural groups in Irish history. The *Celticist* scholastic movement of the mid-nineteenth century promoted a positive image of the peasantry and challenged colonial stereotypes of the Irish peasant as anti-social and savage (Mattar 9). In reaction to the racist “simianization” of the Irish peasants in British anthropological texts, Celticist

folklorists, antiquarians, scholars and artists supplied “a while range of positive characteristics” that countered such pejorative stereotypes (Cairns 48). Spear-headed by the British writer Matthew Arnold, Celticist poets extolled the Irish peasantry by portraying them as the artistic, sensitive, dreamy alter-egos of the stuffy, repressed, rational Britons. For Arnold, the Irish were a “sentimental” race, “*always ready to react against the despotism of fact*” that characterized England (qtd. in Frawley 47). Arnold's essentialising of the races was by no means altruistic; for as much as Celticism celebrated Irish agrarianism, it also valued Ireland's subsidiary position to the British Empire. The Irish were uniformly what Arnold dubbed “a feminine race,” incapable of autonomy in a modernizing, masculine world (Cairns 47). The Irish could not protect their own sublime interests by nature of being set apart from the stuffy but necessary pragmatics of the epoch. Celticism's brand of romantic primitivism had an imperial periphery that justified British occupation, and in this way it diminished the peasantry's political autonomy.

Romantic primitivism would also come to influence the later Anglo-Irish Literary Revival. “By the mid [nineteenth] century,” writes Mattar, “the very survival of the Anglo-Irish as a class seemed to depend upon the motivating strength of romantic primitivism” (14). Most Anglo-Irish Revivalists emerged from a socio-cultural group referred to as the Ascendancy: aristocratic protestants who immigrated to Ireland from England in the late 17th century. “[F]rom the 1860s on,” writes Yeats' biographer R.F. Foster, “a sense of cultural and social marginalization and insecurity haunted the Irish Protestant universe, as the new world of self-confident Catholic democracy took over

Irish public life” (5). With Irish independence looming, the post-ascendancy Anglo-Irish saw themselves in a precarious position: if Ireland were to free itself of British occupation, the Anglo-Irish place in the social hegemony would be compromised by an almost exclusively Catholic, Gaelic-Irish population. For Anglo-Irish writers, primitivism would be the chief means of inscribing the Anglo-Irish subject into a national discourse that they would otherwise be excluded from (Cairns 66).

The Anglo-Irish Literary Revival focused on peasant folklore, mysticism, superstition, language and dialect (in both Irish and English), and other subjects that recalled Ireland's ancient Celtic past. Revivalist leaders like O'Grady, Yeats, and Synge were eager to position themselves as Irish cultural authorities with full access to Irish culture (Cairns 66-69). In an anthropological sense, Revivalists saw themselves as what the anthropologist James Clifford refers to as “custodians of an essence” – the curators, recorders, and re-inventors of the artifacts of primitive cultures (*Writing Culture* 112). By learning Irish (J.M. Synge), cataloging Celtic myths (Lady Gregory, Standish O'Grady), and establishing an Irish literary canon (W.B. Yeats), the Revivalists would play such a primary role in Ireland's cultural production that their estrangement from the Irish nation would be inconceivable. Gibbons' soft-primitivism, then, grouped within Mattar's broader notion of romantic primitivism, both expound the pastoral project of the Revival: with peasant culture threatened by modernity, it would be up to the Revivalists to save it—or, if this proved impossible, to re-create it, and thus secure their place within the Irish people-nation.

Thus far, I have been discussing three different modes of primitivism, all of which share a similar theme: the idealization of a subject as a passive, *pastoral* victim of history. Taking a different perspective, Mattar finds Synge's primitivism in a new register of expression that offers new interpretations of Revivalist texts like *The Aran Islands*. Rejecting the idea that Synge's primitivism is solely a romantic, pastoral, or “soft” idealization of Irish pre-civilization, Mattar argues that, despite soft-primitivist inclinations that coincide with the Revival's, Synge conceives of the West of Ireland as being, at its core, violent and capricious. The islanders are stoic in their determination to survive in such a place, and in doing so have developed a social psychology that is particular to them, in that it has largely determined by the harshness of their environment. In describing the islands, Synge will again and again turn to the language of anthropology in an attempt to divorce his subject from Irish pastoral tropes. Mattar sees this as Synge's propensity towards “modernist primitivism”, an idealization of the primitive that does not coincide with literary categories of hard or soft primitivism, but takes on a naturalist's view of primitive life.

Mattar describes *The Aran Islands* as “anti-Celticist” in such a way as to “re-inscribe anthropological notions of evolutionary progress into Irish public discourse” (Mattar 134). In other words, Synge's travelogue introduces a pseudo-scientific language by which *literary* writers could represent primitive life in Ireland, an approach that covered relatively new ground in Irish literature.

'The discontent of the civilized with civilization' leads to primitivisms in which

the positive outreach to a primitive sphere is motivated by a negative recoil from the present, with the primitive providing a monitory counter-image to the horrors of 'nowadays'. But the fundamental difference between romantic and modernist literary primitivism is that the modernist writer moves towards this counter-image through the lens of comparative science. (4)

Accepting “the scientific fact of evolution from homogeneity to heterogeneity on an organic, a psychological, a social, a personal, and a national level,” Synge introduces a evolutionary current to a literary terrain otherwise dominated by fly-in-amber projections of prelapsarian Irish life (153). In this regard, Synge imports the latest trends in European anthropology to a nation of soft primitivist thinkers wary of scientific objectivity, or Catholic hard primitivist thinkers hostile towards evolutionism, not to mention cultural outsiders. Without fully denying pastoral, Synge starts to interrogate it by bringing it alongside his evolutionist's depiction of the West of Ireland. At points, his pastoral view of Aran and his “anthropologist's” view of Aran will either intertwine or collide.

Synge's interests in anthropology blossomed in the scholastic career of his youth while reading the anthropologist Charles Darwin (*The Origin of Species* – 1859) and the evolutionary philosopher Herbert Spencer (*Principles of Sociology* – 1876), “who prepared him to be amenable to socio-cultural evolutionism” (Mattar 154). After reading the cross-culture mythological surveys of James Frazer (*The Golden Bough* – 1890), Synge “could not describe his conversion to evolutionism without doing so in terms of

the particular primitive world emergent from [these writers'] works” (Mattar 154). The political impetus behind the *The Aran Islands* was not to subscribe to the hard or soft primitivism of pastoral nostalgia, Mattar goes on to say, but to the primitivism of “Celtology”: an anthropology of the Celtic peoples epitomized by the European writers Anatole le Braz (*Au Pays des Pardons* – 1894) and Henri d’Arbois de Jubainville (*Le Cycle mythologique irlandais et la mythologie celtique* – 1892), who sought to dispel the myth of an idyllic pastoral Ireland (Mattar 134; Castle *Modernism* 99). Celtologists saw a much different Irish archetype emerging from the mists of Celtic history. Anatole le Braz writes:

Instead of a race that is gentle, timid, isolated in its dream and disdainful of all effort, there emerges, on the contrary, vehement natures, passionate, almost brutal, hungry for action, drunk with movement and noise [...] One looks in vain in these rude epics for the ideal cult of woman, so cherished by Renan⁵ [...] Such are these impetuous and wholly primitive natures. We are far from the “extreme moral gentleness” that Renan had believed to breathe “in the ideal compositions of the Celtic races” (qtd. in Mattar 172-173).

If evolutionist anthropology confronted pastoral by way of the prototypical or first

⁵ Ernest Renan “wedded his view of the Celt as timid, reserved, and delicate to the myth of the purity of the Celtic culture to create an imaginative idealization that shared much with earlier versions of Celticism” (Mattar 24).

society from which humankind emerged, then Celtology confronted the Celticism of Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold by projecting an alternate culture area from which to base a cultural history of the Irish peoples. Between Celticism and Celtology, Synge's writing would find a greater influence in the latter. The result was “a primitivism that shaped itself *through* science and thus increasingly emphasized the otherness of the [Aran] islanders” (Mattar 143). The predominating influence behind Synge's textual production would not be the pastoral race that haunted the Revivalists and the Celticists before them, but “the first man” of anthropological imagination, what Adam Kuper calls the “prototype” of all contemporary peoples (6).

According to Kuper, the idea that human society sprung from a primitive catalyst had a significant impact on society the late nineteenth century (6). The Romantic projection of a prelapsarian community living in agrarian harmony shuddered; for anthropologists well-read in Darwin and other evolutionists, the first human communities, determined by their ceaseless struggle to survive in harsh environments, were naturally prone to *conflict* with the culture area. As pastoral literature inculcated the masses with the Christian patriarchal or Revivalist ideology of the modern nation state, prototypical anthropology contended that primitive man was at his core animalistic, violent and hyper-sexual; and entirely contrary to the practice of Christian civil society. In light of these ideas so deeply refined in Mattar's work, I have been proposing that *prototypical* society is the other main current within Irish primitivism, as the antithesis of the pastoral society so often seen in nineteenth century Irish literature. Heavily inspired

by the notion of a prototypical society, Synge's writing complicates Gibbons' soft primitivism or pastoral conception of the west of Ireland touted by the Revival. Instead of enjoying a Romantic conciliation of community and environment, the islanders in *The Aran Islands*, along with the characters of Synge's plays, are a highly sexual and impulsive human species adrift on the edges of civilization, where sustenance and survival are hard won.

Synge would foster the prototypical primitive in nearly all of his work; though a knowledge of Synge's Aran experiences is crucial to any deep understanding of his more highly regarded plays. The transmission of prototypical culture in *The Aran Islands* greatly informs Synge's one act play *Riders to the Sea* (1903), a bleak portrayal of the life of an Inis Meáin peasant woman, Maurya, who has lost all of her sons to the sea—save one. Not heeding an array of ominous warnings that appear to warn him against sea travel, Maurya's remaining son, Bartley, departs for the mainland and consequently drowns, leaving the remaining women in the family to a life of destitution. Declan Kiberd shows how many of the unheeded signs are taken directly from Aran folk traditions – such as wooden boards leaning against the wall as a sign of death – even though Synge does not make these cultural references overt for his audience (167).⁶

⁶ For other examples of the warnings that are violated or disregarded by Maurya and her family, see Kopper, Edward A. "Riders to the Sea." *A J.M. Synge Literary Companion*. Ed. Edward A. Kopper. Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1988. 39 – 49.

