

The 'Good Step' and Swelling in Tim Robinson's *Stones of Aran: the Advent of 'Psycho-archipelagraphy'*

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Abstract



Tim Robinson's *Stones of Aran* diptych is an extraordinary piece of place-based writing. It takes as its subject the Irish island of Árainn, and attempts what the cultural geographer John Wylie calls "the total description of landscape." Its central motif is the 'good step,' a term Robinson uses to explore the relationship between humanity and the world. However, despite the work's gradual recognition as one of the stand-out achievements of twentieth-century Anglophone landscape writing, there is a lack of consensus about the exact nature of that achievement. Robert Macfarlane describes it as "an exceptional investigation of the difficulties and rewards of dwelling." Wylie, by contrast, feels that "A clearer disavowal of dwelling, of a correspondence of land and life, is hard to imagine."

This essay suggests that these polarised views have arisen, in part, because of the prior expectations readers have brought to the text in terms of broadly Romantic traditions of landscape writing, resulting in a failure to engage with its more innovative aspects. These innovations include its polyphonic stylistic quality, which incorporates, amidst detailed excavations of the island's natural and social histories, elements of parody and metatextual commentary, as well as a performative aspect, whereby, cumulatively, we see Robinson attempting to take the 'good step,' and witness both the psychic disorientations and the epiphanies involved in this quest. These aspects bring to rural landscape writing a sensibility more often associated with urban place-based writing and suggest a psychogeographic dimension to the work. This essay argues that *Stones of Aran* represents a hybrid form that might be termed '*psycho-archipelagraphy*'. It enables the expression of a provisional, dynamic sense of dwelling, a 'good step' that, rather than either connoting a consistent correspondence between land and life or disproving the possibility of such a correspondence, effectively straddles the contradictions and disorientations involved in being-in-the-world.

Keywords: landscape, new nature writing, psychogeography, dwelling, Tim Robinson, the 'good step'.

Resumen

El díptico *Stones of Aran* de Tim Robinson es una pieza extraordinaria de escritura basada en el lugar. Tiene como tema la isla irlandesa de Árainn, y es un intento de lo que el geógrafo cultural John Wylie llama "la descripción total del paisaje." Su tema principal es el 'buen paso,' un término que Robinson usa para explorar la relación entre la humanidad y el mundo. Sin embargo, a pesar del reconocimiento gradual de la obra como uno de los logros destacados de la escritura anglófona del paisaje en el siglo XX, existe una falta de consenso sobre la naturaleza exacta de este logro. Robert Macfarlane lo describe como "una investigación excepcional de las dificultades y las recompensas de las moradas." Wylie, por el contrario, siente que "Una negación más clara de las moradas, de la correspondencia entre vida y tierra, es difícil de imaginar."

Este ensayo sugiere que estas opiniones polarizadas han surgido, en parte, debido a las expectativas previas que los lectores han trasladado al texto en términos de tradiciones de escritura del paisaje ampliamente románticas, resultando en un fracaso a la hora de involucrarse con sus aspectos más innovadores. Estas innovaciones incluyen su cualidad estilística polifónica, que incorpora, entre las excavaciones detalladas de las historias naturales y sociales de la isla, elementos de parodia y comentario metatextual, así como un aspecto performativo, a través del cual, de forma acumulativa, vemos a Robinson tratando de dar el 'buen paso,' y siendo testigo tanto de las desorientaciones psíquicas como de las epifanías implicadas en esta búsqueda. Estos aspectos aportan a la escritura del paisaje rural una

sensibilidad más a menudo asociada con la escritura basada en lugares urbanos y sugieren una dimensión psicogeográfica de la obra. Este ensayo sostiene que *Stones of Aran* representa una forma híbrida que puede denominarse 'psico-archipelagografía'. Permite la expresión de un sentido de morar provisional y dinámico, un 'buen paso' que, más que connotar una correspondencia consistente entre tierra y vida o refutar la posibilidad de tal correspondencia, abarca de forma efectiva las contradicciones y desorientaciones involucradas en el ser/estar-en-el-mundo.

Palabras clave: paisaje, nueva escritura de la naturaleza, psicogeografía, morada, Timo Robinson, el 'buen paso'.

