

‘This World of Inarticulate Power’

J.M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* and Magical Realism

Christopher Collins

These people make no distinction between the natural and the supernatural.

-J.M. Synge¹

The normative academic response to J.M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* (1904) advocates that Synge’s dramatic treatment of life on the Aran Islands is symptomatic of that hackneyed (but extremely popular) style that was peculiar to the Abbey Theatre’s formative years: cottage kitchen realism. The dramatist went to extraordinary lengths in order to ensure that there be ‘no fake about the show’ and accordingly the realism of *Riders to the Sea* (hereafter *Riders*) can hardly be overstated.² From his Aran acquaintance Michael Costello, Synge managed to import authentic Aran textiles for the costume department and he even managed to bring the company to a workshop with an ailing Aran exile who languished in a rotting Dublin tenement³; Lady Gregory neatly summarized Synge’s dedication to the realist aesthetic when she feared that ‘local smells’ would be brought into the theatre.⁴ Even Joseph Holloway, architect by day, Abbey stool pigeon by night, congratulated Synge on ‘the naturalness of the whole episode’.⁵ But when writing *Riders* Synge was acutely aware of just how limiting realism could be, especially when reduced to a naturalist aesthetic, which is why he would later criticize ‘the reality of life’ in the work of Henrik Ibsen and Émile Zola.⁶

Synge’s notebooks make it unequivocally clear that the dramatist philosophized the reality of life as two temporal modes of existence: ‘[our] reality [is] conceivable in connexion [sic] with an absolute reality’.⁷ He had come to this conclusion shortly before his twenty-second birthday (nine years prior to his first draft of *Riders*) after he had finished reading

Arthur Schopenhauer's suppositions on metaphysics, which state that 'our world is nothing else than the appearance'.⁸ Synge was fascinated by Schopenhauer's postulate, which proceeds to substantiate, at length, that our experience of reality is just a simulacrum that is idealized by the perceiving subject. Consequently, Schopenhauer occupied Synge's thoughts and time and again the dramatist would reach for his notebook so that he could muse over the authenticity of the realistic aesthetic: 'Real? The conception of reality can be nothing more than some mode of consciousness and the question to be considered is – What is the relation between this and other modes?' (*TCD MS: 4379, f.94r*). Thus, while writing *Riders* Synge was acutely aware of two differential realities and concerned with how they could be made to dovetail seamlessly within his dramaturgical praxis.

Although the sensory data of *Riders* completely conformed to realistic convention this was, in fact, Synge's subversive way of suturing the spectator within a familiar horizon of realistic expectation. For Synge knew that once his spectator was sufficiently comfortable with the familiar material referentiality of the stage picture, the dramatist could then complicate the objective truth of realism with those supernatural phenomena that permeated life on Aran. For if his visits to Aran (Inis Meáin) had taught Synge anything, it was that the hegemony of realism is perennially suspicious of those supernatural phenomena that are characterized as unreal. And in *Riders* the presence of supernatural phenomena within the parameters of realism is categorical. Accordingly, the play's dramaturgical praxis is in dialogue with the fundamental principles of the mode of writing that would subsequently come to be known as magical realism, which is particularly recalcitrant to the homogeneity of Irish-Victorian cultural discourse. Supernatural phenomena were anathema to Irish-Victorian cultural discourse because they were considered to be indexical of a backward and uncivilised consciousness; the very opposite of rectitude and propriety, the *sine qua non* of

Irish-Victorian culture. Synge's narrative of what will here be referred to as magical realism gives credence to a subterranean culture where patterns of pre-modern and pre-Christian belief puncture and problematize the homogeneity of Irish-Victorian cultural discourse.⁹

From his studies of Schopenhauer, Synge understood that mankind's flaw is to let the world 'pass by . . . like an empty dream, or a ghostly vision not worth our consideration'.¹⁰ According to Schopenhauer, if we could exercise the correct categories of the mind then the matrix of our material existence would become alarmingly clear and, all of a sudden, 'the inborn realism which arises from the original disposition of the intellect' would be expelled (*World as Will and Representation*, p. xxiii). In many respects, Schopenhauer's dialectical struggle between the real and the ghostly lies at the very heart of magical realism and indeed, it predicates the dramatic conflict of *Riders*, where reality is pluralized in order to give the spectator a new metaphysical understanding of his or her own ontology. The purpose of this paper, then, is to demonstrate how, twenty-one years before magical realism achieved its title as a literary style, Synge wrote *Riders* as magical realism. In order to give credence to this supposition, *Riders* will be juxtaposed against magical realism's narrative trademarks. Furthermore, the analysis will also explore Synge's unpublished notebooks in order to demonstrate how his dramaturgical praxis of magical realism is predicated upon Schopenhauer's metaphysics and the comparative science of James Frazer and Herbert Spencer. Indeed, this is why the dramaturgy of *Riders* must be considered as praxis; Synge mobilizes philosophical and scientific discourses and gives them aesthetic form.