Synge attempts to transmit Aran culture directly to an urban audience by staging it in the form of meaningful signs, symbols and superstitions that act more than just a back drop – they make up the actual plot of the play, and indeed, for all of island folk-life as Synge sees it. Kiberd also argues that *Riders* is especially meaningful, as Synge’s conflation of English and the Aran dialect of Irish in the play spans “a gulf between the two traditions” of Anglo-Ireland and Gaelic-Ireland: “As an artist, [Synge] had already set about the fusion of these traditions in his own writing, so that some day future critics might be able to treat them together” (103). Kiberd's observation has special relevance to Synge as a Revivalist author, considering the author's desire to engage and establish a rapport with a pre-modern society, whereby he establishes himself, in typical Revivalist fashion, as a cultural interlocutor between the Gaelic peasantry of the west of Ireland and English-speaking Irish of urban centres. As an isolated conduit between the primitive and the modern, *Riders* can also be seen as indirectly consecrating the author's place in a burgeoning nation predominantly constituted by an Irish Catholic bourgeoisie wary of Anglo-Irish citizenship. By conflating the islander’s voice with his own in the play, Synge introduces literal Anglo-Gaelic dialogisms to the Irish theatre, popularizing a syntax that would come to be associated with the anglicized voice of the West of Ireland (Greene 36). *Riders* would also trouble Revivalist trends of pastoral representation. Maurya's life revolves around the reality that life on Inis Meáin is not the pastoral reconciliation of peasant and terrain but an attestation to the impossibility of a West Irish pastoral, and how such a concept could never be integrated smoothly into a contemporary

Irish mythology of place. As Maurya stoically reflects upon losing her last son, death is an integral part of the islander experience that can not be mitigated or explained by religion: “there isn't any more the sea can do to me. No man can be living forever, and we must be satisfied” (*Collected Works III* 27). The play is a landmark work in that it gave, to quote Frawley, “ new dramatic importance to landscape and place by refusing simple idealisations of rural Ireland. In this sense, Synge can be seen to do for rural Ireland what James Joyce was to do for its capital city: diagnose a profound social malaise” (*Riders* 17).

The Aran Islands also informs Synge’s most (in)famous play, *Playboy of the Western World* (1907). *Playboy* is set in rural county Mayo, but the play's plot comes from an anecdote in *The Aran Islands* told by an islander “who is fond of telling me anecdotes.” Synge continues: “He often tells me about a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives...” (TAI 50). Synge then considers the sublime moral architecture of the society that harbours a murderer in order to protect him from “hated” colonial law:

The impulse to protect the criminal is universal in west. It seems partly due to the association between justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but more directly to the primitive feeling of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime, that a man will not do wrong unless he is under the influence of a passion which is as irresponsible as a storm on the sea. If a man

has killed his father, and is already sick and broken with remorse, they can see no reason why he should be dragged away and killed by the law.

Such a man, they say, will be quiet all the rest of his life, and if you suggest that punishment is needed as an example, they ask, 'Would any one kill his father if he was able to help it?' (*TAI* 50)

Synge more deeply interrogates this “primitive feeling” when he dramatizes it in *Playboy*. After “murdering” his father by hitting him over the head with a spade, Christy Mahon flees from the authorities, seeking respite in the remote townships of county Mayo. He takes refuge in the house of a young peasant woman, Pegeen Mike. Recounting to Pegeen the high tales of his murderous exploits, sexual attraction builds between the two. The romance is interrupted when the “ghost” of Christy's father returns to haunt him. It turns out that Christy had not killed his father, who has instead been following him constantly throughout his flight. Resolving to continue his journey in favour of adventure, Christy refuses Pegeen's love and leaves, with his father's “ghost” on his heels.

Eschewing trends in Ireland's national drama to idealize the peasantry, *Playboy* radicalized Irish theatre on several fronts. For one, it challenged traditional interpretations of Irish folklore and hinted at the psychological harm primitivist fantasies could do to the contemporary Irish imagination. (Like Christy Mahon, Irish society is haunted by the spectre of the old regime. The idea that “old-ways are the best ways” dominated Irish social-politics in the first half of the twentieth century, much to the

detriment of the economy and social advancement). On a more bombastic front, Pegeen Mike's overt sexual attraction to an outsider, blackguard and murderer violates the Catholic's hard primitivist representation of the virginal, Madonna-like peasant woman who would only be courted by a moral Irishman, something that would inexplicably change the face of Irish literature by pointing out Ireland's anxiety regarding its national archetypes. "For Irish authors to raise these issues [of sexuality] in their works", write Cairns and Richards, "was to threaten the foundations of familism and the class it made possible" (62). Gregory Castle argues that *Playboy* was genius in that it critiqued *both* colonial racism and national idealism, by challenging

the primitivism that subtended stereotypes of the "stage-Irishman" and the ethnographic representations of [sic] people like Haddon and Browne, whose work contributed to the perpetuation of the idea that the Western Irish were the last bastion of a primitive race; it also called to account those nationalist discourses that celebrated an idealized, pre-modern, pre-colonial peasantry, the fantasy projection of an oppressed people driven to embrace uncritically an image of themselves prepared for them by anthropologists, and... folklorists that Yeats set out to correct and supplant. (Modernism 151-152)

This list of primitivists would, ironically, include Synge, who went to Aran precisely because it was where "life is perhaps the most primitive place that is left in Europe" (*TAI* 11). In response to this problem, Castle argues that Synge's representations the West of Ireland had matured considerably since *The Aran Islands*, in that he began to critically

assess peasant representations by dramatizing them in *Playboy* and his other plays. The remnants of prototypical fancy we see staged in *Playboy*, Castle suggests, is part of Synge's process of critiquing Irish primitivisms by evaluating how they perform or interact within the context of an Irish urban public (Castle *Staging Ethnography* 270 - 271). Synge's attack on the national archetype of the peasant would result in the infamous riot that occurred upon *Playboy's* first performance at Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 1907, an event that would irrevocably put the Literary Revival in the forefront of Irish identity politics. Taking particular issue with the play's sexual references, the largely Catholic-bourgeois audience took to the streets, objecting to Synge's attack on the piousness of the Irish peasant-women. The positive and negative public attention that *Playboy* would subsequently draw attested to the fundamental role that Synge's imagination, which had blossomed in *The Aran Islands*, had played in the formation – and agitation – of Irish national identity.⁷

Synge might have framed the prototypical representation to be, as Castle suggests, “embraced critically” by theatre-goers, but in reality, the escapist romance of prototypical society would still haunt future representations of the Aran Islands. Liam O'Flaherty would also write about a troubled stranger journeying through the natural and social wilds of the West of Ireland. If *Thy Neighbour's Wife* is a satire of the Irish Ego, then the novel *The Black Soul* – also through merit of its title – is the Synge-inspired journey into

⁷ See Cusack, George. "The Playboy Riots". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 26 November 2004.

the Irish Id. Taking cue from Synge's *Christy Mahon*, the man we know simply as the "Stranger" finds himself on the remote island of "Inverara." Trying to escape his own memories of heinous murders he committed in the Great War, the Stranger takes up lodging with a married peasant couple, Red John and Little Mary. Like Pegeen Mike, Little Mary is attracted to the exotic and complicated stranger, and is drawn into sexual relations with him. Unlike Pegeen, Little Mary does not draw the reader into any serious social insight regarding her character: where Pegeen Mike *reflects* national primitivism in such a way as to show the roots of its anxieties, Little Mary is a projection of prototypical desires for the primitive. Not long after meeting the Stranger, Little Mary declares that she will force relations with him, "or I will kill him." (102). O'Flaherty describes her as having a "primitive soul... as merciless as nature itself. The tender growth of civilization had never taken root in her mind. Her love raged mightily. Like an ocean wave there was nothing within her or without her to stay its progress" (136). Instead of eliciting any social commentary on his rendering of the Aran woman, O'Flaherty is content to re-install the prototypical culture area constructed in *The Aran Islands*. At another instance, Red John looks upon Little Mary with cannibalistic desire.

He peered across over his red beard at his wife's bosom. The right side of his face distorted and his right hand shot into the pocket of his waistcoat for his knife. He longed to drive a knife down to the hilt in that breast. He often pictured to himself that thrust and the upward gush of red blood. He would lick his lips as if he were drinking it. (12)

These murderous, misogynistic impulses are not unique to O'Flaherty's representation of his native islanders – they are entwined within the Aran mythos that Synge is largely responsible for choreographing earlier in his career. Castle finds a similar misogynistic impulse borne in Synge's imagination when he confronts island women in an unpublished version of *The Aran Islands*:

No one who has not passed months among these grey clouds and seas can realize the hungry joy with which one follows the red dresses of the women. If they were dressed in blue also the island would be hardly habitable and one would be ready to commit murder to gloat a moment upon red. (qtd. in Castle *Modernism* 130).

Rather than sanitizing his portrayal by repressing sexuality, as Catholic hard primitivism does, Synge's primitivism draws the reader's attention directly to sexuality. The petticoat appears throughout modernist Aran culture as a regional symbol of invested female sexuality, sometimes as an invitation to voyeurism, at other times as a ward against sexual violence. Interrupting the monotonous flow of island grey, the red petticoat becomes, in Gregory Castle's words, an icon that “checks” male violence by “re-signifying” it (131). As an ethnographer, Synge is interested in the symbol of violence in prototypical society; being a novelist, O'Flaherty is much more interested in its melodramatics.

Categorizing *The Aran Islands* according to any kind of primitivism remains problematic. In many ways the travelogue is an unfinished work, and as the following

chapter will show, its unrefined edges jut across ideologies and do not sit comfortably with singular concepts of “pastoralism”, “soft-primitivism”, “modernist primitivism,” or even – as chapter three will show – with “primitivism” altogether. Further complicating studies of *The Aran Islands* is its contradicting views as to what the primitive actually is. To put this as briefly as I can before taking on the bulk of this argument in the next chapter, *The Aran Islands* might be primitivist in intent, but its structure challenges any specific category of the primitive from taking precedence.

In this preamble, I have given a brief summation of Irish primitivism using numerous categories by which the idealization of the Irish peasant has taken shape. For Gibbons, loose categories of “hard primitivism” and “soft primitivism” cover a wide range of nineteenth/twentieth century Irish texts heavily invested in defining national identity. Gibbons argues that Synge is a soft primitivist in that his writing laments the potential loss of a pagan agrarianism, while he celebrates the sensuality of the peasant. Mattar develops two categories that signal an epochal transition in Irish literature, on which Synge's work sits as a pivot. Before Darwin, writers interested in developing Irish national identity wrote with “romantic primitivist” tropes, producing pastoral texts that largely extolled the virtues of the peasantry of the West of Ireland. After Darwin, “modernist primitivism” helped define a new movement of anthropologists and writers interested in naturalist depictions of the West of Ireland. Many of these writers concentrated on subjects such as sexuality, violence, and environment in peasant societies, along with themes that meaningfully contradicted pastoral conceptions of the

West of Ireland.

