"The wild beauty I found there": Plath's Connemara

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The yellows and browns of Connemara are wild. Undulating hills and loughs and inlets where the Atlantic creams over black rocks and the sky and sea join, held together by flat white clouds. The pungent gorse bushes and the roadside fuschias and mallows and spikey hedgerows border peat bogs and marshy brown puddles of water. Megalithic tombs balance their stones atop slight mounds and small cottages huddle in sheltered cut out gardens against the mountains and the sea. Wild Connemara is where Sylvia Plath initially chose to escape in the upset of her final year. A brief visit to Cleggan to stay with the poet Richard Murphy in September 1962 was enough to captivate her. In Murphy's words: "She seemed to have fallen in love with Connemara at first sight" *(Bitter Fame* 350).

This paper aims to explore Plath's time in Connemara, the places she visited and her plans to winter there from December 1962 until late February 1963. While I will not be discussing at any great length the details of her visit there (this has already been done by her host Richard Murphy elsewhere), I will be drawing on Plath's own impression of Connemara using both published and unpublished letters that she wrote to family and friends. [1] Since Plath's journals from this time are lost/missing, letters are the main first-hand sources of information from this period in Plath's life. Following Plath's trail on a recent visit to

[1] See Appendix III in *Bitter Fame* (348-359) and Murphy's autobiography *The Kick*.

Connemara, I was able to find the house that Plath intended to rent from a local woman named Kitty Marriott. I also visited Cleggan, sailed to Inishbofin and attempted to piece together from letters (and second hand accounts) what Plath experienced during her time there and her hopes for the future. This paper, however, will also muse upon the curious role that someone's absence plays in (re)visiting sites, as a form of literary pilgrimage. For in this sense, I found myself visiting a place that had only entertained Plath very briefly, and rather was haunted by the fact that she never made it back there, despite all her plans to do so. Rather than following the traces someone left many years ago, my pilgrimage was a little more spectral than that – following the traces someone might have left, but never, in fact, did. Visiting the house, in particular, which Plath planned to rent on a lonely road between Cleggan and Moyard was a curious experience, considering that Plath perhaps only saw the place once – enough to describe the TT-tested cows owned by Kitty Marriott and the "beautiful cottage (turf fires – the most comfortable and savoury fire imaginable)" (*Letters Home 461*). As such, my engagement with this place was based on a "What if...?" philosophy. A pointless, yet tempting speculation. It was however, also theorised by drawing on the work of, among others, Gaston Bachelard and Avery Gordon, allowing me to consider the role that spectral traces play on the imagination and how houses, once they have been inhabited, however briefly, are no longer inert spaces but alive with possibilities and shifting perceptions. Perhaps we could effectively argue that any pilgrimage draws mainly upon the fantasy and imagination of the person making the visit – more so in this case when there is such little writing available by Plath to describe her own experiences in Ireland.[2] For Bachelard, once we have interacted with a place, it changes the very nature of our perception: "Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination" (xxxvi). In particular, Bachelard claims that our imaginations like to seize on places that attract us: "The imagination is ceaselessly imagining and enriching itself with new images" (ibid). In any act of pilgrimage, the imagination is necessarily at play, daydreaming and bringing forth energies and traces from the past. Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters* explores how the past can control the present and the ways in which a seemingly ordinary space can be rendered spectral (8). How does Plath's Connemara

[2] There exists some references in *Letters Home* (see pages 461, 462, 465, 467, 469, 470, 471, 472, 474, 476) and there are some unpublished letters in which she mentions her visit there and plans for the future. Appendix III by Richard Murphy in *Bitter Fame* (pp. 348-358) also publishes her correspondence with him from this time. Other than this, all accounts of her stay in Connemara are second hand – the main source being Richard Murphy himself, but also a letter published in *The Letters of Ted Hughes* in which he briefly describes the September 1962 stay there (208).

come alive today for the pilgrim following her few and faint traces there? Can places, as the sociologists Ian Reader and Tony Walter suggest, become meeting points, sites of accessibility, for aspects of someone who is now lost?