The premise of magical realism is the notion of narrative hierarchy. Narratives of magical realism create a complicated dialectic where the 'unreal' interchanges with the real so that supernatural phenomena are plausibly produced. However, magical realism is often speciously supposed to be another form of the fantastic as the spectator is forced into raising

an eyebrow towards reality. But unlike a fantastical narrative, magical realism requires that the spectator is not disconcerted by supernatural phenomena, but rather cajoled into accepting the credibility of that which may appear to be extra to the ordinary. As far as *Riders* is concerned, this is an essential supposition that needs to be entertained and therefore it is worth exploring Tzvetan Todorov's useful delineation of the fantastic if we are to accept Synge's narrative to be in accordance with magical realism.

Todorov proposed that the presence of fantastic elements presents the spectator with a curious disjuncture. At this disjuncture, two possible interpretative outcomes can be entertained when the audience of the theatrical text is presented with supernatural phenomena. The first possible outcome is what Todorov characterized as the uncanny, which means that the spectator is able to posit a rational explanation for the presence of supernatural phenomena by, for example, attributing the magical event to a mere trick of the mind. The second outcome is what Todorov understood to be the marvellous, in which the spectator accepts that the supernatural phenomena defy the causality of natural law and so the narrative is not conditioned by our conception of reality but rather constitutes a fictional world that is symptomatic of the fairy tale.¹¹ For the spectator, the narrative is disjunctive precisely because of the presence of the fantastic, which requires the spectator to stop and decide exactly what is going on within the narrative. Thus, the fantastical element of the narrative is only fleeting and once the spectator has decided whether the presence of supernatural phenomena is uncanny or marvellous, events in the narrative can be contextualized within either mode.

According to Todorov, the only exception to this rule is if the characters in the narrative are persistently unsure about the presence of supernatural phenomena. If this is the case then the narrative must be considered as being purely fantastical, simply because the

uncanny/marvellous mode cannot be entertained; the W.B. Yeats/Lady Gregory play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) is a good example of a purely fantastical narrative because the characters can never quite work out if The Poor Old Woman is just that or if she is, in fact, a supernatural phenomenon.¹² Analysis of *Riders* demonstrates how magical realism deviates from Todorov's conception of the fantastic. A narrative of magical realism requires that the characters and the spectator do not entertain the indecision that is indicative of the fantastic, and it is precisely because there is no uncertainty pertaining towards supernatural phenomena that the uncanny/marvellous narrative mode does not apply. This respect for the reality of supernatural phenomena is contingent upon the organic relationship that the characters within the text have with supernatural phenomena, and as a result their acceptance sutures the spectator within realistic convention.

The central conflict of *Riders* is the attempt of a mother (Maurya) to stop her son (Bartley) from leaving Aran for the Galway horse fair because she fears that he will drown in the sea, just her elder son (Michael) did ten days before. Synge based the characters in *Riders* upon the lives of the Aran islanders and was fully aware that supernatural phenomena were an essential part of the material referentiality on Aran, to the extent that he concluded that the islanders made 'no distinction between the natural and the supernatural' (*CW*, II, 128), a supposition that was later qualified by Seán Ó Súilleabháin.¹³ This acknowledgment of supernatural phenomena is the fulcrum upon which the praxis of *Riders* is balanced because the characters demonstrate a credulous relationship with supernatural phenomena that competes with the realist aesthetic.

An idiosyncrasy of magical realism is the insistent but subtle interjection of supernatural phenomena within the paradigm of realism. Narratives of magical realism saliently witness the materialization of the supernatural in the natural order, which in turn

complicates those everyday objects that are an integral part of realism's material referentiality. The repeated manner in which the natural order functions symbolically in *Riders*, and essentially acts as the protagonist in the text, is Synge's debt to this narrative principle. For example, the stage direction, '[*The door which Nora half closed behind her is blown open by a gust of wind.*']' (*CW*, III, 5) measures appositely against magical realism's elementary narrative principles because the door, an object of everyday experience, bursts open specifically when Nora (Maurya's daughter) discusses Michael's death. In this way, Synge uses the natural order to introduce the supernatural and to complicate the cause of Michael's death, which forces the spectator to question exactly what happened to Michael when he found his end on the sea. This dramatic device affords Synge the opportunity to set up Michael's death as something that is possibly extra to the ordinary, but importantly this possibility is not realized until the spectator is completely grounded within the realistic aesthetic. When the spectator begins to entertain the possibility that the cause of Michael's death might be supernatural (as in the fantastic), Synge proceeds to account for the certitude of Michael's death with a realistic device.