In preparing my own analysis of Synge, I have found it necessary to further refine these categories, so as to find more specific influences behind *The Aran Islands*. Synge's soft primitivism is problematic, as there are many points in his conception of primitive life that do not coincide with the nostalgia this category necessitates. I have also found that "romantic primitivism," an excellent category by which to chart the development of Ireland's Literary Revival, provides too broad a light by which to study the intricacies of *The Aran Islands*. Collapsing literary tropes from Gibbon's soft primitivism with those of Mattar's Romantic primitivism, I see a *pastoral* conception of primitive culture at work in *The Aran Islands*, whereby Synge ushers in pastoral motifs and themes to better illustrate an *idea* that he is trying to produce—that island culture is noble, and that this nobility is threatened by modernity. By pastoral, I do not imply a specific literary understanding of primitive culture; for as much as they might be founded in classical categories of literature, pastoral allusions can also serve, especially in regard to Synge's work, anthropological purposes of cultural transmission and production. I demonstrate in chapter two how pastoral serves as an alembic by which we "read" Aran culture. My other category of analysis depends wholly on Mattar's "modernist primitivism," bolstered with insights from the ethnographer James Clifford and the literary scholar Gregory Castle, who stress the ethnographic influences behind travelogue writing. I have called this Synge's *prototypical* conception of primitive culture.

By incorporating these two modes of cultural reception and transmission operate

in *The Aran Islands*, I show how Aran culture operates within an entwined anthropological and literary tradition of cultural interpretation.

Chapter 2

The Aran Islands Analysis: Transmitting Pastoral/Prototypical Culture

...in case it be said that we have only described the facts in relation to a theory of them and as exemplifications of it and have subordinated description to analysis, we reply that this was our intention.

-E. Evans Pritchard (261)

Where scholarship has thoroughly explored Synge's relationship to the pastoral ideology of the Revival (Foster; Frawley; Gibbons; Saddlemyer; Watson), twenty-first century critics like Gregory Castle and Sinéad Mattar have attempted new ground, arguing that Synge's corpus of work is just as indebted to currents in anthropology as it is to Revivalist literary trends. This attention paid to the *scientific* nature of Synge's primitivism makes experiential texts like *The Aran Islands* especially relevant. "Because Revivalist writers had no professional stake in the discipline of anthropology" writes Gregory Castle, "they were free to exploit the contradictions inherent to the discipline" (*Modernism* 10). Though the tropes of the Revival's salvage project are often regarded as belonging to a literary tradition of Irish pastoral expression, Synge in particular would conflate tropes in literature and anthropology, even if this led to undisciplined subjectivity, anachronisms, or other corruptions of "hard" science. Participant-observer ethnography, the practice where a scientist visits a culture area and subjectively records and participates in the life there, would provide an excellent forum by which the Revivalists could inscribe their own cultural values into their subjective representations. Castle continues, stating:

the absence of a professional stake did not prevent Revivalists from adopting forms of participant observation and modes of cultural translation by which native texts and practices were reproduced for and consumed by a metropolitan audience. The *undisciplined* use of ethnographic methods and anthropological theories of culture led to a style of representation that was at once scientific (or pseudo-scientific) and literary. Thus, conflicting authorities – aesthetic and anthropological – governed a discourse of cultural redemption that strove both to represent *and* to invent Irish culture. (*Modernism* 10)

Synge's "pseudo-ethnography" is in turn influenced by various tropes of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century travel literature – a literary and anthropological textual genre in itself – that contrast and compliment definitions of the primitive.

The following analysis of *The Aran Islands* extrapolates several ideas from theorists who have seen Synge's project as being heavily influenced by nineteenth century notions of primitive socio-cultural expression. Considering the ethnographic nature of *The Aran Islands* opens the text to new vistas of expression that might otherwise remain hidden under strictly "literary" readings. In this analysis, I am primarily concerned with Synge's portrayal of environment and gender that ground his ideas in anthropological theories of the primitive. At points of good weather, Synge depicts a pastoral version of the primitive, where islander and landscape exist in co-operation. When the weather is bad, he depicts a prototypical version of the primitive, where humanity is overcome by nature. Synge conflates pastoral and prototypical conceptions

of culture when it comes to gender as well. The presence of “men” signify a pastoral rendering of Aran culture, where “women” signify a prototypical rendering of this culture. As will be made apparent, there is no presiding version of the primitive in *The Aran Islands*. Rather, the work is a pastiche of pastoral/prototypical primitivist thought.

The Aran Islands is made up of four parts, each part describing a different trip Synge made to the islands (*TAI* xxxix). Part I centres on Synge’s arrival to a partly industrialized Inis Mór (which Synge refers to by its then popular name, “Aranmore”) and his subsequent departure to Inis Meáin, moving centrifugally from an urban centre to a rural periphery. The plot-line of these notebooks is regressive, which holds a metaphorical importance for Synge. Disappointed with the moral decrepitude he has experienced on Inis Mór, Synge leaves for Inis Meáin, where “life is perhaps the most primitive that is left in Europe” (*TAI* 53). Initially arriving on a ferry, Synge symbolically moves backward in time on a *curach*, or traditional Irish canoe (*TAI* 53). The author’s situation seemingly de-evolves from modern society (Galway), to sub-modern society (Inis Mór), then to primitive society (Inis Meáin). Part II moves in reverse of Part I. Beginning at his lodgings at the Macdonagh cottage on Inis Meáin, Synge travels back to Inis Mór and then to Galway. A contrasting motif of evolutionary progression should be taken as paradox: technologically, the mainlander and the Inis Mór islander have evolved to a far greater extent than the islander, but their moral characters are vestigial by comparison (“The charm which the people over [on Inis Meáin] share with the birds and flowers has been replaced [on Inis Mór] by the anxiety of men who are

eager for gain”), as the author re-evaluates notions of societal progress and sustainability in a new Ireland (*TAI* 69).

In Part III, the narrative trajectory becomes more ambiguous as Synge moves intermittently between Inis Mór, Inis Meáin, Inis Oírr, mainland Ireland and Paris. On the advice of Lady Gregory and Yeats, Synge includes more “fairyllore” in these parts, and the travelogue loses some of its autobiographical references (*TAI* xxvi). Synge’s transcription of Michael’s letters signal a subtle restlessness growing in Aran’s youth. Part IV is largely a collection of stories by islanders, with a few personal observations made by Synge. Aside from a few musings, Synge’s extensive self-reflections made in the first three parts are few, as most of this final part is primarily dedicated to cataloguing Aran folklore and anecdotes.

It becomes clear from the outset of *The Aran Islands* that Yeats’s imperative of giving voice to a culture that had yet to find expression would be frustrated, and that Synge’s expectant rendezvous with Aran would lend less to a climate of coherent allegories and cultural signs than it would to a primordial space of cultural distortion, adverse to easy revivalism. Upon his arrival, Synge’s numerous descriptions of bad weather and harsh climate warn us that social expression will not be easily capitulated from the Aran culture area. Synge’s first impression of the islands is of an otherworldly zone hidden from the mainland by “a dense shroud of mist” in which Inis Mór seems to be retreating: “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” (*TAI* 5). Three hours later,

Synge lands on Inis Mór, “a dreary rock”, on which he has “seen nothing so desolate. Grey floods of water were sweeping everywhere upon the limestone, making at times a wild torrent on the road” (*TAI* 5). The setting of Irish pastoral – landscapes of green hills, Catholic (or pagan) iconography, and industrious peasants – has yet to be extrapolated from raw environment. Enveloped in a sense of personal and psychological danger, Synge acknowledges that he has moved away from civilization into the primitive cultural area: “I have wandered only some few thousand miles yet I am already beyond the dwelling place of man” (*CWii* 110).

Aside from creating mood, adverse weather serves as a metaphor for Synge's own sense of cultural dislocation and what John Wilson Foster calls “his own terrifying loneliness of spirit” (102). Synge is anxious whenever skies are overcast, as he projects his own alienation onto the landscape: “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 rock, a strip of surf, and then a tumult of waves” (*TAI* 74). When he tries to talk to people on Inis Meáin, he compares his inability to communicate with them (due to his lack of Irish) to being lost in a fog: “In some ways these men and women seem strangely far away from me. They have the same emotions that I have, and the animals have, yet I cannot talk to them when there is much to say, more than to the dog that whines beside me in a mountain fog” (*TAI* 66). Night serves as another period of anxiety for Synge. After one particular night fall, he experiences a sensation of disembodiment and an unintelligible association with his

immediate natural environment: “The sense of solitude was immense. I could not see or realise my own body, and I seemed to exist merely in my perception of the waves and the crying of the birds” (*TAI* 82). At points of bad weather or at night, people, villages, codified flora and fauna, and other socio-cultural indicatives of “civilization” regress into a homogenous mass of primordial nature. This frustrates or overwhelms the Revivalist Synge, who seeks coherency and belonging; it would also frustrate a sense of national identity that draws “its symbols from the healthy, pristine, vigorous life” of “a putative folk culture” that is not apparent on Aran (Gellner, qtd. in Cairns 51).

Synge's depiction of the Aran Islands as *timeless* also plays a role in distancing the islands from contemporary civilization. Oona Frawley contends that Synge evades the convention of time “whenever possible” in *The Aran Islands*, and that he describes only on the “most immediate of natural cycles” in his observations to develop a conception of Aran as being detached from the rest of Europe, both literally and metaphorically (86). When Synge first arrives on Inis Mór in Part I, he makes hasty departure for Inis Meáin, where the islanders are “more primitive” (*TAI* 3). Moving west into primordial space symbolizes a move into the past for Synge, as the Inis Meáin islanders

...seemed to be moved by strange archaic sympathies with the world. Their mood accorded itself with wonderful fineness to the suggestions of the day, and their ancient Gaelic seemed so full of divine sympathy that I would have liked to turn to the west and row with them forever. (*TAI* 94)

The short but meaningful sojourn from Inis Mór to Inis Meáin signifies a complete spatial and temporal break from modernity in Synge's mind, as he finds himself "moving away from civilisation in this rude canvas canoe of a model that has served primitive races since men first went on the sea" (*TAI* 53). (Recall that Máirtín Ó Direáin's use of the Irish word "*thiar*" can be translated both as "back" and "west".) Aside from its symbolic importance, timelessness literally finds itself on Inis Meáin because of the absence of clocks. Synge notes that time pieces are a novelty on the island and that many islanders approach him for the time of day (*TAI* 22). He describes islanders as always being curious about the exact time of day, as they have a "general ignorance of any precise hours in the day (*TAI* 23). Instead, time is monocyclic and entirely dependent on shifts in weather and light: "[A]s soon, however, as the wind changes to the south... the people, who never think of putting up a primitive dial, are at a loss" (*TAI* 22). An older man likens Synge's face to a clock's, as if Synge, being a foreigner from civilization, is an agent of the temporal passage that is a novelty on the islands (*TAI* 23). Resulting from this "loss" of time is a society that is ignorant of routine, regimentation, and other conventions which plot civilization's more complex (and nerve-wracking) day-to-day course. In addition, Synge's frequent descriptions of mist and sea, intended to obscure culture indicatives, also camouflage the ubiquitous layers of cliff strata and flotsam, those time-markers of Aran topography that, as Tim Robinson writes, "insistently raise the question of geological origins, of the processes of time; it is as if [Synge] wanted to generalize his island into elemental simplicity and atemporality" (Robinson xlii; Frawley

86). The people “forgotten in these worlds of mist” are literally lost in a Pangaea of nature, sharing little relationship with wider geography of civilization (*TAI* 29). The process of obscuring space, while removing time markers, becomes Synge's desperate attempt to idealize an archaic geography that has been lost to the evolutionary process.

