

# The Desire of the West: The Aran Islands and Irish Identity in *Grania*

JACQUELINE BELANGER

In an examination of 'region' in nineteenth-century Ireland, the use of the term 'the West' as a critical tool not only presupposes a political relationship to another, more central place from which directions are determined, but also suggests that 'the West' is a unified and coherent entity in time and space. Joep Leerssen provides a working definition of 'region' which is worth quoting in full for the comprehensive range of terms in which discourse on region has been articulated:

A region is centred on, dependent upon, a metropolis elsewhere, to which it is subordinate and which it cannot claim for its own. Also, a region's sense of history is secondary and incidental to the historical patterns of the nation-at-large; indeed, in many cases the region is seen as somehow a-historical, a place where metropolitan historical developments were passively registered (rarely shaped or influenced), a place where life follows the slow patterns of unchanging tradition or cyclical nature, a place where the capital's fashions penetrate after a time-lag, where the modernizations and changes of modernization penetrate only in weakened or blunted form. Regions often count as backwaters, as places where time has stood still or which have been bypassed by history. Throughout Europe, the nineteenth-century literary imagination of the countryside is one where peasants are ignorant of metropolitan topicality and speak the language of unchanging proverb and slowly-accumulated natural wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

Leerssen's representation of region is that of the metropolitan centre's conception of the region-as-periphery, unidirectional and constructed around a set of binary oppositions; this version leaves no room for possibilities of either regional identity or reciprocal constructions of the 'metropolis' by the regions themselves. Emily Lawless's 1892 novel *Grania: The Story of an Island* can be read as pointing to and problematizing certain issues involved in the construction of the West by the Literary and Gaelic revivals. Her portrayal of the western regions

<sup>1</sup> Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork, 1996), p. 187.

of Ireland – specifically Galway and the Aran Islands – represents the West as fractured into a number of spatial, temporal, social and linguistic areas. While the Aran Islands as represented in the novel do fulfil some of the criteria set by Leerssen, the very fact that they are seen as peripheries of a periphery allows for a critique of such binary oppositions as those between centre and periphery, region and nation. This characterization of a non-unitary West opens up the possibility of resistance to late nineteenth-century nationalist and revivalist discourse, which constructed the West as an ideal pastness to which those attempting to formulate an Irish national identity could look to find the ‘true’ Ireland. Read through psychoanalytically inflected models of the construction of individual identity, *Grania* represents a fractured West – one which, while often defying the originating and regenerating function ascribed to it by certain metropolitan projects, does not fundamentally disrupt the need for the ‘other’ to define the self.

Lawless (1845–1913), a staunch unionist and member of the Anglo-Irish landed gentry, spent most of her childhood and much of her adult life on her family’s estates in Clare. Much of her work coincided with that of Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory, as well as with the establishment of the Gaelic League. In addition to *Grania*, Lawless wrote three other major novels dealing with Ireland, *Hurrish* (1886), *With Essex in Ireland* (1890) and *Maelcho* (1894), as well as a history of Ireland and a biography of Maria Edgeworth. Lawless’s work, and *Grania* in particular, can be read against the representations of the West deployed by both Anglo-Irish and Irish-Irish discourses, which saw the West as the home of a peasantry untouched by English colonialism and materialism and therefore more representative of a ‘transcendental Irish essence’.<sup>2</sup> In placing Lawless in this context, certain Lacanian psychoanalytic models can be strategically applied to explore issues of identity formation as represented in *Grania*. In moving to a closer examination of the text of the novel, it can then be shown how the categories of centre and margin are disrupted in the text, and how the formation of identity, based on the theory of the self’s desire for and ambivalence towards the ‘other’, contributes to the construction of identity on individual, communal and national levels. Ultimately, even though the West is represented from the perspective of those who inhabit it, the islanders are portrayed as ‘exotic’. This reasserts the centrality of the metropolis and the Anglo-Irish, which in turn reinstates the use of the West as other to the Anglo-Irish self. However, unlike many of her counterparts in the revival, Lawless does not see any possibility for the West-as-other to provide a way forward in attempts to build an Irish nation.