In *The Aran Islands* (1907) Synge remarks that the islanders live a 'simple life' in which the principle of economy is taken to its frugal conclusion to the extent that the islanders thought that 'Every article' held a 'personal character' (*CW*, II, 58). Hence, Michael's death is not originally substantiated by any supernatural evidence because his sisters are able to empirically verify it by 'three score stitches' of his stocking, which was found on the Aran shore (*CW*, III, 15). After viewing 'the incident in which the sisters discover that the old shirt & stocking are those of their missing brother' Holloway concluded that the scene appeared as consummate 'reality to those who witness[ed] it'.¹⁴ But this is magical realism's complicated dialectic of narrative hierarchy in full force; the realistic

account of Michael's death draws the spectator into the realism of the cottage kitchen, but it also brings supernatural phenomena, such as symbolic function of the natural order, which up until this point had been understated, firmly within realistic convention. However, this primary analysis does not necessarily vindicate Synge's praxis as magical realism; to fully appreciate how *Riders* is in accordance with magical realism we need to establish how Synge used comparative science and Schopenhauer's metaphysics to theorise magical realism.

As a student of comparative anthropology, Synge grounded his magical realism in an acute anthropological knowledge of the magical belief that he had encountered while living amongst the Aran islanders. Synge understood that the credal interchange between natural and supernatural law on Aran was indexical of 'the marks of primitive religion' as laid out by James Frazer in his polemical text *The Golden Bough*. Synge began reading *The Golden Bough* after his first visit to Aran (he made five in total) in September 1898. And in his notebook Synge recorded Frazer's four elementary principles of primitive religiosity:

- 1) No priests proper.
- 2) No temples.
- 3) Spirits not gods are recognised. Names general not proper.
- 4) The rites are magical rather than propitiatory. (*TCD MS: 4378, f.52v*).

These signatures of primitive religion were written into *Riders*, in which there is no mention of any church and the 'young priest' is an apprehensive offstage figure (*CW*, III, 5). But with respect to magical realism, it is the latter two hallmarks of primitive religion that particularly concern Synge's dramaturgy. Narratives of magical realism are often predicated upon folklore and cultural residue, which makes them known as narratives of folkloric

magical realism.¹⁵ *Riders* is consummate folkloric magical realism because Synge utilizes two cultural residues, the fairy-faith (Frazer's third principle) and magical rituals (Frazer's fourth principle) in order to effect his narrative with a sympathy for the traditions of those who were characterized as the discontents of Irish-Victorian cultural discourse.

As Synge settled into Aran life he was repeatedly reminded of the efficacy of the fairy-faith and indeed, the fairies were considerably more centralized in their orthodoxy than Roman Catholicism was on Synge's Aran. For Synge, whether the fairies actually existed or not was beside the point; what interested the dramatist was the monopoly the fairies held in the religious *habitus* to the extent that the Christian God was forced to play second fiddle. Accordingly, the fairy-faith was a rationalizing tenet that allowed the islanders to comprehend that which was incomprehensible. Upon arriving on Aran Synge was greeted by Old Mourteen, who blamed the fairies for the disappearance of his child. The disappearance of Old Mourteen's child is illustrative of that belief fetishized by Synge's Revivalist colleagues: the abduction of humans by the fairies. According to Irish folklore humans were often taken away by the fairies and irrevocably kept in their company if the abducted were not rescued within ten days.¹⁶ And Synge juxtaposes Michael's supposed death, ten days before, with this belief that he knew was discursively familiar amongst the Aran islanders.