As Frawley suggests, pastoral design becomes quite heavy-handed at these moments of timelessness, and complicate any Darwinian readings of a “world untouched by *evolutionary* time” (86 italics Frawley). While I agree that the registers of nostalgia are there, the idea that Aran is purely pastoral is troubled by its initial lack of an idealized community. It is not until later that we feel a coherent social presence, and Synge's association with idealized community is always hampered by the weather that hides these social structures from him. It has been argued that the obfuscation of both time and landscape are projections of Synge's own feelings, and that his immediate environment often reflects the conflicting sense of “affinity” and “isolation” he feels amongst the islanders (J.W. Foster 102). Aran's environmental desolation is often construed as a metaphor for the Anglo-Irishman living in “search for wholeness and unity of being” in a predominantly Celtic-Irish Ireland, in that it enacts a displacement from the Aran community (Belanger 97). Aran's subsequent distinguishing from the modern world signifies an important national conception of the Aran culture area as set apart from the nationalizing course of the Ireland. The dense mist and torrential waters signal the end of civilization and its offspring of the nation-state, and the beginning of non-nationalised (pre-modern) space, whose resident is the *other*. Just as pastoral is troubled by harsh

environment and its obfuscation of clear cultural signs, Ireland is troubled by the presence of Aran's prototypical space. This space must be recovered by literary institutions such as the Revival, in the form of utilization of its natural/cultural resources.

In contrast, a sunny day on Aran indicates cultural coherence. When the weather clears, Synge moves about the island unhindered by fog or rain, free to interact with his environment, to visit a village and describe the previously obscured land and sea. He is only able to have his "first real introduction to the island and its people" after the grey weather passes (*TAI* 7). "Fine" weather entails clarity of perspective (especially after a period of "rain" or fog that often signifies crisis, confusion and threat of cultural dissemination): "The intense insular clearness one sees only in Ireland, and after rain, was throwing out every ripple in the sea and sky, and every crevice in the hills beyond the bay" (*TAI* 9). A mention of Galway Bay follows, then of the Atlantic, Inis Mór, the town of Kilronan, and the local fauna: "Many of the birds display themselves before me with the vanity of barbarians, forming in strange evolutions as long as I am in sight" (*TAI* 30). Now able to decipher his immediate environment, Synge evokes the romanticism of the poet and that of the naturalist, both of whom find genius in the "composite landscapes" that they themselves partly impose, "to express the character of a region, or a general idea of 'the good land'" (Turner, qtd. in Pratt 45-46). Clear weather signifies a sense of cultural and geographical cohesion for the author, enabling him to communicate meaningfully with the islanders, codify the landscape, compare it to other regions, and hint at a coherent national identity embedded in the "insular clearness one sees only in

Ireland.”

Synge is quick to draw comparisons from the terrain, noting that the “green undulating foreground” of Killeany village reminds him “of the country near Rome” (*TAI* 7). The allusion is to Virgil's *Eclogues*, whose shepherds gather near Rome to sing songs that celebrated nature; it is also where they mourned the degradation of nature, signified by urban Rome (Cuddon 644-649). Raymond Williams remarks that “the contrast within Virgilian pastoral is between the pleasures of rural settlement and the threat of loss and eviction” at the hands of an agent from the nearby metropolis (17). It is fitting, then, that Synge lets the pastoral drama play out when he records the eviction of a family living on Inis Meáin. “Once on shore”, Synge says of the policemen arriving from the mainland, “the men were formed in close marching order, a word was given, and the heavy rhythm of their booths came up over the rocks” (*TAI* 44). Here is Yeats' “filthy modern tide” personified in the form of government agents who are evicting a pastoral people (Yeats 196).⁸ The police represent for Synge the modernity that is encroaching upon primitive Aran. Watching the police approach the cottage, Synge reflects:

After my weeks spent among primitive men this glimpse of newer types of
humanity was not reassuring. Yet these mechanical police, with the commonplace
agents and sheriffs, and the rabble they had hired, represented aptly enough the

⁸ From Yeats's poem, “The Statues”: “We Irish, born into that ancient sect / But thrown upon this filthy modern tide / And by its formless spawning fury wrecked... (195-196)

civilization for which the homes of the island were to be desecrated. (*TAI* 44)

During the eviction, Synge tells us that there were “no clouds in the sky, and the heat was intense” (*TAI* 45). The state of the weather is essential for Synge's delivery of the pastoral, enabling him to clearly recognize the cultural – and national – currents in which his Ireland is enmeshed. He continues: “The police when not in motion lay sweating and gasping under the walls with their tunics unbuttoned. They were not attractive, and I kept comparing them with the islandmen, who walked up and down as cool and fresh-looking as the seagulls” (*TAI* 45). It is often through these rotations of storm/sun, nature/culture, despair/contentment, and night/day that Synge registers community life patterns on Aran, as well as their greater national significance.

In his landmark essay “On Ethnographic Allegory”, the anthropologist James Clifford interrogates similar rotating cultural binaries found in ethnographic writings, explaining that such dualisms often constrict ethnographic practice to primitivist readings of community and self (*Writing Culture* 98 - 121). Clifford argues that these dualisms are not cultural red-herrings meant to disguise culture, but are “ethnographic allegories”: the literary equipment integral to an anthropologist's reading of culture. To illustrate his theory of ethnographic allegory, Clifford explains how Margaret Mead's ethnographic study, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1923), and Derek Freeman's rebuke of Mead's work, *Margaret Mead in Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (1983), play on the “Appollonian/Dionysian” framework of cultural representation. Clifford discusses how Mead, whether she meant to or not, constructs a “fable” of a

young Samoan girl who negotiates her sexual identity with her community. Using established modes of cultural reception/transmission, Mead enacts an “Apollonian” reading of culture “designed to propose moral, practical lessons for American society” (*Writing* 102). In classical mythology, Apollo is the god of the sun, rationality, and prophecy, “a direct antithesis of the god Dionysus” (Morford 191). An Apollonian reading of culture entails those qualities of rational and emotional clarity, whereby the ethnographer illuminates shared cultural expressions between a primitive and modern culture area. Clifford argues that it would be impossible to divorce Mead's literary moral from her anthropological intent of cultural transmission – without the allegory, there would be no scaffold on which to build the ethnography.

Freeman takes issue with Mead's ethnography, seeing her “Apollonian” imperative as a projection of her own moral universe onto Samoan culture. Clifford discusses how Freeman, in response, “amasses” historical “counterexamples” that challenge Mead’s portrayal by revealing how impulsive, anxious, and violent this same Samoan society is (*Writing Culture* 102-103). In order to be thoroughly objective, Freeman seems to imply, the ethnographer has to be open only to the most visceral aspects of a culture, while dismissing any manifestation of morals or allegories as the ethnographer's own cultural baggage that she brings into the culture area. What Clifford sees in Freeman's ethnography is another allegory taking shape *against* Mead's Apollonian (or pastoral) reading of Samoan culture. Freeman's is the scientist's story of culture, one that eschews literary artifice for hard scientific truths; when in actual

practice, it reads primitive culture as void of repressions, pretensions, and prejudices, so as not to accidentally entangle it with our own psychologies. People deprived of any recognizable social structure would indeed seem to an outsider as chaotic and impulsive. Because the anthropologist cannot recognize any social rules, the culture must not have any (beyond the impenetrable mysteries of its pagan religion). This is what Clifford calls the “Dionysian” reading of culture, which is another cultural narrative in itself. (In counterbalance to Apollo, Dionysus is the god of sex, excess, intoxication, and the darker impulses that our civilization is bent on repressing (Morford 238-241)). Recognizing the dualistic nature of the Mead/Freeman representational frameworks is important ethnographic practice for Clifford, for it alerts the reader to our own epistemologies imbedded in cultural texts. “Indeed, Mead and Freeman form a kind of diptych, whose opposing panels signify a recurrent Western ambivalence about the ‘primitive’” (103).

Inasmuch that Aran becomes a receptacle for such national anxieties and ideologies, Synge’s projected crisis of alienation can be understood more broadly as pertaining to the geographic boundaries imagined by the genre of travelogue itself. Mary Louise Pratt argues that cultural revivalism finds its alembic in travel writing – natural historical, anthropological, and literary accounts that were being written for the European’s consumption since the seventeenth/eighteenth century (1-11). Whether they are read as scientific or literary representations, travelogues “reflect Europeans’ own anxieties over the rapid institutionalization and rationalization of their own societies. Again, western self-understanding functions only by inventing a projected other whose

other is the European self” (Pratt 248). In Synge’s case, the traveler projects his own anxieties through numerous descriptions of the rainy weather, rock, and the “tumult of waves”, a topography that signifies confusion, disillusionment, and dissemination. In contrast, pastoral coherency is made manifest in examples and descriptions of flora, fauna, and human community, whereby the naturalist (or ethnographer, or artist) establishes his role as ethnographer or cultural interlocutor. Synge’s projection of self is incongruously composed of these two composite European personalities: one of raw nature, accompanied by extreme feelings of fear, isolation, and sexual need (the terrain of the subconscious, what Freud would later call the subconscious “Id”), and a pastoral composite of refined environment with extractable cultural symbols (Freud’s “Ego”).⁹ From this perspective, Synge’s imposed order on Aran community and landscape is as much grounded in European natural history, participant-observer ethnography, and nascent Freudian psychology as it is, in Ann Saddlemeier’s words, “the sensitive varying

⁹ Erickson writes: “According to Freud, the ego and superego could be moulded by culture, which restrained the id, the animalistic part of human nature with instinctive appetites and drives” (84-85). The oscillation between what I have been calling pastoral and prototypical culture is, in Freud’s language, civilization’s mitigation of the desires of natural man. “For Freud, civilization was opposed to human biological nature because civilization tried to tame the animal instincts of people. In fact, civilization was built on sublimated desire.” (Erickson 85-86).

moods of the artist” (114). More than providing the setting that fits the Revivalist author’s emotional state, changes in weather and/or environment signal shifts in a European reception and transmission of culture.

