

9.5. 2015 A return to the western shore: Anne Enright on yielding to the Irish tradition.
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Suffering a touch of midlife madness, the author found herself drawn to the dramatic west coast of Ireland and a way of writing she had always resisted - one with a strong connection to her past.

In the spring of 2012 we took a long rent on a little house in the Burren, on the west coast of Ireland, with a view down to the limestone flats of the Flaggy Shore and across to the Aran



Islands. This is a wild and beautiful part of the world. Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory all wrote about the islands; Heaney and, especially, Michael Longley also about the Flaggy Shore. It is an iconic landscape of the Irish national revival.

Perhaps it was the change of location, but it was one of those times in my life when I wasn't entirely sure who I was any more. Every day I would walk out and let the wind blow these questions out of my mind, and also take in the wildness of the place. The green road is just that: a boreen, an unpaved track that crosses the uplands of the Burren from Ballynahown to the Caher Valley, with a changing view from the Cliffs of Moher in the south to the Twelve Bens and Maumturk mountains in the far north, across Galway Bay.

Over the years I had avoided what I call "the landscape solution" in Irish prose, whereby the writer puts the word "Atlantic" or "bog" into the story and some essential yearning in her character is fixed. But there I was myself, getting fixed on the green road, and it seemed to me that this was something I should allow myself to write about now.

The Aran Islands are in County Galway but, properly considered, they are a continuation of the land to the south and east of them. The cartographer and writer Tim Robinson describes them as "fragments of a single, long, low escarpment, a broken arm of the limestone uplands of the Burren". County Clare is where the islands left the mainland or arrived back home.

The shore is named not for rushes or irises, but for the splits and fissures that turn the sheet of rock into flagstones, like an old floor. There is something about limestone - its glints and grikes, the little flowers that grow in the crevices - that satisfies the child's eye: the geometric lines are an invitation to play. And the grey is very minimal, of course. Very now. You might be in a Richard Long piece, you might be in a painting, on a wall in Berlin (except that the painting could not include you). Karst is slowly soluble, and it remembers the water that wears it down. Lift your eyes, and the sea is huge, religiously large - God, if you believe in God, is just there and all about you. And if you don't believe, the rocks themselves, as they keep their deep geological time, tell you all you need to know about your own humanity and its impermanence.

This coast is swept by Atlantic storms, and the wind carries 2,000 miles of wetness in it. Everything, in winter, is damp. The first time I went to Inis Mór, the largest of the three Aran Islands, I never saw it. It was 1992 and I was working as a television producer. In four days, the mist never lifted and the cameraman found it too dark to film, except in the middle of the day.

My first glimpse of the Arans, on the page, was through the poetry of Máirtín Ó Díreán, who lived around the corner from my childhood home in Dublin, and whose work we

learned by heart at school. “Mórchuid cloch is gannchuid cré,” - more stones than clay - he says, in work that takes its cadence from the granular slice of a spade into earth, in the centre of a great silence.

Stone is what you see. Looking down from our little rented house, the grey flags shade into grey rubble until, further inland, it is overrun by hazel scrub in the small plain of Oughtdarra. Some of this rubble aligns and organises itself into the walls you see everywhere in the west of Ireland, but also into circular forts, with the outline here or there of ancient gateways or roads, these last stones cut monumentally large. From a distance, it is hard to tell one grey from another: the grey of the rocks from the liquid grey of the sea and the shifting grey of the sky. When the sun comes out, a glittering on the water turns the land to a permanent dusk, with the uncertainty that dusk brings; a challenge to the very idea of colour and the workings of the eye. This landscape is a monument to the twilight, whether Celtic or not. It is a place that makes itself hard to see.

Bleak as it looks, the Burren was known for its winter grass, which made it a good place to fatten cattle, and the flowers seem to spring out of bare rock. But it is not plenitude I see when I walk this landscape; rather, it is hunger, a minimalism of stone on stone.



The hunger is also historical. Famine houses; little stone cottages deserted during the famine of 1845-1852, can be found everywhere in the west of Ireland, but on the uplands of the Burren they are rare. This is because (brace yourself, now) the people were too poor, in this land of stones, to build stone houses: they lived in turf bothies instead. They lived, that is, in holes in the ground. Meanwhile, over on Aran, the little fields are sedimented between naked sheets of rock; the soil hand-made by generations of farmers laying down seaweed they have harvested and brought from the shore.

