The normal academic response to J.M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* (1904) has it 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* can hardly be overstated. From his Aran acquaintance Michael Costello, Synge managed to import authentic Aran textiles for the costume department; he even managed to bring the company to a workshop with an ailing Aran exile who languished in a rotting Dublin tenement. Lady Gregory neatly summarized Synge’s dedication to the realist aesthetic when she feared that “local smells” would be brought into the theatre. Even Joseph Holloway, architect by day, theatre denizen by night, congratulated Synge on “the naturalness of the whole episode”. But when writing *Riders to the Sea* Synge was acutely aware of just how limiting realism could

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5 Joseph Holloway, 12 January 1907, “Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer”, NLI MS 1850, 30. All quotations come with the permission of the Board of the National Library of Ireland.
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 to the Sea* after he had finished reading Arthur Schopenhauer on metaphysics, who states that “our world is nothing else than the appearance”⁸ Synge was fascinated by Schopenhauer’s postulate, which argues at length that our experience of reality is just a simulacrum that is idealized by the perceiving subject. 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?⁹

Thus, while writing *Riders to the Sea* 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 to the Sea* 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

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⁹ TCD MS 4379, f.94r.