According to psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan, a mythic originary wholeness is achieved in the Imaginary or mirror phase of a child’s development (although this sense of unity and control is what Lacan calls a ‘misrecog-

<sup>2</sup> David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester, 1988), p. 65.

nition') and is a wholeness the subject will constantly try to achieve again in the desire for an Other.<sup>3</sup> The 'looking' to the West of Ireland that occurred throughout the nineteenth century, but which became particularly intense in its final years and in the first decades of the twentieth century, provides an ideal example of looking to an 'other' to achieve a sense of 'self'. Revivalists and cultural nationalists looked to the West of Ireland as both representative of an ideal past but also as a way to achieve national wholeness in the future – what Seamus Deane has termed 'the powerful dialectic between a spurious Celtic Eden and an unattainable United Irish utopia',<sup>4</sup> and in this way the desire for the West becomes a structuring element in the growing search for national identity.

The desire to return to an idealized Irish past might thus be linked to a movement Westwards in space. The 'conflation of peripherality and timelessness' which Joep Leerssen sees as an important aspect of nineteenth-century Celticism points to the possibility that, in this discourse, the West represents a return to an 'authentic' time-space representing a more 'real' Ireland.<sup>5</sup> Looking in the 'mirror' of the West, however, those involved in the Literary Revival and cultural nationalism could not help but see the Other, with the attendant knowledge that achieving a perfect originary wholeness would mean the annihilation of the self: 'The Other speaks to us of our fundamental lack and also gives us our desire ... The aim of desire is to achieve a state without difference, that difference which constitutes selfhood as it exists in the Other'.<sup>6</sup> Lacan's formulation that 'Desire is the desire of the Other' can thus be mapped onto many of the representations of the West at work in the Literary and Gaelic revivals.<sup>7</sup>

Not only did those writing about the West desire to see the peasantry as representative of a 'true' Irish identity, but those who constructed the West in

3 The use of such psychoanalytic concepts – developed not for analyzing nations but individuals – comes with its own set of critical issues, but I have appropriated for my use here very simplified versions of Lacanian concepts as a starting point from which to approach an analysis of the use of the West in the formation of a discourse surrounding national identity in the nineteenth century. In this and the next two paragraphs only, the distinction between 'other' and 'Other' is used. Diana Fuss offers a useful gloss on these terms: 'In Lacanian terms, these two concepts can be distinguished in at least three ways: first the other (small o) denotes a specular relation to an Imaginary rival, while the Other (capital O) designates a linguistic relation to a symbolic interlocutor; second the other depends upon a narcissistic relation as an effect of primary identification in which the subject recognizes itself in its own image, while the Other is constructed as an effect of secondary identification in which the subject shifts its point of address to another speaking subject' (Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* [London, 1995], p. 166, note 4). 4 Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals* (London, 1985), p. 19. 5 Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination*, p. 188. Here, Leerssen is employing Bakhtin's concept of the 'chronotope' (literally, 'time-space'). According to Leerssen, this concept allows us to see that 'fictional time ... runs unevenly and at different paces in different parts of the narrative landscape' (p. 7). 6 David Watson, *Paradox and Desire in Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (London, 1991), p. 46. 7 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, 1977), p. 312.