The Aran Islands incorporates both the Apollonian imperative of “a pedagogical, ethical undertaking” that choreographs the Aran community, next to a Dionysian “scientism” that links the Aran community directly to the subconscious (Clifford *Writing Culture* 102, 103). As the travelogue progresses, Synge’s perspective changes from an Apollonian reading of culture, the tropes of which – masculinity, rationality, the Occidental, the *pastoral* primitive – proliferate in clear weather, to a Dionysian reading, the tropes of which – femininity, irrationality, the Oriental, the *prototypical* primitive – proliferate in darkness. An Apollonian framework relates Aran community with the greater Irish nation, while a Dionysian framework disturbs this relation. Resulting is a conflicted travelogue of two very different conceptions of Irish geo-cultural value, incorporating the hard and soft primitivism of literary practice with the evolutionist scientism that confines its subject to negative values.

Alongside environment, gender serves as Synge’s primary compass in finding community patterns and organizing them as pastoral or prototypical. For example, Synge shows us that a *curach* is piloted by men, which necessitates a relative calmness of weather (*TAI* 52, 94). Men are also responsible for the bulk of the islands’ economy, reaping kelp and cattle-trading that provides a substantial amount of community income (*TAI* 33-34). In fact, the male islander is a kind of primitive renaissance man in Synge

eyes, capable of both primitive and civilized faculties.

Each man can speak two languages. He is a skilled fisherman, and can manage a curagh with extraordinary nerve and dexterity. He can farm simply, burn kelp, cut out pampooties,¹⁰ mend nets, build and thatch a house, and make a cradle or a coffin. His work changes with the seasons in a way that keeps him free from the dullness that comes to people who have always the same occupation. The danger of his life on the sea gives him the alertness of a primitive hunter, and the long nights he spends fishing in his curagh bring him some of the emotions that are thought peculiar to men who have lived with the arts. (*TAI* 84)

This Apollonian reading of culture tells us that Inis Meain society tends toward the patriarchal, redolent with an idealized European feudalism.

As Elizabeth Gilmartin points out, women, on the other hand, tend to congregate in the Dionysian – what I have been calling the prototypical – moments of Synge’s narrative (66-67). Whether it be by the hearth, the kitchen, the domicile, or by storm-swept graveyards during *keenings* (funeral rites), women spur Synge’s imagination towards prototypical representation. Immediately following the aforementioned eviction, Synge describes the reactions of the woman of the house, and the consequences of having her culture area violated:

At a sign from the sheriff the work of carrying out the beds and utensils was begun in the middle of a crowd of natives who looked on in absolute silence,

¹⁰ Traditional leather footwear of Aran (*TAI* 140).

broken only by the wild imprecations of the woman of the house. She belonged to one of the most primitive families on the island, and she shook with uncontrollable fury as she saw the strange armed men who spoke a language she could not understand driving her from the hearth she had brooded on for thirty years. For these people the outrage to the hearth is a supreme catastrophe. They live here in a world of grey, where there are wild rains and mists every week of the year, and their warm chimney corners, filled with children and young girls, grow into the consciousness of each family in a way it is not easy to understand in more civilized places.

The outrage of a tomb in China probably gives no greater shock to the Chinese than the outrage to a hearth in Inishmaan gives the people. (*TAI* 45)

Belonging “to one of the most primitive families on the island”, the woman's fury is palpable, guttural, and animal-like. There is no communication—the police, as well as ourselves, “speak a language she [can] not understand,” as she is confined to only the most primitive form of expression. Bad weather is also referred to. “Wild rains and mists”, along with the sanctions of the hearth, “grow into the consciousness” of her family, especially the “young girls” that tend the hearth. Later, during a funeral on Inis Meain, the weather breaks into a violent thunderstorm. Again, Synge turns to the women to find Aran's primitive expression:

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, and at this moment when the thunder sounded a death-peal of extraordinary grandeur above the voices of the women, I could see the faces near me stiff and drawn with emotion. (*TAI* 31-32)

At another point, when Synge mentions to a group of women that he is not married, they revert into an animalistic fury: “when I tried to talk to them they crowded round me and began jeering and shrieking because I am not married. A dozen screamed at a time, and so rapidly that I could not understand what they were saying” (*TAI* 90). Synge also finds that the island women mirror the physical wilderness:

...I often come up on a girl with her petticoats tucked up round her, standing in a pool left by the tide and washing her flannels among the sea-anemones and crabs. Their red bodices and white tapering legs make them as beautiful as tropical seabirds, as they stand in a frame of seaweeds against the brink of the Atlantic (*TAI* 33).

The idea that island women belong to another plane outside of the male rational world is shared among the island men, who suspect “a possible link between the wild mythology that is accepted on the islands and the strange beauty of the women” (*TAI* 10). Women occupy these primitive spaces throughout the travelogue.

As what Homi K. Bhabha calls “the bearers of policed sexuality,” Aran women tend to be trapped within heavily gendered modes of primitivist representation; their poised sexuality – they are always being watched by men – requires a set of cultural

signifiers that deter sexual interaction (5).¹¹ Inasmuch as a prototypical rendering of women charges them with sexual energy, it also evokes a powerful boundary that deters any foreign or civilized influence from violating the islander's culture area. In turn, Aran women cannot detach themselves from or rebel against an imposed economy of primitive objects. The red petticoat, spinning wheel and hearths all define and confine the women's culture area: "The red dresses of the women who cluster around the fire on their stools give a glow of almost eastern richness... Many sorts of fishing tackle, and the nets and oil-skins of the men, are hung upon the walls or among the open rafters" (*TAI* 13). The image of women being trapped, tangled, or speared by primitive implements is echoed in the same primitive technology that forms the set for Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*: "Cottage kitchen, with nets, oilskins, spinning-wheel, some new boards standing by the wall, etc" (*Collected Works III* 23). In *Riders to the Sea*, these primitive symbols serve

¹¹ Bhabha writes: "The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological 'limits' of those ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices" (4-5). My interest here is not Bhabha's stance that dissonance manifests in those moments of Western cultural misunderstanding, but more in the idea that the Western practice of ethnography polices female identity *through* absolute binaries, so as to constrict female sexuality and gender into accepted modes of Western cultural reception and transmission.

as a metaphor for the constrictions of fate. They also serve as the condensation of the island woman's life. "The tragedy of *Riders*, writes Frawley, "is not to be associated with Michael [Maurya's other son] or Bartley, but with Maurya. She sees herself as part of a society in which women's roles are strictly defined and in which the loss of the male in a household can seem catastrophic" (*Riders* 19). With all the men of the household dead, the use-value of these objects dead with them, the objects become the "insidious atmosphere of entrapment" that clings to the female culture area (Durbach 83). This primitive quarantine is even more restrictive in *The Aran Islands*, where, unlike Maurya, (who can at least vocalize the invidiousness of her station), women are confined to expressions of hysteria: "the passionate spirit that expresses itself, at odd moments only, with magnificent words and gestures" (*TAI* 47). Where men are free to trans-locate between pastoral and prototypical representations of island life, moving about the boundaries of civilization and pre-civilization with relative ease, women are denied such agency in their oppressive prototypical economy.

Though women are incapable of negotiating their primitive culture areas in *The Aran Islands*, Synge would later tinker with this anthropological model as well, giving way to expression and personal agency through *Playboy of the Western World's* Pegeen Mike. Pegeen ultimately denies both a pastoral and prototypical heroinism. Castle writes: "In her rejection of these potential models, Pegeen disassociates herself from the tradition of warrior-queens and beautiful ideals" (*Staging* 277). Like Maurya, she loses the man in her life – but upon discovering that Christy has *not* murdered his father, she

recognizes that “a strange man is a marvel with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard and blow of a loy, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed” (qtd. in Pierce 193). In other words, she sees the distinction between the act of representing and that which is being represented. No longer “inextricably bound up with the darker impulses of cruelty and destruction” represented by Christy, she is also free of the primitive representation in which her gender is enjambed (Gibbons 33.) With independence on the horizon, nationalists were uneasy with this tinkering with Ireland’s most prodigious cultural resources, an issue that would come to a head in the play's first performance.

Like Freeman’s ethnography of the Samoans, or le Braz’ Celtological summation of the ancient Celtic peoples, Synge’s representation of Aran culture is a history-based analysis of a distinct people that checks pastoral by entrenching the islanders in a primitive sociocultural pattern developed by nineteenth century anthropology. Contrary to standard interpretations of *The Aran Islands*, Mattar’s contention that “modernist primitivism” has much to do with Synge’s conception of the islanders, alongside Castle's insistence that *The Aran Islands* is as much an “ethnographic engagement” with peasant culture as it is a literary one, instil a more nuanced interpretation of the Revivalist text (*Modernism* 110). This thesis is indebted to these critiques. My ultimate object, however, is not to further elucidate the text’s affiliation with the Revival, nor with specific counter-trends in evolutionist anthropology, but to show how specific segments of *The Aran*

Islands begin to disrupt primitivist representation in general, defying both the *pastoral* and *prototypical* conceptions of Aran life. In their places, these segments offer new portrayals of the West as a modernizing culture area within the Irish nation.

Concentrating on Synge's foremost objective – to construct an impartial account of the primitive life he had found on Aran – I question whether or not his pastoral/prototypical framework of primitivist representation recognizes “the internal values” and “subsistence lifeways” of an agrarian community on the cusp of national citizenry (Pratt 45). In doing so, I offer a reading of *The Aran Islands* that draws attention to the textual minutiae that upset primitivist conceptions of Aran life. “The primitive was ever contingent on conditions imposed by progress; by destroying the isolationist myths of primitivism, the Celtologists had set an example that Synge followed when he shifted his focus to Ireland” (Mattar 172). In the shade of Inis Mór's first post office set up in 1897, Synge would have no choice but to acknowledge the deep fracture his primitive ideal would undergo.

Chapter 3

The Aran Islands Analysis: Disrupting the Primitive

Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else.

-Friedrich Nietzsche (217)

The Aran Islands has so often been critiqued strictly as a “Revivalist text” reflective of Synge’s own socio-cultural background that critics tend to overlook how the islanders themselves operate as unique cultural phenomena within the context of Synge’s work. Critics argue that *The Aran Islands* fabricates more of rural Ireland than it observes; yet to argue this case too stringently could undermine potential indigenous voices in the travelogue. I do not deny that the Aran islander is manipulated by Revivalist literary authority—but the islander still haunts the text, even if only by anxiously talking *about* his or her avatar of primitive self. The indigenous small-talk or scribblings of the community – whether they be passing observations on weather, work, fairy-lore, or more lofty considerations on the state of the nation – might challenge the idealistic paradigms of Anglo-Irish literary authority and preconceptions about rural Irish culture in general. Here, I am concerned with this small-talk and its subtly irreverent nature.