Plath's visit to Connemara was brief. She left Devon on Tuesday 11 September 1962 and travelled to Holyhead by train where she and Ted Hughes took a night ferry to Dublin. [3] They had a brief visit with their Boston friends Jack and Marie Sweeney, eating oysters and drinking Guinness, before travelling onto Galway, again by train, and then making the trip to Cleggan (possibly) by car. Cleggan then, as now, was a small village on the west coast of Ireland, almost predominantly reliant on fishing industry and tourism. Certainly this was the way the poet Richard Murphy appeared to support himself – renting his cottage The Old Forge out to visitors, sailing tourists to Inishbofin on his Galway hooker called the "Ave Maria" and in the winter doing small amounts of fishing.[4] Murphy and Plath first made contact when he won the Guinness Poetry prize in 1962 for his poem "The Cleggan Disaster" and Plath, as one of the judges, wrote to inform him of this. From this correspondence and a subsequent meeting in London, the idea of Plath and Hughes paying a visit to Connemara was raised and despite their marital difficulties at that time, Plath and Hughes decided to leave together for Cleggan arriving most likely the day after leaving Devon. Certainly, Plath and Hughes were in Connemara by Thursday 13 September, for the journalist Emily Hourican in an article for the *Irish Independent*, notes that they both signed the visitors book in The Pier Bar, Cleggan that day. Plath cited Court Green in Devon as her address. Hughes wrote the address of his parents in Yorkshire.

On their approach to Cleggan, I wonder if Plath and Hughes drove on the same road I did years later? The road from Clifden into the village is surely the loneliest, brownest and bleakest road ever. I approached at twilight, the peaty moorland eventually giving way to one or two straggling houses before the lights of Cleggan winked into view around the small harbour. The Atlantic, a black wash, the fishing boats tied and moored for the night. Did they, too, feel the beautiful isolation, the peace? Did Cleggan in the 1960s feel even more remote than it does today? The Pier Bar, when I first saw it eight years ago, was painted a shocking pink, sitting at the end of the pier where boats sail to Inishbofin. When I returned in Spring

[3] As stated in an unpublished letter to Elizabeth (Compton) Sigmund dated Saturday 8 September 1962, held in the Lilly Library, Indiana University.

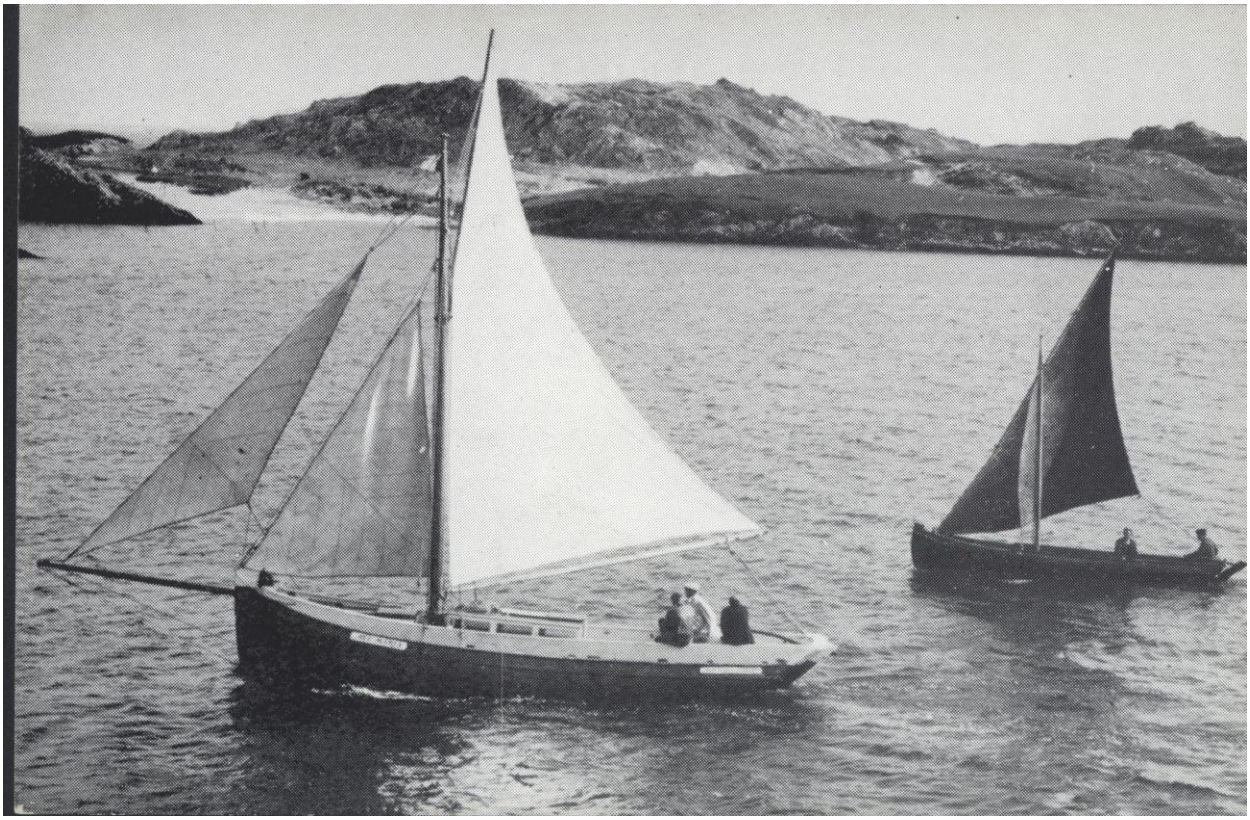
[4] Richard Murphy is an Irish poet born to an Anglo-Irish family in 1927. His poetry collections include *Sailing to an Island* (1963), *High Island* (1974) and *Collected Poems* (2001).