this way wished to be seen by the people of this region as leaders of the 'awakening' nation represented in the West. The Literary Revival constructed the West as a peripheral, regional 'other' representing a version, distant in time and space, of the 'self'. A comparison can be drawn here with a colonial desire to see the colonized as 'other' – split off from the self, yet at the same time a part of the 'self', representing those aspects of the self to be repressed. In this way the colonized other becomes involved in a dialectical process of self-definition with the colonizer.<sup>8</sup> In some cases, the region is considered, like a colony, to be a subordinate part of a nation, and while a nation is physically made up of its various regions, the *idea* of nation is supposed to be greater than the sum of these parts. In the case of constructions of the West in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish culture, there seems to exist a rather different part-to-whole relationship between region and nation: a metonymic relationship, whereby attempts were made to configure the West of Ireland as a stand-in for the whole. In these formulations, the West was the 'real' or 'authentic' Ireland, untouched by colonialism and still retaining the Gaelic language.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, while some constructed the West as a repository of 'true' Irishness, others – particularly those Anglo-Irish writers involved in the Literary Revival – saw in this metonymic construction the possibility of their own exclusion, and in response constructed a relationship with the West on terms meant to exclude the Catholic bourgeoisie, with whom they competed for mastery over discourses surrounding the West, the 'people-nation'<sup>10</sup> and the past. Thus, in movements such as the Literary and Gaelic Revivals, there was an almost colonial (re)appropriation of West-of-Irelanders in order to serve cultural and political ends within Ireland. The colonial discourse of Celticism can be seen as having been appropriated by intellectuals of the Revival, and in turn used by them to reconstruct a version of the 'self' based on the 'otherness' of the West and of the peasantry. In this way regionalism itself can be seen as a recasting of certain colonial tropes into more 'nationalist' projects.

Lawless, unlike many of her counterparts in the Literary Revival, did not stop the movement westward in mainland Ireland – she took this movement literally off the mainland onto Ireland's (and Europe's) westernmost fringes, the

<sup>8</sup> Discussions of the colonizer/colonized relationship in these terms can be found in several places; however, perhaps the best example is Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin/White Masks*, in which he discusses the problems of self-definition for the colonized in this dialectic. <sup>9</sup> John Wilson Foster offers a range of possible reasons why the West of Ireland was seen as somehow more 'authentic' than any other region of the island: the proximity of the western islands to America and their distance from England; the presence of ruins linking the islands with an unconquered Celtic past; the status of Gaelic as a first language; and the difficulty in travelling to the islands, which lent a sense of pilgrimage to anyone visiting them. See Foster, 'Certain Set Apart: The Western Island and the Irish Renaissance' in *Studies*, lxvi (1977), pp 263-7. <sup>10</sup> Cairns and Richards, *Writing Ireland*, p. 58.



Aran Islands.<sup>11</sup> If London was constructed as the political and cultural centre of the United Kingdom, and Dublin and Belfast were Ireland's cultural and commercial centres, then the western regions, and the islands on their westernmost fringes, were peripheries of a periphery. While *Grania* does represent the West as archaic and timeless, the narrative action is also set in a concrete temporal moment. The main narrative is set twenty-four years in the past, on the Aran island of Inishmaan, and details the life of eighteen-year-old Grania O'Malley. Both of Grania's parents are dead, and she supports both herself and her half-sister Honor, who is slowly dying of consumption. Grania becomes disillusioned concerning her potential future with her fiancé Murdough Blake – a disillusionment crystallized during a trip to a Galway fair. After this critical moment in Grania's development, she returns to Inishmaan to find her sister near death; she drowns while attempting to retrieve a priest from the larger island of Inishmore to administer the last rites to Honor.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the depiction of the Aran islands as remote from the rest of Ireland in time and space, there exists a certain reversal of centre/periphery distinctions made through the setting up of the rest of Ireland as foreign to the islanders themselves. This reversal is accomplished primarily through an inversion of perspective, in that the islanders see Inishmaan not as the West or as a margin, but as their centre. Galway and the rest of Ireland are constructed as liminal and 'foreign' to the islanders. Between textual and metatextual levels there is a constant shifting of perspective and a questioning of the centrality of any one island; the 'island' of the individual subject, Inishmaan, the Irish mainland, and the island of Britain all represent the various points from which any other location can be viewed. That mainland Ireland is considered foreign – even to the extent of being associated with continental Europe itself – problematizes the notion that, from the perspective of the mainland, the islands themselves are consid-