Gregory Castle argues that in *The Aran Islands*, Synge begins to “introduce the unmediated voices of his informants, particularly the storytellers,” and thereby “share[s] authority in the creation of a hybrid or dialogical text” (*Modernism* 115). Though Castle gives attention to the storytellers, he does not mention “Michael's” letters as specific

instances of discourse that bridge the gap between Synge's own subjective experience and the islanders' self-representation (*Modernism* 139). Oona Frawley makes a similar case. Inclined to see *The Aran Islands* as an “early” ethnographic work “unaware of its own biases,” Frawley argues that the travelogue moves towards the heightened modernism of Synge's later work, but ultimately does not eschew the subjective modes of nostalgic literature (Frawley 87). It is surprising that “Michael’s” letters have not received more attention from critics (Declan Kiberd's work *Synge and the Irish Language* being the noteworthy exception). Alan Price, editor of the *Collected Works of J.M. Synge, Volume II*, goes so far as to state that Michael’s letters provide us with “nothing private or remarkable” that would warrant any serious attention from Synge—yet it is precisely the unremarkable quality of the letters that would concern the would-be ethnographer, as one who thrives on quotidian details rather than on the exotic (*CWii* 125). It is curious why Synge, so closely associated with Revivalists that fetishize the monumental and shun the pedestrian preconditions of life on Aran, felt it necessary to transcribe these letters into his island representation, thereby giving credence to the idea that there is – as I shall illustrate – a spatial and temporal continuity between island and mainland societies, a continuity consolidated by the Irish postal system. It is my contention that Synge’s decision to reprint Michael’s letters shows a sense of ethnographic maturity in a work where it has not yet been fully granted.

Before discussing Michael's letters, I wish to identify another textual artifact that Synge collects throughout *The Aran Islands*, so that I can better illustrate how Synge's

primitivist view of Aran evolves throughout the course of the travelogue. As is quickly made apparent, Synge is heavily invested in preserving the anecdotes, stories, monologues, and dialogues he hears during his stay on all three islands. Recording the original syntax of the islanders' spoken and written English is an important project for Synge, as it would be this resource from which he would construct the peasant dialect of his plays (Greene 36; Castle *Modernism* 199-120). A primary source for this dialect are the island men, who tell folk-stories with somewhat sensationalist topics like the supernatural, murder, gore, and cuckoldry. Synge's objective is to recount these tales while making scant interpretation of their symbols or motifs—though the recurring themes of sexual proclivity and violence do suggest an influence on Synge's prototypical conception of Aran society.¹² The most frequently featured stories come from Pat Dirane, an old blind man who is known in the Inis Meáin community as the “story-teller” (*TAI* 16). Synge seeks “Old Pat” out in order to hear his tales, which Dirane tells in English and/or Irish, while Synge recounts them in the travelogue (*TAI* 16). Dirane invariably ends every story he tells with the expression, “that is my story” (*TAI* 20; 28; 43; 48). Synge feels it necessary to record Pat's words *verbatim*, perhaps because the final phrase is part of the story model itself, in that it lets the listener know that the story has ended. Castle suggests that, by noting these phrases, “Synge effectively *dialogizes*

¹² Castle writes: “There is a certain wild justice depicted [in these stories] that Synge associated with the peasantry of the West of Ireland” (*Modernism* 140).

his text, granting Dirane the kind of experiential authority usually reserved for the ethnographer himself” (*Modernism* 115 Castle's italics). Yet Dirane's trademark expression (“my story”) also implies ownership of the story: it belongs to the individual rather than to the community.

The paradox of this implication is not lost on Synge: stories are never owned, but are received resources that pass from one individual to the next, or more broadly, from one culture to the next. The first story Dirane tells makes several allusions to stories and tales well-known to European culture, the strongest being the reference to the well-known “pound of flesh” anecdote from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (*TAI* 16 - 20). After he records the tale, Synge notes that the story has numerous influences, from folk-tales in Ireland, Scotland, Prussia and Italy, and as far reaching as Egypt and Persia (*TAI* 20 – 21). “It gave me a strange feeling of wonder,” remarks Synge, “to hear this illiterate native of a wet rock in the Atlantic telling a story that is so full of European associations” (*TAI* 20). This is a strange admittance for Synge, who's primitivism wants to believe that Aran's monoculture is cut off from European associations. Recording Dirane's trademark ending, however, salvages the primitive culture area from the quagmire of a shared European culture. By referring to Dirane as “illiterate,” Synge seems to suggest that the islander is ignorant of how stories come into his possession. Though Synge is aware that Dirane's oral culture has somewhere been breached by European influence, Dirane himself, claiming sole ownership of these tales, is blissfully unaware of this influence. Being both physically and metaphorically blind, he is unable

to recognize the circulatory nature of his own culture. Primitive society is possible if the islanders themselves are blind to the actual marks civilization has made on their own culture area. Illiteracy, then, does not necessarily refer to the inability to read text, but to the ignorance of the sources of one's own language. In this way Dirane's phrase "that is my story" is the formula by which Synge convinces himself that the primitive still exists on Aran, because the islanders themselves are unaware of their cultural relationship with Europe.

When he is near death, however, Dirane reveals something about his life that unsettles Synge's interpretation of Aran's unacknowledged circulatory culture:

I sat for a long time on his threshold, while he leaned on a stool behind me, near his bed, and told me the last story I shall have from him – a rude anecdote not worth recording. Then he told me with careful emphasis how he had wandered when he was a young man, and lived in a fine college, teaching Irish to young priests!

They say on the island that he can tell as many lies as four men: perhaps the stories he has learned have strengthened his imagination. (*TAI* 55)

As Frawley points out, Synge's refusal to transcribe Dirane's "rude anecdote," for whatever reason, is immature ethnographic practice, in that Synge is unabashedly trying to mitigate Dirane's cultural representation (91). Further down, we see more of Synge's partiality, which point to more ironies. Upon hearing that Dirane has traveled in Ireland

and has worked in a college – a national institution of literacy, no less – Synge takes *this* to be a lie. Irrationally, Synge would much rather accept the myth of Dirane's homogeneity, when it is more likely, on proof of his language being steeped in “European associations,” that Dirane has indeed traveled beyond the “wet rock in the Atlantic.” It is also more likely that, being a story-teller, Dirane is an expert listener who is aware of the many nuances of the language that he uses (Dirane could be meaning to say, “this is my version, my riff” on a popular folktale). Finally, even if his career teaching Irish to English speakers is a product of his imagination, Dirane's claim may not altogether be a lie—for he is, in many respects, Synge's teacher. In order to achieve any kind of ethnographic authority beyond his primitivism, Synge would have to confront this *thing* that makes the story-teller so good at telling stories: they tell us the story we want to hear.

James Clifford writes that “twentieth century ethnography reflects new ‘spatial practices’” (De Certeau 1984) in that it shows how culture has found “new forms of dwelling and circulating” within a society (*Predicament* 13). Differing from nineteenth century anthropology, twentieth century ethnographic participant-observation necessitates the presence of an ethnographer or writer within the studied community. Mature ethnographers view the community not as an isolated or static entity, but as alert to and affected by external sociocultural conditions. “Cultures do not stand still for portraits,” Clifford exclaims – they respond to and interact with the urban centres that generate the ethnographers, painters, and writers who penetrate their rural worlds (*Writing Culture* 10). Pratt concurs, stating that the culture area constitutes a “contact

zone” where “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (7). In the struggle for representation, a diplomacy generates between the traveler and a local personality who translates, guides, and/or teaches the writer about the studied community. This is the writer’s confidant, who, in an ethnographic context, would be unflatteringly referred to as a “native informant” (*Predicament* 9). In order to be able to communicate with the ethnographer effectively, the informant must have one foot in his own represented culture and another in the urban culture that is doing the representing. From this comes the new “spatial practice”, where the dualistic experience of the informant, by virtue of being informed of both primitive and contemporary culture, comes to stand in as the primary cultural source.

Even though there is little else said of the man himself, Dirane's “lies” open up windows to the anthropological methodology of *social constructivism*, which shows “how the subjects of ethnography themselves set about creating and negotiating the categories of meaning that inform their social worlds” (*Erickson* 146). One begins to wonder not only to what extent Dirane has negotiated the primitive culture area with the tourist (for instance, what chosen aspects of his culture has he impressed upon Syngé), but also of the role Dirane plays in Inis Meain society as a creator and dis-locator of Aran culture. To recall, it was other islanders who told Syngé that Dirane could “tell as many lies as four men.” What, precisely, does the community take as Dirane's lie? That he has traveled across Ireland, or that he belongs to a primitive – and rather sensationalist –

monoculture? Perhaps both? Dirane's community role entails this double-nature: he is at once an organizer *and* a fabricator of folklore. Knowing this, Synge cannot entirely dismiss Dirane's death-bed "confession." The seed of doubt has been planted, and Synge will begin to mildly question what role islanders have in the construction – and deconstruction – of their primitive selves. It attests to Synge's ethnographic maturity, then, that he is willing to transcribe these stories and "Michael's" letters *verbatim*, in that they come to stand as examples of "dialogical textual production" that relay first hand interpretations of Aran life within the context of being both inside and outside of that culture: "In this view of ethnography the proper referent of any account is not a represented 'world': now it is specific instances of discourse" (*Writing Culture* 14).

Before focusing on the content of Michael's letters *per se*, I contextualize the letter as a new "spatial practice" of cultural negotiation by briefly discussing the posted letter's significance as a form of modern communication in a primitive society. Through its presence, the posted letter troubles primitive representation by implying an advanced geographical and social infrastructure – the postal system – in the community. (Synge acknowledges the letters are internationally posted when he states: "One of my island friends has written to me"; "[a] letter has come from Michael while I am in Paris" (*TAI* 56, 77)). Michael's letters exist in a modern paradigm of cultural praxis, as the Aran community, able to write and correspond internationally, begins to "dwell" (to use Clifford's term) in amassed systems of transit that suggest "dialogical modes" of cultural production (*Predicament* 13; *Writing Culture* 14). In this sense, they occupy the space of

Leersen's *paratext*: the typographical material that "surrounds" a text without forming a fully integrated part of its primary focus (footnotes, illustrations, chapter headings, titles etc.) (7). The implied postage stamp, the envelope, the composer and receiver, etc., implicate a paratext of wider cultural negotiations and exchanges.

On nearly all fronts does Synge avoid making mention of modernity in *The Aran Islands*; but when he introduces Michael's¹³ posted letters to the text, these new spatial practices indicate that the Aran Islands have been, at some point prior to Synge's arrival, integrated into the epoch. Synge does not acknowledge the nexus of international communication that Aran has inextricably found itself in—anachronistic as it is that primitive Aran culture is transmitted to the public through the multinational medium of the post, and that the island "beyond the dwelling place of man" is accessible through the nearest post office (*CWii* 65).¹⁴ Synge nonchalantly reveals that the island community finds a circuit of expression in an underlying industrial system of civil servants, bicycles, steamships, ferries, and trains, internationally synchronized to find an urban recipient of its primitive experience.