We know that Michael disappeared ten days before through Bartley's attempt to assuage Maurya's fears about his travelling to Galway on the morning of the tenth day: 'How would [he] be washed up, and we after looking each day for nine days, and a strong wind blowing a while back from the west and south?' (*CW*, III, 9). Hence, it is possible to conjecture that the fairies snatched Michael, especially since the fairies were known to maliciously linger over the sea, waiting to abduct humans; Synge gives this dramatic precedence when Cathleen (Maurya's other daughter) laments that her brother is with 'the

black hags that do be flying on the sea' (*CW*, III, 17). With respect to the concomitance of the fairies with the sea, Irish folklore maintains that certain people were able to hear what the fairies were saying by paying close attention to the sea's cadences and rhythms. With this information the seer was said to be able to divine the future, as proposed by Dáithí Ó hÓgáin: 'There was a very old tradition that the sea around Ireland [...] cried out to foretell a catastrophe.'¹⁷ The currency of this superstition finds its way into *Riders*; up until this point the spectator, along with Maurya and her two daughters, has been led to assume that Michael has drowned in the sea, simply because it is the only realistic conclusion. But this is just Synge's way of convincing the spectators that they are (like Synge's characters) rational subjects. For Synge understood that if the spectator could willingly accept that his characters were reasonable, then when the same characters nonchalantly accept the presence of supernatural phenomena within the realistic aesthetic, the spectator will be obliged to do the same.

In December 1899, after Synge's second visit to Aran, the dramatist began reading Herbert Spencer's *The Principles of Psychology*. Spencer's work reminded Synge that our conception of reality is unreliable and in his notebook Synge recorded Spencer's theory of 'Transfigured Realism', which 'simply asserts objective existence as separate from and independent of subjective existence. But it asserts neither that one any [sic] mode of this existence is in reality that which it seems, nor that connexions [sic] among its modes are objectively what they seem.' (*TCD MS*: 4379, f.85r). What Synge is trying to explain here is Spencer's theory that a transfigured, noumenal reality or, in other words, a reality that provides the hidden truths behind our material existence, is always beyond our understanding. Therefore our reality is always open to reasonable doubt because we rely on our subjective gaze to rationalize the phenomenal world. To Synge this was nothing new, as

he had come across this understanding of an alternative reality in April 1893, when reading Schopenhauer's philosophy on metaphysics (*TCD MS*: 4414, f.49v). Synge diligently read Schopenhauer's shrewd defence of 'apparitions and magic', which advocated that their existence could be detected if we could just contemplate an alternative reality.¹⁸ Schopenhauer advocated that it is entirely possible to send our minds to an alternative reality through the power of dreams and once in this mode of consciousness it is not only possible to detect magical apparitions but also to 'announce things that occur at a distance' (Schopenhauer, 'Supplement I', p. 150).

In the same line of thought, Spencer maintained in *The Principles of Sociology* that the appreciation of an alternative reality formed the provenance of primitive religion. Thus, Spencer was keen to emphasise the efficacy of dreams because it allowed the believer in primitive religion to appreciate and differentiate between two states of consciousness, the nighttime consciousness (the dream-self) and the daytime consciousness (the shadow self). According to Spencer, when the supplicant of primitive religion dreams, he/she becomes aware that the soul can leave the body, and with this newfound appreciation of the duality of human consciousness, the dreamer starts to consider what form the soul might take when it leaves the body. Spencer advocated that this conjecturing on the part of the primitive gives rise to the belief that after death the soul can take the form of a ghost and the propitiation of these spirits is, according to Spencer, the kernel of religious practice. Synge never made any notes on Spencer's schema on primitive religion's provenance in dreams and ghosts, choosing instead to focus on Spencer's suppositions on causality and natural law. But it is possible to conjecture that Synge appropriated Spencer's theory of primitive religion into *Riders*, especially when one considers the striking parallels within his dramaturgical praxis. And while there is, of course, an anthropological difference between a ghost and a fairy, we

would do well to remember Frazer's third principle of primitive religiosity: 'Spirits not gods are recognised. Names general not proper.' (*TCD MS*: 4378, f.52v). For Synge, ghosts and fairies were interchangeable precisely because they were both spirits with generic titles, rather than ones with any individual appellation.

In *Riders* Synge amalgamates Schopenhauer and Spencer's theories on dreams and applies them to Maurya's character. From this perspective, Maurya, a supplicant of primitive religion, believes that the dead will return as ghosts and it is through dreaming that she is able to detect their presence. And so, Synge dramatizes Maurya as not simply another mother of a frugal Aran household, but a woman with magical and prophetic powers who has the ability to send her consciousness to a shamanic reality and divine 'the fearfulest thing' (*CW*, III, 19). With respect to shamans, as Mircea Eliade points out, 'Magic and magicians are to be found more or less all over the world, whereas shamanism exhibits a particular magical speciality...the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave the body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld'.¹⁹ Thus, by entering a shamanic state of consciousness (another trademark of magical realism), Maurya is able to negotiate the matrix of everyday reality and detect Michael's presence as a supernatural phenomenon.²⁰ And not only does Maurya's divination of Michael as a fairy who has returned to abduct his brother harmonize the supernatural within realistic convention, it also gives consideration to Frazer's fourth principle of primitive religion: magical rituals. From *The Golden Bough* Synge learnt that Frazer differentiated between contagious and homeopathic magical ritual. Whereas contagious magical rituals involve the application of universal sympathy (stabbing a person's shirt will cause that person real harm), homeopathic magical rituals involve an interaction with the spirit world (stabbing a shirt that is completely unconnected with the person will suffice as the spirit world will ensure that the person is harmed). Maurya's