Some people like it bleak. I mean, some people like to visit bleakness and then to go home and talk about how lovely it is and how lovely it makes the people who live surrounded by it, every day. Or perhaps this loveliness is a product only of Irish bleakness: no one calls the Inuit lovely, or the islanders of the Outer Hebrides. No one accuses the Sami of a ready wit and easy smile, though these people are all probably as nice as pie. But the people of the west of Ireland are “lovely” - that is well known. They are unspoilt, poetic in their speech - which owes much to the Gaelic - and hugely welcoming. They sing at the drop of a hat. They are pagans who go to mass every Sunday. Absurdly open-handed when it comes to money, they fleece you as soon as your back is turned.

But my father is from the west of Ireland, and he is none of these things. Or he is some of these things, if you are an Irish-American or a weirdly patronising German, perhaps, or a sentimental 19th-century Irish Protestant. Or no, actually. Sorry. He is none of these things. He is himself. You might say this is the only aspect of his character that I find distinctive to this coast. My father makes up his own mind: he does not follow the crowd.

The farmhouse where he grew up, and where we spent our summers as children, is further south, on Loop Head. You can not see the Aran Islands from there, but you can see the Atlantic. The house is exposed enough to worry about lightning, and it is turned

away from the sea wind - more concerned with minimising drafts than maximising the view.

I told my father about the place we had rented (we were interested in the surfing in Lahinch) and asked him if he knew the spot. He thought a moment and then he said: "Oh, little Corca Baiscinn, the wild, the bleak the fair! / Oh, little stony pastures whose flowers are sweet, if rare!" (So alright, the bit about "poetic of speech" might apply.) He continued through a whole stanza of a poem by Emily Lawless that I must have read once, and forgotten. "Oh, rough the rude Atlantic, the thunderous, the wide, / Whose kiss is like a soldier's kiss, which will not be denied!" It was then I knew we were making some kind of return by going down to Clare, though I had not been looking for my childhood, or my father's childhood either. I was looking for a quiet place to start a book, whatever the book might be, and I realised it would have to be about this, a poem my father has retained for 80 years. "The whole night long we dream of thee, and waking think we are there, - / Vain dream, and foolish waking, we never shall see Clare."

The yearning for the west was not, at first, the yearning of the exile, though the lament of the exile is everywhere in the *With the Wild Geese* poems Emily Lawless wrote. Published in 1902, they remain her most lasting work. The Wild Geese were the first lost Irish generation, remnants of the defeated Irish nobility who left in 1691, seeking alliances and fighting other men's battles on the European mainland. Laments for this lost leadership were everywhere in the bardic poetry I learned in Irish class at school, with the figure of Ireland waiting for her rescue: Ireland as lost heifer, as dream, as beautiful woman or old woman, awaiting their return. I came to think of Irish as a language of loneliness. This was a poetry of abandonment, not of exile - a technical distinction perhaps: sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between the two.

Loop Head lighthouse on Ireland's west coast, near the farm where Anne Enright spent her childhood summers.

Photograph: Trish Punch/Getty/Lonely Planet



Lawless was disliked by Yeats and by posterity for being on the wrong side. She was a unionist. She was also rumoured to be a lesbian. She had an ear for melodrama and for the sentimental, but her accounts of peasant living conditions are tough and realistic. In her 1886 novel *Hurrish*, she describes the Burren as a place no one would ever want to visit: "Truly a grim scene! - suggestive of nothing so much as one of those ugly little early German prints where every stick and stone seems to be grimacing with unpleasant intention." Tim Robinson, in his book *Stones of Aran*, describes the history of the interest in the islands as "a rich series of footnotes to that of the Romantic movement", a movement to which Lawless was clearly immune. She saw the Burren Hills as "skeletons - rain-worn, time-worn, wind-worn - starvation made visible, and embodied in a landscape". The memory of the famine was still too strong. It would be another generation at least before the scenery became epiphanic and the local poverty lovely.