2011, it was painted white, but gone off and a little sad looking, as in need of repair. The P was missing from the name, patches of paint peeling from the wall.

The inside of the bar appeared little changed – quite snug and dark and all wood, creaking. Perhaps the small extension with three windows looking down the length of the pier was a newer addition (see right). Plath does not mention the Pier Bar in any of her correspondence, despite leaving her name and address in the Guest book there, so her presence there is especially spectral and requires much work on the part of a pilgrim tracing her steps. Perhaps a curious twist on the tale is Richard Murphy's account that in the weeks following Plath's death, he entered this bar one night to find Assia and David Wevill there on a journey in which they too were tracing where Plath had been in her final months. Reader and Walter sate that pilgrimages by their very nature are ambiguous because they cross so many boundaries (time, space, place) and because ultimately it involves being out of place oneself so that the boundaries between past and present blur and open up (244). It is this opening, according to Monica Degan and Kevin Hetherington, that allows the ghost to drift in and out "a wandering figure that flits in and out of presence both in time and space" (4). Thus, all the characters in this story, some alive, most dead, take on a spectral element in which their past selves are able to rear up in the present as the imagination of the pilgrim conjures and mediates them. I imagine Plath sitting drinking beer beneath

the fishing poster, beneath the glass boxes of preserved fishes and the memorials to dead sailors. Empty lobster pots line the pier, as they likely would have lined the pier in 1962, crab-bits, dead fish creating a sort of flat, dead smell assailing the nostrils.

Before leaving for Connemara, Plath writes to her friend Elizabeth (Compton) Sigmund, that the holiday is a health trip for her and certainly from her first day in Cleggan, she appears to, at least on the surface, have enjoyed the activities planned by Richard Murphy. On Thursday September 13, Murphy sailed Plath and Hughes to Inishbofin on his hooker, the “Ave Maria”.



The “Ave Maria” sailing at Cleggan from a promotional postcard by Richard Murphy courtesy Joe McCann at Maggs.

Here, they drank tea in Day's Hotel. Later, the owner, Margaret Day, reminisced about Plath's warmth: "We had some magnificent lilies growing outside the hotel at the time, and I remember Sylvia Plath refused to leave without taking a bulb, which I was more than happy to give her" (Atlantic Jewel). It is likely that Plath would have sailed to the old pier on Inishbofin and it is at the end of this pier that Day's Hotel stands; a small, bluish, wooden building, low slung behind a slate wall.

Apart from visiting the bar and chatting to locals, there is a silence surrounding the rest of this visit to Inishbofin. Perhaps it was fairly brief. Perhaps for Plath the key event was being back on the sea in Murphy's hooker, "leaning out over the prow like a triumphant figurehead, inhaling the sea air ecstatically" (Stevenson 349).