shamanic state of consciousness is necessary for the completion of her homeopathic magical ritual because it is within this shamanic state of consciousness that she is able to interact with the spirit world, which will allow her to defer Bartley's abduction. However, during her homeopathic magical ritual Maurya realizes that Michael did not drown but rather, that he has been snatched by the fairies that lurk on the sea. And now, returning from her shamanic state of consciousness, she is able to understand that Michael has returned to take Bartley away with the fairies and, furthermore, that her interaction with the spirit world has been unsuccessful:

Maurya: [*a little defiantly*]. I'm after seeing [Michael] this day, and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare; and I tried to say 'God speed you,' but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly; and 'the blessing of God on you,' says he, and I could say nothing. I looked up then, and I crying, at the grey pony, and there was Michael upon it – with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet. (*CW*, III, 19).

Maurya's vision is Synge's literal appropriation of the story that surrounded the disappearance of Old Mourteen's child: 'Afterwards he told me how one of his children had been taken by the fairies. One day a neighbour was passing, and she said, when she saw it on the road, "That's a fine child." Its mother tried to say "God bless it," but something choked the words in her throat [...] "Believe me," said the old man, "the fairies were in it".' (*CW*, II, 51). According to the fairy-faith, the fairies snatched their victims on a grey horse, but if the horse could be stopped then the fairies would cease their abduction. Maurya fails to do this and in keeping with magical realism's reliance on the literalization of supernatural metaphor we learn that 'The grey pony knocked [Bartley] over into the sea', where the fairies lurked in the waves (*CW*, III, 23).

Concomitant with Spencer's theory of transfigured realism is his hypothesis on the persistence of consciousness: 'we speak of a belief as something separate from the conception to which it relates, yet on analysis we find that we simply express by it a certain property of such conception – *its persistence*'. According to Spencer, although our conception of reality is unreliable, any reality could be justified through what he classified as a persistence of consciousness: 'The belief being the persistence, the persistence cannot be destroyed without the belief being destroyed.'²¹ And in his notebook Synge jotted down Spencer's supposition: 'By reality we mean persistence in consciousness' and later 'The real, as we conceive it is distinguished solely by the test of persistence for we distinguish it from what we call unreal.' (*TCD MSS*: 4379, ff.94r-94v). What Synge is articulating here is Spencer's theory that the belief in any reality is solely dependent on the application of our consciousness to that reality; as long as the consciousness remains constant then, by corollary, the credulity of that reality will also remain constant. Thus, as far as Synge was concerned, Maurya's vision is completely real precisely because of the persistence of her shamanic state of consciousness. In this way, both Frazer and Spencer suggested that all primitive communities embodied a psychic unity, which allowed Synge, who also believed that the community on Inis Meáin had a 'psychic memory' to substantiate Maurya's vision as being completely credible to her daughters (*CW*, II, 99). Indeed, Nora and Cathleen may counter the supernatural phenomenon by referencing their own empirical evidence (Michael's stocking) but they immediately accept the validity of Maurya's prophecy – 'It's destroyed we are from this day' (*CW*, III, 19) – once the supernatural phenomenon is given its realistic details. Furthermore, the girls are inclined to accept Maurya's prophecy because it is likened to Bride Dara's vision of 'the dead man with a child in his arms' (*CW*, III, 19), which suggests that the community on Inis Meáin are completely familiar with shamanic

states of consciousness and homeopathic magical rituals. Accordingly, the verification of Maurya's vision allows Synge to dramatize the magical ritual as something that is reasonable and fundamentally realistic. The realistic nature of the magical ritual is consummated when Maurya correctly predicts the immediate sequence of events:

Maurya: [...] I seen two women, and three women, and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves, and not saying a word. I looked out then, and there were men coming after them, and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it – it was a dry day, Nora – leaving a track to the door.

[She pauses again with her head stretched out towards the door. It opens softly and old women begin to come in, crossing themselves on the threshold, and kneeling down in front of the stage with red petticoats over their heads.] (CW, III, 21).