These are mighty abstractions, humanity and the world, and I repent my presumption before them. But here I am, as one always is, faced with the next step. (Robinson, Pilgrimage 364)

Then it's one foot then the other as you step out on the road, step out on the road. (Jane Siberry "Calling All Angels")¹

Introduction

In 1972 the artist, mathematician, cartographer and writer Tim Robinson left London to settle on Árainn, the largest of the Irish Aran islands. He lived on the island until 1984, when he moved to Roundstone, Connemara, also in the far west of Ireland, and where he is still resident. Over his twelve years on Árainn, Robinson set himself the task of exploring the place as comprehensively as possible, mapping the area and recording his observations in notebooks and diaries. He then set about condensing and ordering these notes, publishing in 1985 the first of two volumes about the island; *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*, followed in 1995 by *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*. The first charts the author's tracing on foot of the entire coastline of Árainn, while the second delves into the interior. Both books record in layers of painstakingly accumulated detail the complex interweavings of the island's human and more-than-human histories, and reflect what the cultural geographer John Wylie calls "Robinson's own freely-admitted ambition: the total description of landscape" ("Dwelling" 366).

While relatively slow to attract attention, and largely out of circulation during the early 2000s, the diptych has now been hailed as "one of the most sustained, intensive and imaginative studies of a landscape that has ever been carried out" (Macfarlane, "Rock of Ages"), and "one of the stand-out achievements in the Western tradition of writing about culture, nature and landscape" (Wylie, *Perspectives* n.p.). However, despite the agreement evidenced by these citations that the books represent a major achievement, there is a lack of consensus about its exact nature. While Macfarlane and Wylie both praise the works for their exploration of dwelling, focussing in particular on the central motif of the diptych—the 'good step' (a term Robinson uses to explore our

¹ "Calling All Angels" lyrics quoted with permission from Jane Siberry.

being-in-the-world)—their conclusions are markedly at odds. Macfarlane's summation of the work is as follows: "For years, Robinson walked, and as he did so the sentences began to come—beautiful, dense, paced. The result, finished in 1995, was the 830-page [980-page in the editions referenced here] *Stones of Aran* diptych, *Pilgrimage* and *Labyrinth*: an exceptional investigation of the difficulties and rewards of dwelling, and of the deep entanglement of the human and the mineral" ("Rock of Ages" n.p.). Wylie, by contrast, states that in the *Aran* and later *Connemara* books, "The paradox haunting Robinson's writing is that the more he says, the more the words accumulate, thousands of pages of them, the more *Aran* and *Connemara* withdraw from view [...] A clearer disavowal of dwelling, of a correspondence of land and life, is hard to imagine" (379).

This essay addresses the question of how such apparently polarised responses might have arisen, suggesting that Wylie's reading of the work, insightful and persuasive though it is, perhaps overstates the legacy of the Romantic tradition of walking and landscape writing in the books. It leads him to see Robinson as constantly trying and failing to effect a 'reconnection' with the world—admittedly a view encouraged by Robinson's own sporadic and apparently definitive declarations of defeat—which he then extrapolates as a fundamental expression of the impossibility of Robinson's model of dwelling. Macfarlane's response is also perceptive and richly suggestive, but, in the context of recent 'archipelagic' perspectives on contemporary landscape writing, perhaps encourages a reading that dwells on certain aspects of Robinson's writing—the wealth of painstakingly accumulated local detail, for example—at the expense of its more innovative features. This essay briefly outlines ecocritical notions of dwelling, investigating the ways in which Robinson's approach both reflects and moves beyond them. Likewise, it discusses the ways in which his work reveals the influence of Romanticism and supports an archipelagic reading, before focusing on aspects that distinguish it from these traditions of landscape writing. These aspects include its polyphonic form, which incorporates, amidst long passages of detailed representational writing, elements of pastiche, parody, and metatextual commentary, and its performative character, whereby the books not only provide us with a literary exploration of the idea of dwelling and the 'good step,' but at the same time cumulatively enact Robinson's own performance of his attempt at that step. This enactment involves a dialectical movement in which episodes of disappointment and disorientation alternate with moments of reinvigoration and stepping onwards.