11 Like the non-metropolitan locations of many of Lady Morgan's Irish works, Inishmaan in *Grania* is littered with ruins, which might indicate (as it does in Morgan) the picturesque pastness of a given locale. That the ruins most often referred to in *Grania* are those of a disused church indicates, on the one hand, representations of the peasantry of the West as more pagan than Christian and, on the other, that Inishmaan does not share many of the same institutions of church and state with the rest of Ireland. Lawless was also the first Irish fictional writer to use an island to represent an area of Ireland as Gaelic and situated in the 'past': this particular trope was used by Lady Morgan in *The Wild Irish Girl* and by Maria Edgeworth in *Ormond*. For this last point I am indebted to Frances Botkin. 12 It is significant that Grania shares her name with the famous (or notorious) pirate queen of the sixteenth century, Grania O'Malley (Gráinne Uí Mháille, also known as Grace O'Malley): 'From the 17th to the 20th century the name "Gráinne Uí Mháille," and its later anglicised form of "Granuaile," was used as an allegorical appellation for Ireland in the poems and songs of the *Aisling* genre' (Kit and Cyril Ó Céirín, *Women of Ireland: A Biographic Dictionary* [Galway, 1996], p. 219). Lawless's use of the name 'Grania O'Malley' further complicates any reading of the character as either representing the isolation of the Protestant Ascendancy or symbolizing the Gaelic peasantry of the West.

ered foreign or other, both part of Ireland and separate from it. The subject's view of centre and margin depends on the subject's own position of looking and speaking.

In the meeting between the islanders and the mainlanders *difference* is emphasized, as if they are not from the same country, so that any potentially homogenizing distinction of the 'West of Ireland' is disrupted. Here a region of Ireland, the Aran Islands, is represented as autonomous both from other places within the West, and also from the rest of the nation:

The group of Aranites tramped rapidly along in their cowskin pampooties, their tongues keeping pace with their legs. In their home-made flannel clothes and queer shoes, with their quick, alert, yet shuffling tread, they formed a marked contrast to the ordinary peasants of the mainland, most of whom stopped short on encountering them, and a brisk interchange of guttural salutations took place. Yes, certainly, it was amusing, Grania thought. Murdough was right; it was a mistake to stay always in one place. One grew to be no better than a cow, or a goat, or a thistle growing upon the rocks. It was good to look abroad. The world, after all, was really a large place. Why, beyond Galway there were actually other towns; Dublin even; that Dublin which Murdough was always talking about and pining to get to. Who could tell but what she herself might someday see Dublin? Stranger things had happened.<sup>13</sup>

The central locale for the characters in *Grania* is Inishmaan, rather than Dublin or London. It is significant that the above passage contains one of the few mentions of Dublin in the novel; aside from such brief instances, there is the sense that Dublin – and indeed the rest of Ireland – is virtually non-existent for the peasants of Inishmaan.

That *Grania* can be read as reversing certain views of region-as-periphery is illustrated by Leerssen's comments on the construction of what he terms the 'Celtic Fringe':

It is ... a place at the very edge of the real world, usually glimpsed dimly in the distance, a place with a somewhat ambiguous ontological status, liminal, half-ghostly. It is for that reason, also, that such places tend to be distant destinations, to be approached in an asymptotic deferral, like Achilles chasing the tortoise: glimpsed on an ever-retreating horizon, sought in an ever emptier landscape, approached stage by stage, never reached or occupied but only beheld as an Outside, an ectopia.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Emily Lawless, *Grania* (London, 1892), pp 231-2. <sup>14</sup> Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination*, p. 191.

For Grania, Dublin and, indeed, the rest of the world are liminal and dream-like, and Dublin is explicitly formulated in the text – by Murdough who pines for it and Grania who fleetingly considers it – as a destination never to be reached. In *Grania* it is Dublin that is the exotic ‘other’ locale, distant in time and space, a place – or, perhaps more precisely, an idea – to be dreamed about but never achieved. Here, Dublin as ‘centre’ and the West as regional ‘periphery’ are represented not as absolute categories, but as dependent on the perspective and positioning of the individual within these places. While this allows for an interrogation of such centre-periphery distinctions, ultimately, however, the terms by which the ‘other’ is defined do remain largely intact.