This *mise-en-abîme* is characteristic of narratives of magical realism because such narratives relish in playing with the signifiers of realistic convention so that the supernatural emerges from the narrative as being self-evident. Thus, Synge's spectator is forced to accept Maurya's divinatory powers precisely because the supernatural cannot be excused; what she divined has actually materialized within the cottage kitchen. Again, this is just another way that magical realism foregrounds its most fundamental concern: the reconfiguration of reality. In this way, Synge's magical realism attempts to critique the habitations of an Irish-Victorian culture by giving the spectator the chance to appreciate Spencer's realm of transfigured realism, where noumenal respect is attributed to all supernatural phenomena.

Magical realism is subversive because it launches a critique on contemporaneous texts that purport to be realistic. It is because magical realism understands the supernatural to be in harmony with realism's sensory data that the term cannot be readily applied to the majority of the fantastic/marvellous narratives that emerged from the Revival's obsession with the

mysterious powers of the Celt. Thus, it should be noted that it was not Synge's intention to suture his narrative of magical realism within the Revival's atavistic logic that was uncritically based in Celtic lore. From his knowledge of comparative science the dramatist knew that the magic ritual witnessed by Maurya in her vision had nothing to do with the Celtic Zeitgeist and he had to look no further than Andrew Lang's critique of the Revival for evidence of this. Lang complained that '... "second sight" is averred to be a Celtic gift. You might as well call epilepsy a Celtic gift. Every savage – the Maori, the Red Indian, the Zulu – is as full of second sight as any man of Moi-dart. What is called "Celtic" in poetry or in superstition is really early human, and may become recrudescant anywhere, for good or for evil.'²² This is why Synge considered Aran life to be 'the most primitive that is left in Europe' (*CW*, II, 54) – not because he fetishized the Revival's nobility of the savage Celt, but because he recognized that the islanders' belief in primitive religion warranted this categorization. Synge was particularly interested to see how the islanders would evolve from their belief in primitive religiosity, something that he knew was bound to happen after reading Frazer and Spencer. Spencer understood that the evolution from primitive religion was driven by what he called persistence of force, an innate ambition within all phenomena to move from a homogeneous to heterogeneous structure. In his notebook Synge struggled to come to terms with Spencer's theory: 'By the Persistence of Force we really mean the persistence of some Power which transcends of our knowledge and conceptions.' (*TCD MSS*: 4379, ff.92r-92v). In the case of *Riders* this transition from homogeneity to heterogeneity is already taking place as Bartley, indexical of a new generation of islanders, decides to ignore his mother's warnings from the spirit world. But Synge's spectator, forced to interrogate his/her appreciation of fairy abduction and magical rituals in an age of Darwinism, cannot disregard Maurya's warnings, and this is crucial when considering *Riders* as a narrative of

magical realism: Synge modelled his dramaturgical praxis in such a way that his spectator is unable to deny that Michael has returned to take Bartley away with the fairies, which precipitates a retreat from realistic expectations as the spectator is forced to reconsider his/her own understanding of metaphysics and ontology.

This pluralization of reality is inherent in all narratives of magical realism because they make the spectator acutely aware that if his/her categorization of reality is indefinite then, by corollary, all truthful presuppositions are also indefinite. Accordingly, this is why Synge's narrative of magical realism is subversive. It treats the spectator as if s/he were a child by enticing him/her with peculiar supernatural details, such as fairy abduction and magical rituals, so that ultimately, the spectator willingly accommodates the supernatural within his/her understanding of mimesis so that the supernatural is afforded the opportunity to work its magic within narrative realism. But to the spectator in the Ireland of Synge's time, as Frazer was quick to point out, fairy abduction and magical rituals were 'nothing but a mistaken application of the very simplest and most elementary processes of the mind'.²³ In Synge's hands, then, magical realism emerges as a discourse of counter-hegemony as it seeks to problematize the convention of realism, which was so essential in bolstering the binary structures of Victorian rationality and ontology. For the impetus of magical realism is always to reconfigure reality in order to give the spectator a new clarity of existence and it offered Synge with a paradigm in which he could ensure that two beliefs particular to that 'world of inarticulate power' were plausibly accepted upon a stage of national-popular sovereignty (*CW*, II, 110).