In spite of its reputation of having primarily an oral culture, Aran and the wider *Gaeltacht* were also the nation's source for written Irish. In a near-desperate attempt to

¹³ "Michael's" real name was Martin McDonough (Kiberd 45).

¹⁴ Coincidentally, Aran's first post office opened in Kilronan in 1897, the year before Synge's arrival (Ó hEithéir 8).

recover the widely-forgotten Irish language, the Gaelic League (1893) and the earlier “Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language” (SPIL) attempted a wide-spread revival of the language by promoting its publication in books, pamphlets and newspapers (Gilmartin *The Anglo-Irish Dialect* 5). Alongside the Literary Revival, the Gaelic League turned to the *Gaeltecht* for Irish texts and teachers. The League's mandate to organize and promote its production of Irish texts enabled Dublin and other urban audiences to learn the language without having to visit the *Gaeltacht*.¹⁵ We can imagine the postage system as playing an important part in the revival of the Irish language, as places like Aran ceased to be thought of as strictly having oral cultures, as the scratching of island pens started to overcome imagined seaside brogues. This emphasis on the written Irish word opened new cultural spaces that united the identities of urban and rural Ireland. The resurgence of the language would have a particular impact on young Irish men. Angela Bourke writes:

[Douglas] Hyde became president of a new organization, the Gaelic League, dedicated to the revival of Irish as a spoken and literary language through evening classes and weekend social activities. The League's appeal to a new generation of literate but often deracinated urban workers was immediate: it offered a

¹⁵ See Ó Buachalla, Séamas. “Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831 to 1981.” *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Multicultural Education (1984). 75- 92

distinctive identity and a youthful alternative to the complacencies of established parliamentary nationalism, at the same time as trains and bicycles began to give young people new mobility. (Bourke 85)

Because of institutions like the Gaelic League, alongside the new mobility fostered by mass manufacturing and long-established emigration routes, the *Gaeltacht* had been integrated into Irish geo-cultural life well before Synge's arrival on Aran in 1897 (Ó hEithir 8). More than this, the *Gaeltacht* youth were not absorbed into an English homoglot, but were valued for their knowledge of Irish *and* for their labour. It is this background that Synge's primary cultural informant represents. The documents of Michael's written Irish and English in *The Aran Islands* are important, because they signify an Aran textual culture fully aware of these social and cultural conditions.

This said, Declan Kiberd's observation that Michael's written English was substantially better than his written Irish attends to an important irony not to be overlooked. By Synge's first visit to Aran, almost all islanders who wrote did so predominantly in English. "Those islanders of Synge's acquaintance seemed to regard English as an easier literary language than Irish and they wrote it among themselves when communicating by mail. [Michael] wrote all letters to his mother in English, says Synge, because 'he is the only one of the family who can read or write in Irish'" (Kiberd 48). (The islanders started to adopt English sometime after the middle of the nineteenth century because of the growth of numerous types of industry in Galway City, Aran's portal into Ireland and the rest of the world. Consequently, "Cill Rónáin [Inis Mór's most

populated town] gradually became the island metropolis and the English language was in common use there before the end of the nineteenth century” (Ó hEithéir 5)). The question, then, is whether or not Michael's Irish is informed by the mandates of the Gaelic League, an institution Synge was critical of for its conservative nationalism (Gilmartin *The Anglo-Irish* 11). Synge does admit that one of his supplement Irish teachers on Aran, a precocious boy of “about 15”, has gained most of his knowledge on written Irish from national institutions: “A few years ago this predisposition for intellectual things would have made him sit with old people and learn their stories, but now boys like him turn to books and to papers in Irish that are sent them from Dublin” (*TAI* 84). It is precisely this circulatory nature of Aran's cultural reservoir that confounds Synge. Whatever the effects the postal system, along with bicycles, trains, and institutions such as the Gaelic League may have had on Aran, these effects certainly entailed a whole new way of life that Revivalists worked at great lengths to avoid citing. At the same time, it was precisely these things that would enable Revivalists like Synge to read and write in Irish.¹⁶

Against the trend to obfuscate signs of the modern epoch, Synge would include

¹⁶ In the words of James Buzard, culture-tourism was, in itself, “a way of seeing structured and sustained by institutions, [brought] into focus... by the instruments of modern transport technology and administration... it looked out upon a realm of asterisked tourist attractions and standardized amenities. (11)

Michael's letters into his work. A bilingual sojourner who knows how to read and write in English and Irish, Michael is indirectly juxtaposed to Synge's other cultural informant, Pat Dirane, the wizened story-teller of Inis Meáin, who relays oral histories. Where Dirane is tethered to the cottage hearth, Michael moves to-and-fro on the island while he accompanies Synge. Dirane's mythic subjects of Irish legend lie in contrast to Michael's contemporary subjects of immigration, industry, and urbanity. Dirane's stories emphasize the past and the collective memories of the community; Michael's reflections emphasize the individual and reveal how the community is being splintered by present-day economic necessities. Dirane, who is literally blind and dying, represents the old Ireland. The young Michael, in a constant state of migration, represents the new. If Synge had intended an allegory here, it is clear that the Aran community, once represented by Pat Dirane, is now being given over to Michael; and that Aran, along with Ireland, is entering a new era.

The topics of Michael's letters also challenge Revivalist conceptions of Aran as an isolated, atemporal cultural phenomenon. In Pratt's view, letters are "bilingual and dialogic" cultural artifacts that "often... constitute a group's point of entry into metropolitan literate culture", in form and often in content (7). The practice of sending and receiving letters between the islander and the mainlander signifies this point of entry into mainland metropolitan culture, where the composer of the letter initiates a linguistic exchange between island and mainland social circles and, thus, new ways of comprehending the urban-rural relationship. Again referring to Pratt's concept, the

letters ground a “contact zone” where the colonized subject finds a voice that engages a dominant culture, using the dominant culture's “own terms” (7). The content of Michael’s letters take on topics that an urban Irish audience would find familiar: blue-collar labour, migration due to economic circumstances, and the quotidian “punch-clock” passage of time.

To thoroughly explore how Michael’s letters trouble Synge’s Revivalism, two of Michael’s letters, which were written originally in English, are here printed at length. The italics are mine – they draw attention to Michael’s consistent attention to the passage of time. In the first letter, Michael is writing to Synge from Galway, where he has been looking for work:

My dear Friend, -- I hope that you are in good health since I have heard from you before, its *many a time* I do think of you since and it was not forgetting you I was for *the future*.

I was at home in *the beginning of March for a fortnight* and was very bad with the Influence, but I took good care of myself.

I am getting good wages from the first of *this year*, and I am afraid I won’t be able to stand with it, although it is not hard, I am working in saw-mills and getting the money for the wood and keeping an account of it.

I am getting a letter and some news from home *two or three times a week*, and they are all well in health, and your friends in the island as well as if I

mentioned them.

Did you see any of my friends in Dublin Mr – or any of those gentlemen or gentlewomen.

I think I soon try America but not until *next year* if I am alive.

I hope we might meet again in good and pleasant health.

It is now time to come to a conclusion, goodbye and not for ever, write soon. – I am your friend in Galway.

Write soon dear friend. (*TAI 77*)

At the time of the second letter's writing, Michael is back on Inis Meáin and Synge is in Paris. In this letter, Michael anticipates Synge's arrival on Inis Meáin.

Mr. Dear Mr. S.,-- I am *for a long time* trying to spare *a little time* for to write a few words to you.

Hoping that you are still considering good and pleasant health since I got a letter from you *before*.

I see *now* that *your time is coming round* to come to this place and learn your native language. There was a great *feis*¹⁷ in this island *two weeks ago*, and

¹⁷ Tim Robinson writes: “The *feis*, or Irish language festival, was an open-air event, with storytelling, dancing and games, organized by Tomás O'Concheanainn and chaired by Fr Michael O'Hickey (who was Vice-President of the Gaelic League until 1903, and

there was a very large attendance from the South island, and very many from the North.

Two cousins of my own have been in this house *for three weeks or beyond it*, but *now* they are gone, and there is a place for you if you wish to come, and you can write before you and we'll try and manage you as well as we can.

I am at home now *for about two months*, for the mill was burnt where I was at work. *After that I was* in Dublin, but I did not get my health in that city. – *Mise le mór mheas ort a chara*¹⁸ (TAI 77 - 78).

The first apparent contradiction to primitive representation is Michael's transient lifestyle. His work in various lumber-mills alerts the reader to a life that is largely determined by its reliance on industrial commerce. He has established contacts ("friends") in Dublin. Because Synge recounts Michael's letters, we assume that Michael is the subject of Synge's study; and if we are to accept him as such, Michael's transient experience with industrial labour is at odds with the agrarian reality Synge would have the reader believe exists on Aran. At the same time, there is no evidence that Synge is making any kind of moral out of Michael's transience – Michael's absence from the family and hearth is portrayed without any nostalgic sentiment concerning the splintering of the family.

Professor of Irish at Maynooth, the seminary in which he formed a federation of nationalistic priests)" (TAI 146).

¹⁸ Tim Robinson translates: "I am, with great respect to you, my friend" (TAI 146)

The second contradiction to primitive representation is Michael's repeated references to time. As discussed in chapter two, Synge sees the islanders as being ignorant of a mainland conception of the passage of time. Oona Frawley contends that Synge evades the convention of time "whenever possible" in *The Aran Islands*, and that he describes only the "most immediate of natural cycles" to deepen his isolationist conception of Aran as a place detached from the rest of Europe, both literally and metaphorically (Frawley 86). For Frawley, *The Aran Islands* is foremost a pastoral representation, usually nostalgic in its analysis of island geography and culture. She argues that Synge "omits" autobiographical, natural, and social history, in an attempt to recover a "pre-Darwinian mode of existence" on Aran (86).

The Revivalist idea of the Aran Islands ignores time altogether, so that the islanders themselves seem to become objects whose function it is to be subject to the gaze (whether pseudo-anthropological or touristic is a matter of debate here) and 'embody' Irish history. Aran and the west of Ireland more generally thus formed a 'timeless' space in which historical cycles were frozen: it was as if the islands and their inhabitants were oblivious to what had occurred in Irish history over the last several hundred years. (82)

For Frawley, *The Aran Islands* does not idealize the primitive as much as it de-historicizes it. Aran society is not primitive because they are at a lesser stage of evolution than mainland European societies, but because they occupy a different category of humanity altogether. It is, in Clifford's words, the mythologized "simple society" that

does not take part within “the flux of the present”, but stands in for the consistency of the archaic (*Writing Culture* 111).