On the following day (Friday 14 September), Plath visited Thoor Ballylee, the site of W.B. Yeats' Tower and Coole Park in Gort with the famous autograph tree inscribed by different writers over the years. The day ended with a visit to Murphy's ancestral home at Milford, an eighteenth-century house which Murphy describes as "aloof and decayed" (*Bitter Fame* 350). In a later

unpublished letter to Olive Higgins Prouty, written November 20 1962, when Plath is attempting to secure Yeats' former London home at 23 Fitzroy Road, she reflects back on her visit to Thoor Ballylee, describing in beautiful language the magic of the tower surrounded by wild rhubarb and an apple orchard with a kind-eyed grey donkey. It was here, Plath writes, despite feeling somewhat dead and ill, that her soul responded to the peace there and in some odd way, she felt a connection develop with Yeats. It is interesting to reflect upon the type of pilgrimage Plath herself was making here and the way in which her own imagination was able to play as she mounted the spiral stone steps in Yeats' tower and threw three coins into the river below. Perhaps this allowed Plath to draw on the healing aspects and transformative power of a spectral Yeats in order to bring about changes in her own life. As Gordon states:

> Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition. (8)

In other words, we do not have to be "certain" about a place for it to impact us, but rather, through employing our fantasy and daydreaming, we can bring about changes in our lives for the better. Indeed according to Bachelard, "The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths" (6). Equally for Bachelard, there is nothing quite so potent for daydreaming as a house: "Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others stimulating one another" (6). Thus we have a weird melding of Plath and time – Yeats climbing the stairs to his tower and years later Plath climbing those very stairs, dynamisms stimulating one another. Plath taking comfort and strength from Yeats, conjuring his ghost, bending chronological time somewhat.[5]

At some early stage in Plath's Connemara visit, she decided to winter in Ireland amidst the "wild beauty" she found there. Richard Murphy recalls taking her to look at various houses and being surprised when she agreed on the spot to rent a house from December through to late February from a local woman named Kitty Marriott.[6] Plath describes Marriott as "a woman after my own heart, one of the sturdy, independent horse-and-whisky set" (who loves children and is willing, says Plath, to show her all of the sea walks (*Letters Home* 461). Plath concludes: "I think this Irish woman and I speak the same

[5] This, of course, is not the only comment Plath made on her slightly mystical connection with Yeats. She also describes after successfully securing his old home at 23 Fitzroy Road, sitting in Court Green and asking him for a message by playfully opening his *Collected Plays*. The page fell open on the words "Get wine and food to give you strength and courage, and I will get the house ready" (*Bitter Fame* 275).

[6] Murphy recalls that this decision was made quickly, and he dates this to the best of his memory as being on Saturday, September 15 (*Bitter Fame* 351).

language" (ibid). The house which Plath intended to rent for the winter is on the road between Cleggan and the nearby village of Moyard. It overlooks a lough which at one end points to the sea and Cleggan; and the other to the Twelve Bens of Connemara, the mountain range that dominates the area. The lough is low-lying and a changeable colour depending upon the sky and the clouds. There is a flat greenness running down to the water dotted with gorse and low green shrubs. There are one or two other houses nearby with their own gardens, but most are surrounded by hilly fields, some with Connemara wild ponies, some with cows.

In the garden of the house, a small river runs through the grounds and there is still what could well be Kitty Marriott's cowshed to the right of the main cottage. The house is nestled and sheltered at the foot of a small hill. It is very isolated.

As Plath stated, it is indeed a place of wild beauty and perhaps in many ways, the perfect setting for her to have recovered from the marital difficulties and her illnesses of the summer and autumn. In a letter to her mother dated October 12 1962, she writes, "In Ireland – in my darling cottage from December 1 to February 28 – I should recover on the milk from TT-tested cows (hope to learn to milk them myself), homemade bread, and the sea!" (*Letters Home* 466). On October 25 to her brother Warren and his wife Maggie, Plath writes: "I have a gorgeous, plush house hired in Ireland, *much* cosier, smaller and easier to manage that this *[Court Green]*, sheltered, with a lovely woman, the owner in a cottage next door, willing to babysit and help shop etc" (476). This enthusiasm for Connemara is further evident in a series of unpublished letters.[7] On September 22, Plath writes to Olive Higgins Prouty that she adored Ireland and planned to spend the winter taking long walks by the sea, milking cows, churning butter and sitting in front of turf fires.[8] Furthermore, she credits the place with giving back her health after a long autumn spell of flu. By October 18, Plath again writes to Prouty that a winter in her lovely cottage in Ireland will help free her from the terrible memories and emptiness of Court Green in Devon now that her marriage has ended. Connemara, it seems, will act for Plath as both a balm and an escape. These sentiments are further echoed when on October 19, Plath writes to her friend Clarissa Roche, that she plans a rest-cure in Ireland near the sea to try and regain her flesh and more importantly to finish her novel. She describes this novel to Olive Higgins Prouty in a letter of November 20, 1962 as being called "Doubletake," previously titled "The Interminable Loaf."[9] In an unpublished letter to Harriet Cooke written on November 29, Plath describes this novel as being another potboiler, the hero of the novel being a painter.[10] Plath prays that she will visit West Ireland next fall since she loved it so much. She simply does not want to go anywhere else.[11] The overwhelming theme to emerge from these unpublished letters to Olive Higgins Prouty, Clarissa Roche, but also to her other friends Elizabeth Sigmund and Kathy Kane, is that Ireland was to be a place of healing and a haven of wild sea and good health.