The text of *Grania* can be read, at least in part, as an examination of the ways in which both individual and communal identities are formed; what is suggested by this interpretation is that for Grania herself, and for the islanders in general, difference is necessary to the formation of a sense of self. The interrogation of the construction of identity within the island community is extended to the relationship between places within the West as a whole. From the very start of the novel, Grania is marked out as at once, paradoxically, a symbol of the island itself and a ‘foreigner’ on Inishmaan; her ‘otherness’ on the island derives, in part, from having a mother from mainland Ireland. As an examination of centre/periphery distinctions in an Irish context, the representation of the islanders’ attitudes towards Grania’s mother proves illuminating: ‘It was a girl from the “Continent,” as the islanders call the mainland ... a girl from Maam in Joyce country, high up in the mountains of Connemara – a Joyce herself by name ... with an unmistakable dash of Spanish blood in her veins’.<sup>15</sup> The other women on the island refer to Grania’s mother as ‘a “Black stranger,” a “Foreigner,” a girl “from the Continent,” not related to anyone or belonging to any place!’<sup>16</sup> As a result of her mother’s mainland origins, Grania is herself considered a ‘foreigner’; she isolates herself from – and is consequently isolated by – the rest of the community on Inishmaan.

Not only does Grania see herself as belonging to a higher social class than the rest of the Aran islanders, but she is also frequently described as transgressing certain gender norms of the community, in having a man’s strength and appetite and in her active sexual desire for Murdough. While these factors mark Grania as different from the islanders themselves, her status as ‘other’ at the Galway fair is also emphasized when she is literally looked down upon by the Galway gentry from the second floors of their houses. In this assertion of power and difference, Grania feels herself surveyed and judged by those ‘above’ her. Just as the Galway gentry enact a process of self-definition through this critical viewing of Grania below, so too do Grania and the other islanders define themselves against a family of outcasts on the island, the O’Shaughnessys.<sup>17</sup> However,

<sup>15</sup> *Grania*, p. 23. <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25. <sup>17</sup> ‘Teige O’Shaughnessy was an orphan, and lived with an uncle and an aunt ... who inhabited a cabin upon one of the outlying rocks, one which

it is primarily Grania whom the islanders see as other, although she is, at the same time, identified with the island itself by the focalizer of the text:

If all humans are themselves islands, as the poet has suggested, then this tall, red-petticoated, fiercely-handsome girl was decidedly a very isolated, and rather craggy and unapproachable, sort of island. In her neighbours' eyes she was a 'Foreigner,' just as her mother had been a foreigner before her, and there was much shaking of heads and lifting of hands amongst the matrons of Inishmaan whenever her name was mentioned.<sup>18</sup>

Here Grania is at once identified with the landscape itself, and alienated from the community living within this natural environment. The landscape of the island is represented as sublime; its darkness and wildness are directly linked with Grania's own wildness and beauty. At certain points in the text, there is an observable blurring of distinctions between Grania's external and internal worlds; she often has trouble distinguishing whether her feelings originate from within herself, are actually created by the unsettled environment, or whether the environment and landscape are projections of her subjective experiences.

This linking of the native with the natural environment and landscape has a long history in colonial discourses, where the native 'barbarity' is linked to the wildness or impenetrability of the natural environment. As Declan Kiberd points out (in terms of Synge's *The Aran Islands*), there are similarities between Irish representations of landscape and other colonial discourses surrounding the Orient and Africa, particularly in terms of 'the reconstitution of the setting as a landscape of the individual consciousness'.<sup>19</sup> There is a certain ambiguity to this idea that is quite useful to a study of *Grania*: the landscape functions as a reflection not only of the consciousness of the native but also of the Anglo-Irish writer who, perhaps as Synge and Lawless did in relation to the Islands, saw in the isolation of place an external reflection of their own isolated state within the islands and within Ireland in general.<sup>20</sup> That this text might be read in terms of Ascendancy anxieties in relation to their place in an Ireland whose 'authenticity' is closely connected to rural and Catholic identity is an issue that will be revisited below.