As insightful as Frawley’s interpretation is, it makes no mention of what is evidenced in Michael’s letters. Here, time is not omitted “whenever possible”, but is mentioned repeatedly. The frequent reference to the word “time” (six times), and the citing of a duration of time – such as “a fortnight” (four times) or a specific point in time (eight times) – shows that the passage of time is of great concern. Whether it be in anticipating Synge’s arrival or perhaps keeping check of his own punch-clock, Michael conscientiously keeps accounts of when events have transpired, what is happening now, what will likely be happening in the future, and what routinely happens in the present simple tense and the perfect tense (“two cousins of my own *have been* in this house for three weeks”). Where Synge’s concern might be to negate time on Aran, Michael intends to make it the primary object of his discussion. It is not a question of whether or not Michael’s conception of time conflates with our own, but that time is something that this member of the community is greatly concerned with, not only as a topic, but as a rule by which one keeps economically and physically productive. (For example, Michael would have been concerned with Synge’s arrival because this would have been a primary means of his income. He also notes unproductive time: “I am at home now *for about two months*, for the mill was burnt where I *was* at work.” Health is also a primary concern, perhaps because it determines whether or not time is spent productively or in sickness.)

While not directly confronting the primitive stereotyping of his community,

Michael's letters do reveal a different cultural background that takes Dublin, Ireland, industry, the macro-system of the world, into its fabric. In addition, Michael's own acknowledged micro-system of minutes, weeks, months, and specific dates proves that Michael does not read time by means of a shifting light through a cottage door. The constant movement between his conception of immediate time (the now in which he is writing the letter), and his conception of a historical time structure (March, a fortnight) disproves the theory that Synge's intent was to omit a temporal structure altogether.

The fact that Synge himself does not voice these apparent contradictions himself marks an important straying from his own subjectivity. Cultural revival no longer seems to be Synge's goal. His mantra of "inventing nothing, and changing nothing that is essential" is no longer meant to insinuate his original intent to transmitting Aran culture. Instead, it becomes his assurance that his representation will not (entirely) get in the way of Michael and Pat Dirane's representations of their home community. Even though his sentiments would remain primitivist, Synge would no longer confine the islanders to primitivist representation. Such a reversal of objective, to allow the islander to illustrate indirectly how he is part of the nation-state, is a precarious venture for a writer affiliated with the Revival and its ambivalence towards nationalism. Charting the islanders' links to national and economic institutions would be counter-intuitive for a writer primarily concerned with cultural subsistence and immutability of *how* can a people survive exclusively, without interruption from the age. Adaptation was not supposed to be Synge's subject, after all, but sustainability in the face of adversity. Instead of

investigating how the modern vitiates the primitive, Synge would later turn to the question of how the primitive manifests itself in the modern. This, however, would be a subject for his plays; we can only assume that this reversal would not be “worth while to deal with” in the cultural representation we see in *The Aran Islands* (TAI 3).

Why does Synge insist on introducing the islander’s voice into the text, one that would breach the bounds of primitive space and time? I suggest that by the end of the four years he intermittently spent on Aran, Synge had grown overly suspicious of the air-tight primitive society he largely fashioned on Aran. It would be the problems inherent to *representing* this culture that would interest Synge, and “Michael's” voice would give a credence to this burgeoning interest that has not yet been fully granted.

Conclusion

This thesis has re-evaluated Synge's idealization of the primitive in *The Aran Islands*, showing how his “primitivism” is informed by trends in pastoral literature and evolutionist anthropology. I have argued that Synge's primitivism shifts from a pastoral idealization of the Aran Islands to a prototypical or “first man” conception of the Aran Islands that does not necessarily coincide with the ideology of the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival. Throughout, this thesis has also kept in mind moments where Synge overcomes this dual-primitivism by letting islanders, however remotely, refute their primitive selves. Such dialogisms dispute contentions that *The Aran Islands* is strictly primitivist in scope, as these transcriptions of island voices trouble or counter a primitive conception of Aran culture. More than this, I have contended that this “paratext” of island voices speaks to an artistic maturity that has indeed given shape to the “the internal values” of the Aran community – perhaps at the risk of betraying the illusion of its “subsistence lifeways” (Pratt 45).

In chapter one, I coin the term “Aran primitivism” by finding two categories of primitivist representation at work in *The Aran Islands*, as well as in other representations of Aran written by writers native to the islands. I call these categories a *pastoral* conception of the primitive, and a *prototypical* conception of the primitive. Relying on Irish primitivist theories made by Luke Gibbons (“hard primitivism” and “soft primitivism”) and Oona Frawley (“Irish Pastoral”), I demonstrated how Irish pastoral literature exalts the West as a sublime culture area threatened by modernity. I also

demonstrated how the pastoral mode of cultural representation is favoured by Anglo-Irish Revivalists, most notably by W.B. Yeats in his move to recover or revive ancient Irish culture. Following the pastoral mode, the prototypical mode of representation relies heavily on Sinéad Mattar's understanding of “modernist primitivism,” with its connections to evolutionist and “Celtological” anthropology. Contrasting the pastoral ennobling of the West of Ireland, the prototypical conception envisions the harsh realities of life in the rural culture area of the West of Ireland, as well as the hyper-sexual, violent and antisocial inclinations of its peasant people. To demonstrate examples of these two strains of primitivism at work in literature about Aran, I rely on representations made by the Inis Mór natives Liam O'Flaherty and Máirtín Ó Direáin, and find influences on their works in Synge's *The Aran Islands*.

In chapter two, I illustrate how deeply pastoral and prototypical conceptions of the primitive *The Aran Islands* by conducting a close analysis of the travelogue. Using theories by the renowned ethnographer James Clifford, alongside the literary criticism of Gregory Castle, I disinter what Clifford calls “ethnographic allegories” at play in Synge's portrayal of island life. At some points Synge depicts a pastoral version of the islands (which Clifford refers to as the “Appollonian” framework of cultural representation amongst ethnographers), in which islanders and landscape exist in cooperation. I show how pastoral takes shape in moments of clear weather that signify rationality and cultural cohesion. These moments are presided by island men, who exemplify the ennobling qualities Synge found in the Aran community. I also show how Synge often shifts from

pastoral to prototypical representation (Clifford's "Dionysian" cultural framework) upon instances of bad weather and night, which signify doubt, frustration, and cultural dissolution. These moments are presided by island women who exemplify the impulsive and sexual drives of a primitive people. Oscillating between these two modes of cultural representation, Synge comes to find a hybrid register of understanding the Aran people that includes both a literary and an anthropological idealizing of the West of Ireland as a primitive culture area.

In chapter three, I show where these moments of pastoral/prototypical representation fail. I argue that, by transcribing Pat Dirane's stories and Michael's letters directly into *The Aran Islands*, Synge allows Aran Islanders to speak for themselves through and against the pastoral/prototypical framework of primitive representation. Though Synge still loosely adheres to the illusion of primitive society, Dirane and Michael begin to bring this conception of their home island into question. Dirane does this subtly in his renditions of Aran folklore that imply far-reaching cultural influences—an impossibility in what was supposed to be a primitive monoculture. Michael confronts Synge's primitive representation directly by posting letters to Synge, thereby revealing that Aran culture resides in a circulatory system of dissemination. I also show how the content of Michael's letters problematize the idea of primitive culture itself by revealing how concerned the cultural informant is with industry, emigration, and mainland conventions of time.

Anyone who has been to Aran will likely find two faults with this thesis. Firstly, I

use the term “Aran culture” throughout, with little regard for what each individual island stands for by way of its own unique culmination of technology, art, social structure, agrarian labour, and so on. Inis Mór, Inis Meáin, and Inis Oírr are very different from one another, despite the fact that they share the same geology and are but a few miles from one another. One Inis Mór local told me that the Inis Mór community takes much of its cultural influence (its dialect of Irish, in particular) from Connemara in County Galway, where Inis Oírr culture seems much more characteristic of that of the Burren in County Clare. And Inis Meáin's tourist market is nowhere as pronounced or accessible as Inis Mór's or Inis Oírr, and might therefore spur the tourist's idea, forged by Synge, that life is more primitive there than it is on the other islands. (To what extent this is true I do not know, for I have not been to Inis Meáin—though I expect it to be false. It does not take a clear day on Inis Mór to see the gigantic wind turbines on the west side of the middle island.) In response to this objection, my intention here has not been to focus directly on the sociocultural development of the islands, but to analyze Synge's conception of the islands while mentioning the gendered sociocultural distinctions he himself envisioned there during his tours. I agree, however, that any effort to tease-out Synge's primitivism with respect to each island would definitely be worthwhile, as each island has no doubt responded to Synge's presence in different ways. Taking the attention off of Synge and placing it on his more-or-less subsidiary role in the development of individual island culture is a study I have yet to come across.

The second limitation to this thesis is due to my inability to understand Irish. This

ignorance makes any analysis of Aran culture, even through the eyes of Synge, a problematic venture. I noticed from my time on Aran that the islanders' perception of themselves was inextricably linked to their language; and that although the overwhelming majority of islanders were bilingual, Irish was their first and foremost means of expression. I readily admit that a unilingual survey of *The Aran Islands* and its subject matter, especially in comparison with the Irish poetry of Máirtín Ó Direáin, can only touch surface at best. Yet I hope this thesis has ended suggesting that the “true” islands of the *Gaeltacht* might still be hiding amidst the colonial baggage of English. To quote Mairtin O'Deirian's “Homage to John Millington Synge”:

The ways of my people decay.

The sea no longer serves as a wall.

But till Coill Chuain comes to Inis Meáin

The words you gathered then

Will live on in an alien tongue. (qtd. in Ó hEithir 175)

Making do, I have relied on Tim Robinson's translations of Irish phrases and anecdotes in his forwarded edition of Synge's *The Aran Islands*, as well as from his compendium, *Stones of Aran*.

Lastly, the title for this thesis derives from Pat Dirane's trademark ending to his stories. As Synge admits (perhaps unwittingly), Dirane's stories have many authors, so many that it becomes difficult to continue believing in the fine lines that demarcate Aran folklore from the rest of Europe's. I have found this a pithy metaphor for Synge's project

of cultural revival itself. Not unlike Dirane's stories, *The Aran Islands* is made up of multiple narratives, with characters and motifs from different genres, weaved together by different authoritative perspectives. A deep listening is required to find the ideological wirings of travelogue, pastoral piece, ethnography, and autobiography that crisscross the text. And though the cultural baggage Synge brings to Aran has much to do with his rendering of the life he found there, Dirane and Michael's voices subtly bring forth the "Aran associations" within the text. As Tim Robinson muses, [t]hat double-natured and sphinx-like creature, Synge-on-Aran, still proposes its riddle" (*TAI* xxxix). In all his work, Synge continues on as a trickster figure who folds many stories into one deceiving whole.

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