[7] Please note due to copyright reasons The Estate of Sylvia Plath does not allow any quotations from unpublished material. Unpublished letters from Plath to her friends are held in Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College (Clarissa Roche), University of Maryland at College Park (Olive Higgins Prouty), Lilly Library, Indiana University (Elizabeth Compton, Kathy Kane).

[8] Olive Higgins Prouty was Plath's benefactor during her time at Smith College and also funded Plath's psychiatric treatment after her first suicide attempt in 1954.

[9] Interestingly on Plath's 1962 Lett's Calendar held at Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, she lists one of her tasks on Friday August 10 1962 as Start Int. Loaf.

[10] Harriet Cooke was the wife of the painter Barrie Cooke, who Ted Hughes seemingly left Cleggan to go and visit.

[11] Sylvia Plath's letter to Harriet Cooke courtesy Glenn Horowitz, Bookseller, Inc., New York.

It is odd, years later, finding this house, which could have led Plath to a very different future. For Bachelard, "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). As I am standing at the gateway to the house Plath planned to rent, it is not difficult to imagine Plath's enchantment at the view from the windows, at the lough and the mountains and the sea. Behind this house, is a megalithic tomb, surely a pleasing parallel to the Roman mound beneath the elms at Court Green. Yet this house does not protect the dreamer or really allow one to dream in peace, for knowing what happened in the months after Plath abandoned her plans to winter here, lends the house a unique type of poignancy. Would coming to Ireland for that terrible winter of 1962-63 have given Plath the time and healing that she needed? Would such a move have afforded her time to finish her second novel, "Doubletake"? Could coming to Connemara have resulted in a very different ending to Plath's story? This place is haunted, not by what was once there, but what *might-have-been*. The pilgrim stands and daydreams any number of scenarios, but is no longer in a position to bring about any transformative changes – that time has been and gone. The melancholic spectre retains its elusiveness.

Plath's decision to abandon Ireland was an abrupt one. It seems at least one reason for her change of plans that winter was her correspondence with Olive Higgins Prouty. In an unpublished letter from October 25 1962, Plath writes to Prouty that she will be accompanied to Ireland by her children's *au pair*, Susan O'Neill-Roe, for the first couple of weeks, before the nanny has to return to start a job at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London. Yet days later on November 2, Plath praises Prouty for her wise suggestion that the trip to Ireland be cancelled and that Plath strike London <u>now</u> and face people, make contacts, establish herself as an independent woman.

Plath describes her Ireland trip as an evasion and decides that she will only go as a last resort if she is unable to find a London flat. It may not simply have been Prouty's suggestion that changed Plath's mind. She made a visit to London at the end of October to read her latest poems to Al Alvarez and to attend a party to face English literary circles. Her accounts of this in an unpublished letter show how hard it was for her to do this but yet how liberated she felt making this move so early into the collapse of her marriage. Alvarez's enthusiasm for her new poems may well have also played a part in her desire to re-establish herself as soon as possible in London. Whatever the case, the house that Plath located on that September Saturday in Ireland was never inhabited by her, and the poignancy of her absence there is further heightened by the subsequent events of Winter 1963.

The rest of Plath's stay in Connemara is detailed in Murphy's Appendix to *Bitter Fame* – the visit from Thomas Kinsella, Plath's alleged "kicking" Murphy under the table and Hughes leaving her in Cleggan. Thus her sojourn in Connemara came to an abrupt ending, with Plath leaving early for two nights in Dublin to stay with Thomas Kinsella and his wife Eleanor, before sailing back to England alone. In an October 12 letter to her mother, Plath reflected back on her time there and her plans to spend more time there in the future:

> Ireland is heaven, utterly unspoiled, emerald sea washing in fingers among green fields, white sand, wild coast, cows, friendly people, honey-tasting whisky, peat (turf) fires that smell like spiced bread – thank God I found it. Just in time. (*Letters Home* 466)

How sad, then, that she lost it all, before even returning.

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