The essay argues that these innovative aspects, allied to the text's commitment to vertical excavations of each location's physical and psychic history, along with Robinson's willingness to disclose at times the disorientations and faultlines of his own personal experience, bring to rural landscape writing what might be considered a more urban, psychogeographic sensibility. The essay develops this idea, proposing that, in combining existing traditions of landscape writing with the innovations detailed above, Robinson has created a new hybrid form—one that I have light-heartedly dubbed '*psycho-archipelagraphy*'. This form brings together in a sometimes awkward alliance the Romantic and the postmodern, the archipelagic and the psychogeographic, offering

intensely detailed representations of local place, but also honouring the flawed subjectivity of the human observer in both its epiphanies and its fragmentation and dislocation. John Wylie argues that Robinson's books represent "active contributions to contemporary geographical thinking, practice and theorization" (366). Likewise, I would suggest that they challenge existing literary concepts of landscape and nature writing, expanding these genres and allowing, ultimately, for a valuably provisional and tentative sense of dwelling.

Dwelling—the Romantic and the Archipelagic

The concept of dwelling as it has evolved in ecocriticism owes much to ideas that emerged with European Romanticism, and the ways in which those ideas have been amplified and developed since the late 18th century. Jonathan Bate, for example, stresses the importance of the Romantic poets both in identifying what they saw as a growing human alienation from the natural world as a result of the industrial revolution and increasing urbanisation, and in proposing a need to re-establish the lost connection with that world. At the same time, Bate acknowledges that this sense of originary oneness may be illusory, and that some form of disconnection may be an inevitable element of the human condition. He writes: "Whereas the swallow *is* its biology, our knowledge of mind, our self-consciousness, brings the possibility of alienation from self and from nature" (260), and he believes that the Romantics also understood this possibility. Thus, for Bate, Romantic poetry has "a melancholy awareness of the illusoriness of its own utopian vision" (245). Nevertheless, in his discussion of the philosophies of Martin Heidegger, and Heidegger's mobilisation of Hölderlin's perception that "poetically man dwells on this earth" (257), Bate suggests that literature, specifically 'ecopoetry,' can present us with an experience—a '*presencing*'—of the world that equates with un-alienated dwelling. He argues that a poem may itself be "an image of ecological wholeness which may grant to the receptive and attentive reader a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world" (109).

John Wylie very plausibly argues that UK and US prose genres of environmental writing and nature writing are underpinned by a similar longing for ecological wholeness, arguing that they "inherit a complex romantic legacy in which notions of land and life existing in reciprocal harmony play a significant, if contested part" (366). He sees this legacy as perpetuating a model of dwelling that continues to involve "a sense of land and life in some ways sutured together" (367), and it is this model that informs his analysis of Robinson's work. He also draws attention to another element of the Romantic influence on notions of dwelling—its instigation of a sense that being-at-home-in-the-world might be best achieved through the act of walking, particularly rural walking. He suggests that "Robinson's mode of walking, and thence of writing, draws most of all on refurbished romantic registers and legacies" (370) that regard walking as "*proper* to dwelling" (371, emphasis in original). He identifies these registers and legacies as the source of landscape's "generic literary legacy of yearning and returning; nostalgia, elegy

and lament" (367). There certainly *are* elements of yearning and elegy in the Aran works. Robinson initially describes his quest for the 'good step' as "the mind travelling back in search of Eden" (*Pilgrimage* 7), suggesting some kind of nostalgia for originary connection. In the context of geological erosion, Robinson feels that "Aran is a dying moment" (*Labyrinth* 130), and confesses: "Too often, in writing of Aran, I am writing elegies unawares" (278). Thus, for Wylie, Robinson's sense of dwelling is characterised by a "romantic lament for dwelling's loss" (367), undermined by the insight, which Wylie finds to be the insistent message of the Aran diptych, that "displacement, not rootedness, is originary" (367). Wylie argues that this contradiction leaves us mourning a connection that never was, and potentially destroys the validity of landscape "as a mode of critical and creative writing" (367).² The absence of a Romantic recovery of dwelling or image of ecological wholeness in Robinson's work suggests to Wylie that it therefore demonstrates the impossibility of this kind of dwelling altogether.