To return to Schopenhauer's postulate on life passing mankind by as if it were a ghostly apparition: it could be said that Schopenhauer urged Synge to 'ask whether the apparition is something else, something in addition, and if so what that something is'

(Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, p. 99). In *Riders*, the ghostly vision that came to Maurya might have passed her by, but due to her persistence of shamanic state of consciousness she had no reason to question its veracity. Synge hoped that his narrative of magical realism would ensure that his spectator employed the same persistence of consciousness. To achieve this end, Synge had to discredit the “magical thinking” of the Revival because he understood the convention of cottage kitchen realism to be a reductive aesthetic that bolstered cultural hegemony. And so, Synge’s dramaturgical praxis of magical realism in *Riders* is much more than a tragedy of an Aran household, but a subversive dramatisation of a subterranean culture that lurked within the gaps and the fissures of Irish-Victorian cultural discourse.

Notes

[1] J.M. Synge, *Collected Works*, Volume II: *Prose*, ed. Alan Price (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.128. Hereafter quoted within the text as *CW*, II, and page number.

[2] J.M. Synge, *Collected Works*, Volume III, *Plays Book I*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.xix. Hereafter quoted within the text as *CW*, III, and page number.

[3] See, George Roberts, ‘Plays of Synge’, *The Irish Times*, August 2, 1955.

[4] Lady Gregory, *Seventy Years: Being The Autobiography of Lady Gregory* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1976), p.415.

[5] Joseph Holloway, January 12 1907, *Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer: January-June 1907*, National Library of Ireland Manuscript: 1805, p.30. This quotation comes with the permission of The Board of The National Library of Ireland.

[6] J.M. Synge, *Collected Works*, Volume IV, *Plays Book II*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.53.

[7] *The Manuscripts of the Irish Literary Renaissance*, Series 3: *The J.M. Synge Manuscripts from the Library of Trinity College, Dublin* (Brighton: 1987), *TCD MS(S)*: 4379, f.93r. Hereafter quoted within the text as *TCD MS(S)*: and folio number. All quotations come with the permission from The Board of Trinity College, Dublin.

[8] Arthur Schopenhauer, 'Supplement II: On The Metaphysics of Music', in Richard Wagner, *Beethoven: With a Supplement from the Philosophical Works of Arthur Schopenhauer*, trans. Edward Dannreuther (London: W.M. Reeves, 1903), p.161. Synge read Schopenhauer's postulate on Thursday 6 April 1893. See, *TCD MS*: 4414, ff.49v – 50v.

[9] It should be noted that magical realism only achieved critical currency in 1925 (long after Synge's premature passing in 1909) through Franz Roh's discourse on post-Expressionistic art. However, the principles of magical realism were first theorised by Novalis's philosophy, which, in reference to 'magical idealism', speculates on what it would mean to question phenomenal existence with the supernatural. In this way, Schopenhauer's metaphysics is a logical corollary of Novalis's philosophy, which proceeds to problematize our relationship with the noumenal (the thing-in-itself) and the phenomenal. Thus, although *Riders* is not concomitant with the birth of magical realism as a literary discourse, it is undoubtedly in dialogue with magical realism's fundamental philosophical concerns.

[10] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume I, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), p.99. Hereafter quoted within the text as Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, and page number.

[11] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), p.44.

[12] It should be pointed out that Todorov's third condition of the fantastic as a literary genre requires that 'the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations [Todorov, 1975, p. 33]. It is commonly understood that character of The Poor Old Woman is a poetic allegory for Mother Ireland, which therefore makes the example of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* as being

indexical of the fantastic somewhat problematic. However, we should remind ourselves that *The Poor Old Woman* operates within the paradigm of realism and the reader of the theatrical text is required to consider the character within these limitations; like the Gillane family in the play, the reader of the theatrical text hesitates over the ontology of *The Poor Old Woman*; Peter Gillane saw an old woman, whereas Patrick Gillane saw a young girl with the walk of a queen. As Jonathan Allison has points out: ‘the crux of the play lies in the double function of the old woman as symbol of the nation and as a naturalistic character in the drama...For a ‘fantastic’ moment or two, the audience cannot decide what she is’. [Jonathan Allison, ‘Magical Nationalism, Lyric Poetry and the Marvellous: W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney’ in eds. Stephen M. Hart and Wen-Chin Ouyang, *A Companion to Magical Realism* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2010), pp. 234-235. For more on how *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is exemplary of the fantastic see, Peter Kuch ‘Writing “Easter 1916”’, in ed. Bruce Stewart, *That Other World: The Supernatural and the Fantastic in Irish Literature and its Contexts*, Volume II (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998), pp. 1- 17, particularly, p. 14.