The first English-speaking lovers of these harsh shores saw, in the remnants of ancient settlement, a druidic civilisation of a grandeur that had since been lost. They were mythmakers and then folklorists whose impulse was spiritual and anti-Christian before it was political. Inspired by Yeats' collection of folklore, *The Celtic Twilight*, Lady Gregory went along the West of Ireland looking for stories, which she thought of as clues leading

to “that mountain top where things visible and invisible meet”. A collector of stories travels through the landscape in a way the novelist can not. At least, collecting and travelling can seem one and the same thing, though the stories Lady Gregory records are mostly about things you can not see: ghosts, fairies, sea horses, the hosts of the Sidhe. Riding her pony, Shamrock, into County Clare, Lady Gregory uses the scenery, in the same way she uses the voices of the local people, as a gateway into the unreal. “The red mud of the road, the purple heather and foxglove, the brown bogs were a contrast to the grey rocks and walls of Burren and Aidhne, and there were many low hills brown when near, misty blue in the distance; then the Golden Mountain, Slieve nan-Or, ‘where the last great battle will be fought before the end of the world’.”

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JM Synge went to the Aran Islands in 1898, five years after Lady Gregory. He, too, collected folktales, but his fine book *The Aran Islands* was also an account of the lives of the people and of his own attitudes towards them. As for the landscape: “I have seen nothing so desolate,” he says. His first glimpse of Inis Mór is of “a dreary rock ... sloping up from the sea into the fog”. The people he meets are often sick, and just as often asking for money. His first teacher, a blind man, delights in malice and considers his stories superior to any found elsewhere. But Synge describes the people - their livelihood, their clothes, funerals and entertainments - with an increasing sense of intoxication. What starts as malice ends as passion: self-importance is restyled as nobility. The people have become the story. They are, he discovers, natural aristocrats. A hard life makes the men deft, lithe and nimble, while the women’s beauty has a “spiritual cast”, and their speech has a purity of intonation that comes from their native tongue. By the second half of the book, the Irish language, which Synge has been studying, has begun to riddle the sentence structure and seep out of the prose. “A dhuine uasal”, they call him - “O noble person”. The idea of the noble peasant lay in wait in Irish long before the revivalists invented it. Meanwhile Synge enters a language that is behind the language spoken in Ireland, as Irish is behind Hiberno-English, and there is a pleasure to this penetration that is akin to coming home.

Synge is more interested in character than in the mystical. The beauty of landscape does not illuminate the unreal so much as the self. This also applies to the terrible weather. “The continual passing in these islands from the misery of last night and the splendour of to-day seems to create an affinity between the moods of these people and the moods of varying rapture and dismay that are frequent in artists, or certain kinds of alienation.” Madness is never far away. A storm turns to hurricane and Synge sees immense waves “rolling in from the west, wreathed with snowy phantasies of spray. Then there was the bay full of green delirium, and the Twelve Pins touched with mauve.”

Landscape may have no plot, but it has much by way of revelation, not just as one vista gives way to the next, but also as the light shifts, and the weather shifts, and the viewer is filled with feelings that are hard to name.

Reading *The Aran Islands* was, for me, an exercise in *deja vu*, or *presque vu*, or some “*vu*” the French don’t have a phrase for yet, because there, surely, among the girls Synge watches gathering seaweed, is Joyce’s bird girl from *Portrait of the Artist*, with her skirts hoisted. “Their red bodices,” Synge says, and “white tapering legs make them as beautiful as tropical sea-birds.” This girl fills Dedalus with a profane joy about his future, a sense of transcendental possibility, as she opens for him “all the ways of error and glory”.

And there in the storm - or is this too much of a reach? - is Krapp's moment of illumination at the end of Dun Laoghaire pier, fragments of which we hear as he spools through his tapes: "Great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse ... clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality." Beckett was parodying his own epiphany (which took place, in fact, indoors, in his mother's room), in which his whole future direction as an artist appeared to him. This is a howl of grandeur to mimic Lear's on the heath. The figure in this landscape is tiny, vivid, the fictions that he intuits are - or will be - immense.

Back on the mainland, Synge looks towards the Arans and mourns: "The sort of yearning I feel towards those islands is indescribably acute." When he is on Inis Mór, indeed, he manages to yearn for the smaller island of Inis Meáin, "where Gaelic is more generally used, and the life is perhaps the most primitive that is left in Europe". This seems like wanting a drink when you have one in your hand - wanting, not having, seems to be the point.