Undermining this observation, though, is the way in which Robinson himself explicitly resists Romantically-inflected traditions of landscape writing, while acknowledging their attraction for him. Notwithstanding his image of the mind travelling back in search of Eden, he claims that the dolphins that inspire his notion of the 'good step' "induce in [him] no nostalgia for imaginary states of past instinctive or future theological grace" (*Pilgrimage* 19). And though he feels the power of transcendental urges, he is keen to refute their attractions. Displaying a certain relish for apparent contradiction, he describes himself as a "romantic materialist" (*Pilgrimage* 109)—one who is drawn to Romanticism but is at the same time focused on the material world. Thus, in a passage from *Labyrinth*, he describes a moment of intense connection rich with the possibility of transcendence, but immediately turns back to the materiality of the earth: "But I soon tire of transcendental flight and start poking about again, questioning the ground I stand on" (325). In an episode from *Pilgrimage* entitled 'A Difficult Mile,' Robinson gives his reason for this resolute resumption of his earthly focus. He expresses a belief in the necessity of recognizing our mortality and finitude, concluding that even if the cosmos did have "a meaning narrow enough to be discovered by or revealed to such infinitesimals as Man, it would be one which we, honouring ourselves as dust, should decline to read or make our own. Better to keep our eyes on the ground, our ground" (168).

This sense of 'groundedness' is one which, notwithstanding their Romantic leanings, can also be traced in ecocritical formulations of dwelling. For Jonathan Bate, being-at-home-in-the-world implies a life "grounded in regional particularity" (234). He cites Thomas Hardy to argue that "those who truly dwell [...] are attuned to collective memory, to 'old association—an almost exhaustive biographical or historical acquaintance with every object, animate and inanimate, within the observer's horizon'" (18). Likewise, he contends that for the poet Ted Hughes, "dwelling with the earth is a

² He contrasts Robinson's 'good step' with Tim Ingold's notion of 'wayfaring,' which for Wylie does provide a context in which there is "a certain continuum of world, body and text—of landscape, walking and writing" ("Dwelling" 372) and in which dwelling in a more contingent, fluid form is possible.

matter of *staying put* and *listening in*" (29; emphasis in original). This notion of consistent localised dwelling is one that has been adopted (though not uncritically) in ecocriticism as a whole. Greg Garrard, for example, states: "'Dwelling' is not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work" (117). This formulation is certainly applicable to Robinson's writing, which pays devoted attention to all of these aspects—indeed it is Árainn's richness in such histories that contributes to Robinson's choice of it as *the* location for his exploration of the 'good step.' However, he also explicitly resists too close an identification between ancestry and place, mindful of the dangers of this kind of model of dwelling when combined with nationalist politics. He is emphatically dismissive of nationalistic claims on place, arguing that in the context of geological time, "the geographies over which we are so suicidally passionate are, on this scale of events, fleeting expressions of the earth's face" (*Pilgrimage* 7), and he goes on specifically to reject the idea of rootedness: "In all this the step is to be distinguished, maximally, from those metaphorical appendages of humanity [...] roots—a concept which, though obviously deep, is to me unacceptably vegetable" (*Pilgrimage* 364). When asked to comment further on this declaration, Robinson elaborated:

Roots spread out from a centre they themselves fix in place, lay claim to a territory, suck up historical and political poisons, limit the access of nomads, passers-by and explorers. I exaggerate, of course, and there is much to be said for settled communities in their familiar old places, but as a human being I claim the freedom of the globe's surface and accept responsibility for it. (Interview n.p.)

In many ways this statement, which incorporates both a valuing of localised tradition and an insistence on a more open, outward-looking relation to place, locates Robinson within the emergent area of landscape writing known as "archipelagic literature" (Smith, "Archipelagic Literature" 5). Inspired by 'prophets' who include in their number Wordsworth and Thoreau (McNeillie vii), suggesting a broadly Romantic inheritance, archipelagic literature is characterised by the belief that a profound relationship with a particular place can be effected by bringing a detailed attentiveness to the multiplicity of its specific histories, as well as by a desire to remap the British and Irish archipelago so as to highlight the vitality of its marginal spaces and the complex interplay between them. In his editorial to the first issue of the journal *Archipelago*, a publication which has spearheaded the archipelagic movement in British and Irish creative writing, Andrew McNeillie set out its manifesto, stating:

Extraordinary will be its preoccupations with landscape, with documentary and remembrance, with wilderness and wet, with natural and cultural histories, with language and languages, with the littoral and the vestigial, the geological and topographical, with climates, in terms of both meteorology, ecology and environment; and all these things as metaphor, liminal and subliminal, at the margins, in the unnameable constellation of islands on the Eastern Atlantic coast, known variously in other millennia as Britain, Great Britain, Britain and Ireland etc. (vii)

This declaration not only establishes the depth and breadth of archipelagism's place-based preoccupations, it also gives an immediate sense of its resistance to dominant homogenising political discourses, reflected here in McNeillie's refusal to

name the Eastern Atlantic constellation of islands. This hint of a radical edge perhaps begins to work against some of the more troubling political implications of notions of localised dwelling. In fact, for Jos Smith, the most significant achievement of recent archipelagic writing is the way in which it addresses the problem of balancing a deep regard for local identity while maintaining the self-reflexivity and openness to ideas of flux and hybridity required to avoid the pitfalls of a more conservative mentality. Taking up Arif Dirlik's notion of 'critical localism,' Smith proposes his own version—of archipelagic writing as performing a radical “act of resistance to the dual unifying narratives of Great Britain and globalisation” and offering “a critical form of the local that is slippery, creative and progressive” (“Archipelagic Environment” 6). He suggests that ‘archipelagic literature’ is a more appropriate and meaningful generic description than ‘New Nature Writing’ for contemporary place-based writing, given its increasing focus on the complex intertwinings of nature, culture and place.

It is no surprise that Robinson's detailed investigations of Árainn's histories, mythologies, geologies and biologies have led to his being hailed as an archipelagic chronicler *par excellence*. Describing the intensity of his focus, Robinson comments: “I wore the network of tender little fields and bleak rocky shores of Aran into my skin until I could have printed off a map of them by rolling on a sheet of paper” (Interview n.p.), and he also shows a keen awareness of the significance of naming—“The names of places have an explosive power, as any researcher of lost space-time knows” (*Pilgrimage* 285). In fact, the Atlantic Archipelagos Research Project (AARP), which was founded in October 2010 as a joint initiative between the University of Exeter and the National University of Ireland, Galway, “has made it a priority to develop research interests in and around the work of cartographer and author Tim Robinson” (AARP n.p.). Moreover, Robinson's adoption of groundedness rather than rootedness plays into Smith's sense of a more progressive localism. Smith demonstrates the correspondences between Robinson's approach to landscape and Arif Dirlik's notion of place, which “suggests groundedness from below, and a flexible and porous boundary around it, without closing out the extralocal, all the way to the global” (Dirlik, qtd. in Smith, “Archipelagic Literature” 10).

This idea of unbounded place spinning out from the local to the global is a key feature in Robinson's construct of dwelling, as is his insistence on situating that dwelling within the vast expanse of geological time. Robinson places Árainn within the context of the limestone area of central Ireland, as well as other limestones dating from the same Carboniferous era in Europe and America. Jos Smith comments on the way in which this “pre-national understanding of the archipelagic space” (“Archipelagic Literature” 11) undermines nationalist renderings of place. Similarly, Ben Smith's reading of *Stones of Aran* sees the ‘good step’ and its geological framework as symbolising the liberating potential to overstep human terms entirely in their ability to “encompass all human, cultural modes of mapping landscape, but also move beyond these bounds—beyond the human conception of Aran as an island, into an understanding of Aran in global, non-human terms, as fluid, interconnected, interchangeable limestone” (69). Robinson goes

even further than these global terms in his proposal of a cosmic context for dwelling and rejection of the term 'landscape'. He states: "'Landscape' implies a perspectival, if not proprietorial, overview" (Interview n.p.), and, in the Preface to his 1996 collection *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara*, he elaborates: "'Landscape' has during the past decade become a key term in several disciplines; but I would prefer this body of work to be read in the light of 'Space'" (vi). He goes on to define what he means by 'Space,' which is: "the interlocking of all our mental and physical trajectories, good or ill, through all the subspaces of experiences up to the cosmic" (vi). It is in this context that Robinson hopes his exploration of dwelling will be read, the only context in which, he believes, "one can without real contradiction build deep-eaved Heideggerian dwellings" (vi). Robinson's model of dwelling, then, begins to take on an expansive, fluid form which suggests that the lack of 'rootedness' Wylie identifies may not necessarily undermine its validity.