[13] According to Ó Súilleabháin, Synge was correct to conclude that ‘the natural and the supernatural were equally real’ to the islanders. But unlike Synge, Ó Súilleabháin maintained that the islanders were able to distinguish between the two temporal modes. As far as the relationship between *Riders* and magical realism is concerned, Synge ensured that just like himself, his characters were able to differentiate between the natural and the supernatural; he merely appropriated the uniform credence that he believed the islanders gave to both natural and supernatural phenomena. See, Seán Ó Súilleabháin, ‘Synge’s Use of Irish Folklore’, in Maurice Harmon (ed.), *J.M. Synge Centenary Papers: 1971* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1972), p.26.

[14] Joseph Holloway, February 26, 1904, *Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer: January-June 1904*, National Library of Ireland Manuscript: 1802 Volume I, p.100. This quotation comes with the permission of The Board of The National Library of Ireland.

[15] Maggie Ann Bowers discusses narratives of folkloric magical realism as follows: ‘[folkloric] magical realism originates either from a particular folk tradition, or is cultivated

from a variety of traditions in order to produce a particular narrative effect'. See, Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp.91-92.

[16] Joan Hoff and Marian Yeates, *The Cooper's Wife is Missing: The Trials of Bridget Cleary* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p.166.

[17] Dáithí Ó hÓGáin, *Irish Superstitions* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2002), p.52.

[18] Arthur Schopenhauer, 'Supplement I: An Essay on Visions and Matters Connected Therewith', in Richard Wagner, *Beethoven: With a Supplement from the Philosophical Works of Arthur Schopenhauer*, trans. Edward Dannreuther (London: W.M. Reeves, 1903), p.117. Hereafter quoted within the text as Schopenhauer, 'Supplement I', and page number.

[19] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Arkana and Penguin, 1989), p. 5.

[20] See, Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and The Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), p. 75.

[21] Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology* (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996), p. 30. Emphasis in original.

[22] Andrew Lang, 'The Celtic Renaissance,' *Blackwood's Magazine*: no. 161 (1897): pp. 188-189.

[23] Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.52.

References

Allison, Jonathan. 'Magical Nationalism, Lyric Poetry and the Marvellous: W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney' in (eds.) Stephen M. Hart and Wen-Chin Ouyang, *A Companion to Magical Realism*. Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2010, pp. 228-236.

Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magic(al) Realism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask. London: Arkana and Penguin, 1989.

Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and The Remystification of Narrative*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004.

Frazer, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Hoff, Joan and Marian Yeates. *The Cooper's Wife is Missing: The Trials of Bridget Cleary*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Holloway, Joseph. *Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer: January-June 1907*. Dublin: National Library of Ireland Manuscripts, 1907.

Gregory, Lady. *Seventy Years: Being The Autobiography of Lady Gregory*. New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1976.

Kuch, Peter. 'Writing "Easter 1916"', in Herbert Stewart (ed.) *That Other World: The Supernatural and the Fantastic in Irish Literature and its Contexts*, Volume II. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998, pp. 1-17.

Lang, Andrew. 'The Celtic Renaissance'. *Blackwood's Magazine*, no. 161, February (1897), pp. 181-191.

Ó Súilleabháin, Seán. 'Synge's Use of Irish Folklore', in Maurice Harmon (ed.) *J.M. Synge Centenary Papers*: 1971. Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1972, pp. 18-34.

Ó hÓGáin, Dáithí. *Irish Superstitions*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2002.

Roberts, George. 'Plays of Synge', *The Irish Times*, August 2, 1955.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. 'Supplement I: An Essay on Visions and Matters Connected Therewith', in Richard Wagner, *Beethoven: With a Supplement from the Philosophical Works of Arthur Schopenhauer*, trans. Edward Dannreuther. London: W.M. Reeves, 1903, pp. 117-153.

----- ‘Supplement II: On The Metaphysics of Music’, in Richard Wagner, *Beethoven: With a Supplement from the Philosophical Works of Arthur Schopenhauer*, trans. Edward Dannreuther. London: W.M. Reeves, 1903, pp. 157-177.

----- *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume I, trans. E.F.J. Payne. New York: Dover Publications, 1969.

Spencer, Herbert. *The Principles of Psychology*. London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996.

Synge, J.M. *Collected Works*, Volume II: *Prose*. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.

----- *Collected Works*, Volume III: *Plays*, Book I. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.

----- *Collected Works*, Volume IV: *Plays*, Book II. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.

----- *The J.M. Synge Manuscripts from the Library of Trinity College, Dublin*. Brighton, 1987.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard. New York: Cornell University Press, 1975.

Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Faris, Wendy B. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995.