Grania's journey to the mainland is shown to be a movement both in space and time: as she moves east to Galway, she moves forward in time, reversing

became an island at high tide and therefore was then unapproachable' (*Grania*, p. 49). The O'Shaugnesseys are outsiders primarily because the aunt and uncle are deaf and dumb, and cannot communicate with the rest of the islanders. It is worth noting that the 'pariahs' within Inishmaan are placed on a plot of land that becomes an island at high tide, extending further the use of islands as locations of 'otherness'. <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 62. <sup>19</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London, 1995), p. 287. <sup>20</sup> See Foster, 'Certain Set Apart', for a discussion of the duality of community and isolation experienced by Anglo-Irish writers during visits to the Aran Islands.

Leerssen's employment of the Bakhtinian chronotope. The pivotal point in the text occurs when she sees the relationship between a drunken, abusive man and his haggard, struggling wife in a cabin in Galway. What is crucial in the peasant cottage scene is the sense of recognition Grania experiences: 'She looked suddenly across at the mistress of the house, and it seemed to her that she saw herself grown older'; 'Staring at her in the dusk of that miserable hearth, Grania seemed to see herself a dozen years later: broken down in spirit; broken down in health; grown prematurely old ... with shame and a workhouse on the mainland – deepest of all degradation to an islander – coming hourly nearer and nearer'.<sup>21</sup> The scene in the mainland cottage (which is itself located on the shore, the endpoint of the mainland and the point of departure for Inishmaan) represents a point in the future for Grania. She recognizes herself not only in terms of this woman of the mainland, but also in terms of a temporal change as well – this Galway woman is who she herself will be in twelve years' time. It is after this incident in Galway that Grania recognizes the failure of her relationship with her fiancé Murdough. For her, it is the final break with any sort of conventional society as well: she has the 'sense of being a sort of a pariah' after her return to the island from Galway.

In this moment of identification with the Galway peasant woman, Grania recognizes herself as if in a mirror, albeit a distorted one. This recognition of a version of herself in an 'other' does not engender a Lacanian type of mythical wholeness or a unitary sense of self. Instead, Grania experiences a vision of the disintegration of herself in the future. Because she is representative of a poor and degraded peasantry, the Galway woman cannot be the 'other', the 'mirror' for the rest of Ireland to look to for a return to a mythical past of wholeness and purity; because she represents a vision of future disintegration for Grania, she cannot represent the hopes for seeing the West as a repository of a Utopian future. Ultimately, after experiencing contact with the peasant family in Galway, any possibility that Grania can then go back to the life she had led on the island is precluded; she perishes at the close of the novel not so much because of her experiences in Galway, but because, after these experiences, she cannot be accommodated within the norms of Inishmaan. Represented as at once corrupt and squalid, the mainland also stands for a movement forward in time that is not necessarily progressive or regenerating. Grania cannot go 'back' to her past on Inishmaan, nor can she go 'forward' to life on mainland Ireland; the fact that she is caught somewhere between is symbolized in her death in Galway Bay, the place where the novel began – somewhere between the islands and the mainland.

One of the fundamental issues explored in the text is the way in which a community forms a sense of its own identity. What is enacted in *Grania* is a fundamental ambivalence about the ways in which difference is to be approached

in the process of constructing Irish identity. Grania is both the island itself and its other, in terms of gender, class and family origins; yet the island and its other as represented in Grania prove to be irreconcilable in the text. The identification of the self with the other – the other which is the self differentiated by its distance in time and space – leads her to assert herself against this vision of her future self, but at the expense of setting her further outside the society to which she returns. Both island society and the West as represented by Galway prove to be oppressive to its ‘others’, those who are at once necessary to self-definition (as both the islanders define themselves against Grania, and she defines herself against the woman in the cottage) but also unable to be accommodated within this society itself.

The text opens up the possibility for an interrogation of the ways in which the other is used to define the self, and precludes the possibility of looking to an other to rejuvenate the self. Galway is at once the past for centres such as Dublin, but also the future for Grania and the island; this locus in time and space, however, does not offer the possibility of rejuvenation for either centre – that is, Inishmaan or Dublin. In portraying the squalor and degradation of the Galway cottagers (and of those peasants on Inishmaan as well), Lawless precludes the possibility that difference can be neatly erased to create an homogeneous and idealized version of the West. Class differences, obscured in idyllic versions of the peasantry deployed in some narratives of the revival, are actually highlighted in the text, so that the ‘other’ cannot be subsumed into a version of the ‘self’.