All through the 20th century, the west coast of Ireland continued to contain longing the way a bog contains rain. It was the lost place, a place that might be regained, a place where mourning was possible and time went slowly. Emigration may have had much to do with this sense of bereavement - and of beautiful or unexpected reclamation - but it can not explain the extent of it. The tug of it was felt not just by the Irish, or by the Irish in exile, but as far east as Germany. Heinrich Böll's Irish Diary established Achill Island as a place of innocence after the second world war, in which Ireland, of course, stayed neutral. The writer Hugo Hamilton, who had an Irish-speaking father and a German mother, coined a word for it: "Atlanticsucht". It carries the force of addiction, this longing for the Atlantic that he senses in the Germans he knows, who play the line between tourism and pilgrimage, who journey west and are satisfied. The west coast of Ireland (pictured, the Cliffs of Moher).

'It was the lost place, a place that might be regained, a place where mourning was possible and time went slowly' ... Enright on the west coast of Ireland (pictured, the Cliffs of Moher). Photograph: P Skelton/Getty/Moment Open



The chief mourner in this business of sadness, the voice and figure of sorrow, is the mother. "The maternal feeling", Synge writes, "is so powerful on these islands that it gives a life of torment to the women." The girls are lovely, as you might expect, but motherhood brings loss, as sons drown in sudden storms or leave for work elsewhere. The lament of the mother is at its purest and most powerful in his play *Riders to the Sea*, in which Maurya, a widow who has lost five sons to the water, loses two more in the course of the play: "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me." There is a toughness in Synge that was lost, in the years after his death, to stage Irishness and the cruel sentimentality of Irish nationalism. Female suffering was highly valued in the Catholic Ireland of my youth, but I was never all that keen. I did not see what was in it for me.

In *A Golden Treasury of Irish Verse* (MacMillan, 1928), that staple of my parents' bookshelves, I rediscover another piece by the anti-nationalist Lawless. "After Aughrim" is a fierce poem that seems to capture the hurt of emigration better than any popular

ballad. Ireland is styled not as a mother in mourning, but as a “dreary woman, grey and cold”, who has cast her children away “like rubbish”. She had ceased almost to breathe their name, “Then caught it echoing down the wind,/ Blown backwards from the lips of Fame.” The image of the abandoning and abandoned mother is a striking one. “Not mine, not mine that fame,” she keens, jealous and slightly maddened by their distant, unflinching affection. “God knows they owe me nought,/ I tossed them to the foaming sea,/ I tossed them to the howling waste,/ Yet still their love comes home to me.”

Every day, after working on my novel, I walked up the green road, the edge of the world, the last place before America. I spent long summers looking out over the Atlantic as a child, so I knew where I was. I knew this changing sky, these small fields and stone walls, as I took my midlife madness out as you might take out a dog on a lead and wondered why nothing had turned out the way I had expected.

That child, running around the fields and the beaches in a pair of brown Clarks T-bar sandals and cotton shorts, and often little else. Half wild and full of chat. Back in Dublin, I read a book a day, because reading was also a kind of wildness, and they said I would be a writer when I grew up. They said. And I agreed. And now look at me, stomping along under a big sky, wondering what the hell - what is it that you get, when you get what you want?

The Green Road by Anne Enright review - an exquisite collage of Irish lives

A reunion dominates this moving family drama but it's the distinct individual stories that fascinate



Maybe it was just a question of timing. I never expected to be middle-aged. That was a bit of a shocker. To be a mother, how weird was that? To be married. Goddamn it, I knew I'd end up in some kind of institution, I never thought it would be marriage. I did not expect to be more or less happy. And more or less alone. To be entirely happy, sometimes. And also, sometimes, entirely alone.

I am a writer. It is my job to be alone. To witness the “great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light”. Or to forget about all that and sit still a while, waiting for the story that is out there, just beyond reach.

The view from the green road is stunning, and it is also comforting. This is not just a question of scale, which is Irish and therefore a little less than vast. It might be my father's part of the world, but landscape, for me, is always maternal. That is why we feel so good between those hills. That is why a new vista seems like something remembered from another time, and walking out feels like a return. To walk a place every day is to arrive, slowly, at a knowledge of that place that precedes words, and precedes the stories that attach to this mountain peak or that bend in the road.

They say you can never go back, you can never go home. Up on the green road, these questions were made beautiful - if there there is such a thing as a beautiful question - because there is no better place to come home to than the west coast of Ireland. And when I sat back at the desk, sufficiently windblown, with a little wildness still running in my blood, I started to write a book about love and abandonment, exile and return, all those impossibilities.