While this shifting between periphery and centre, and between temporal and spatial locations, calls into question the primacy of one centre and its corresponding margin, ultimately the centre/periphery distinction, and the power relations expressed within that distinction, are held intact by the representation of the ‘exotic’ aspects of Grania and the islanders; as Bakhtin notes, ‘Exoticism presupposes a *deliberate opposition of what is alien to what is one’s own*, the otherness of what is foreign is emphasised, savored, as it were, and elaborately depicted against an implied background of one’s own ordinary and familiar world’.<sup>22</sup> The islanders in *Grania* are depicted as alien and foreign, against the implied background of Anglo-Irish and British society; in attempting to delineate the specificity of the Aran Islands, so as to introduce heterogeneity

<sup>22</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), p. 101; emphasis original. Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘exotic’ is extended by Leerssen into what he terms ‘auto-exoticism’: ‘Ireland is made exotic by the selfsame descriptions which purport to represent or explain Ireland ... That is a direct consequence of a regional literature which tries to establish its discreteness, its regionalism vis-à-vis an exoteric readership by means of local colour’ (*Remembrance and Imagination*, p.37). While Leerssen refers to an English audience reading the ‘regionalism’ of Irish literature, his formulation can be equally productive when applied to the representation of a region *within* Ireland.

into representations of peasantry and of locale in the West, Lawless might be seen to be already representing the islanders as exotic. While the islanders see those from the mainland as foreign, the narrator's perspective represents the islanders themselves as foreign and exotic. Even though there is no Anglo-Irish or British focalizer within the text itself, the representations of Inishmaan (and Galway) are placed against a background in which Dublin and London are the implicit centres.

There is the sense of the focalizer and the reader knowing more than characters in terms of their relative place within Ireland and within the Empire as well: 'The fair was held in the middle of the town, in its main square, the Belgrave or Grosvenor Square of its fashion and importance'.<sup>23</sup> This rather ironic commentary on the relative importance of the Galway fair, achieved through comparison with the pristine fashionable squares of London, serves to highlight the provincial nature of Galway. The West is restored to the status of region-as-periphery through an assertion of the metropolitan position of narrator and reader in relation to the people and places represented in the text proper.

Although Lawless problematizes the perspectives of centre and periphery by drawing attention to the centrality of Inishmaan for the islanders, and, in their view, the foreignness and peripherality of mainland Ireland, she ultimately undermines this in using it as an example of the exoticism and quaintness of the islanders' views of the world. For Grania and her father, and the other islanders as well, mainland Ireland is Leerssen's 'Celtic Fringe', 'a place at the very edge of the real world ... liminal, half-ghostly':

Their islands – especially this one they were approaching, Inishmaan – were to all practical purposes the world. Even for Con O'Malley, whom business carried pretty often to the mainland, the latter was, save on the merest fringe, to all intents and purposes an unknown country. The world, as it existed beyond that grey wash of sea, was a name to him, and nothing more. Ireland – sometimes regarded by superior persons as the very Ultima Thule of civilisation – hung before his eyes as a region of dangerous novelties, dazzling, almost wicked in its sophistication, and he had never set foot on a railroad in his life.<sup>24</sup>

The perspective offered here, in pointing out that the 'natives' see their island as the world, permits readers to take up the position of judging that this is not the case. The ironic glance at Ireland being the Ultima Thule of civilization also draws readers back from actually taking up the perspective of the islanders and draws attention to the centre/margin category in a larger colonial context, as Ultima Thule means, 'a far-away, unknown region'.<sup>25</sup> Ireland here is

23 *Grania*, p. 232. 24 *Ibid.*, pp 29-30. 25 'Ultima Thule', from the Latin which means the furthest Thule, a remote unknown northern region in the Roman Empire.

constructed by 'superior persons' as being on the very periphery of 'civilisation' – civilization, being represented, of course, by England and continental Europe.

Whether Lawless is criticizing this view or lending it a certain credence is open to debate; but the emphasis is on the quaintness of the islander who sees what is itself a periphery (that is, mainland Ireland as constructed by the metro-pole) as a centre characterized as dangerous, wicked, and full of unknown novelties. That Con O'Malley has never been on a train – that symbol of progress and movement – demonstrates the islanders' distance in space and time from mainland, modern Ireland. Ultimately, what we are left with in the text is the sense of 'us' looking at 'them' looking at 'us'. That this formation might prove subversive is perhaps indicated by the need both to contain the disruptive elements of otherness represented by Grania, and by the narrative strategies employed to lend the text an overarching singularity of viewpoint oriented towards the centres of Dublin and London.

*Grania* brought the Arans into literature six years before Synge's visit to the Islands, and the text prefigures many of the concerns with community, identity and gender present in Synge's work. A number of parallels can be drawn between Grania and many of Synge's characters – particularly those individuals who cannot be accommodated within the community of which they are a part. Unlike the affirmation of individualism in Synge's plays, Grania is eliminated at the end of the text because she cannot be accommodated within either island or mainland society, and this perhaps serves, as in Synge's plays, as commentary on the peasant community in Ireland. Indeed, 'revivals' in both Synge and Lawless, 'are not rejuvenations but a reassertion of the power of the old over the young'.<sup>26</sup> The possibility of regeneration, so crucial to the Irish Literary Revival and to other forms of cultural nationalism, is curtailed in *Grania* by the deaths of the two wealthiest and youngest marriageable women in the community of Inishmaan: Grania and her sister Honor.

What can be seen in both Lawless's and Synge's works dealing with the Aran Islands is the projection of an increasingly isolated Ascendancy consciousness onto the people and landscape of the western isles in such a way that the peasantry becomes literally both self and other. Terry Eagleton places the duality of the Ascendancy's relationship with the West within a continuous process of identification and alienation:

The peasant is 'other' to the upper-class intellectual, who must therefore transform his own language to capture this difference, yet the peasant is also, as natural aristocrat, a kind of mirror image of himself. The loneliness of the disinherited intellectual finds its echo in the collective isolation of peasant life, but discovers there too a community which might

<sup>26</sup> Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination*, p. 222.



compensate for it. It is not for nothing that Synge felt wonderfully at home on the Aran Islands, and a complete outsider.<sup>27</sup>

While Grania is identified as the island itself, and her personality intimately linked with the landscape and natural elements of Inishmaan, it is possible to see this as both the placement of the 'native' Irish within certain colonial essentialist relationships with their environment, and as a projection onto the native of the anxieties of the Protestant minority in Ireland.

Lawless herself explicitly places Grania in a higher social class than the Irish peasantry. She remarked of the character of Grania, in comparison with that of Grania's sister Honor, that 'A Grania, on the other hand, I never have known in that rank of life [the peasantry]. The idea is taken from something a good deal higher up in the social scale'.<sup>28</sup> In the representation of Grania as a 'foreigner' and a 'pariah', as both the island itself and the other against whom the island community defines itself, it is possible to read this text in light of the changing role of the Ascendancy in nineteenth-century Ireland, particularly in terms of the Ascendancy class at once seeing themselves as Irish, but increasingly being used as the other against whom definitions of Gaelic, Catholic Irishness were being formed. While Lawless opens up possibilities for difference within places designated as regions by metropolitan centres, ultimately she does, like many of her Anglo-Irish counterparts in the late nineteenth century, use the West in order to examine the self. The use of Grania as both native and representative of the Ascendancy is a definitive example of the self's desire for the other. In this case, the other, as represented in Grania, is really the self constructed through a narcissistic looking to the West, not in order to see alterity, but to use that 'other' as a mirror in which to see the self.

<sup>27</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London, 1995), p. 312. <sup>28</sup> Personal letter, quoted in William J. Linn, 'The Life and Works of the Hon. Emily Lawless, First Novelist of the Irish Literary Revival' (doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1971), p. 32.