Notwithstanding these moves towards a more open sense of dwelling, and the recognition of the significance of Robinson's geological contextualisation of Árainn, there has perhaps been a lack of engagement in archipelagic readings of his work with what might be seen as its more 'difficult' aspects. At a 2011 AARP seminar celebrating Robinson's work, Wylie argues:

Ideas concerning the special value of places such as Aran and Connemara were prominent, along with a stress on the importance of preserving deep affinities with and attachments to specific places. In this vein, for the author and critic Robert Macfarlane, for instance, Robinson's work is above all 'an exceptional investigation of the difficulties and rewards of dwelling.' ("Dwelling" 377)

By contrast, as we have seen, Wylie finds in the work a disavowal of dwelling and a problematizing of landscape "as a reservoir of existential value, identity and authenticity" (366). While I wholeheartedly agree with Macfarlane that the Aran diptych represents an exceptional investigation of the difficulties and rewards of dwelling, I would contend that there is a temptation in archipelagic readings of Robinson's work to focus on his evocation of localised affinities and attachments at the expense of exploring the 'difficulties'—Robinson's sporadic confessions of disorientation, dislocation and even boredom, for example. There is also perhaps a lack of engagement with the text's comical, ironic and parodic moments and the contradictions which emerge in pursuit of the 'good step.' Macfarlane acknowledges Robinson's declaration that the task of documenting the 'good step' is "too great for single person, a single lifetime" ("Introduction" xiv), but does not delve further, commenting: "But he attempts it nonetheless" (xiv). He also characterises Robinson's manner as "austerely passionate" (xiv), a beautifully apposite phrase for the attitude of much—but not all—of the writing. John Elder suggests that it is Robinson's own (possibly unreasonable) demands of himself that lead to his sense of failure: "he must grapple with a certain quality of obsessiveness that makes the achievement of any resolution difficult for him" (x). Both views perhaps presuppose a more definite sense of dwelling than the Aran diptych in its totality supports.

I would suggest, like Wylie, that the lack of resolution Elder alludes to is, in fact, central to the books' meaning, rather than the side-effect of somewhat compulsive

tendencies. However, contrary to Wylie's belief that the fact that "any such sought-after unification—of self and land, word and world—is *never* ultimately achieved, and moreover is recognised as being unachievable, is in large measure the insistent message of Robinson's writing" ("Dwelling" 368; emphasis in original), I contend that the lack of resolution is integral to Robinson's uniquely provisional and dialectical sense of dwelling, in which unification is achieved and lost by turns. What I hope to show in the following sections is that the Aran diptych, with its innovations of form and its subtle and sometimes comical performance of an attempt at the 'good step,' enacts a straddling of contradictions—a way of viewing our being-in-the-world with a kind of negative capability. I argue that it enables a perception of dwelling as constituted by the constant interplay of displacement and connection, by the alternation of groundedness and groundlessness, both literal and metaphorical, involved in stepping through this world.

The 'Good step'

The 'good step'—the motif Robinson uses to ground his exploration of dwelling—is inspired by an experience he has while walking along a beach early on in his stay on Árainn. He becomes aware of a wave "with a denser identity and more purposeful momentum than the rest" (*Pilgrimage* 19) which gradually resolves itself into the shapes of two or three dolphins. This prompts him to reflect on their profound at-oneness with their environment: "they were wave made flesh, with minds solely to ensure the moment-by-moment reintegration of body and world" (19). Robinson wistfully identifies this as "wholeness beyond happiness" (19), a unity of body and world which is largely denied to the human: "a dolphin may be its own poem, but we have to find our rhymes elsewhere" (19). The juxtaposition of the dolphin's integration with human dislocation hints at a Romantic sense both of lost connection and of a melancholy awareness of the illusoriness of that connection. But for Robinson, this apprehension, rather than instigating an elegiac lament, poses a conundrum: "Let the problem be symbolized by that of taking a single step as adequate to the ground it clears as is the dolphin's arc to its wave. Is it possible to think towards a *human* conception of this "good step"?" (20). However, thinking towards this conception is fraught with difficulty. Humans exist in such a "multiplicity of modes of awareness that it must be impossible to bring them to a common focus even for the notional duration of a step" (20), in a world which is ever complicated by the "geologies, biologies, myths, histories, politics, etcetera" (20) we negotiate with each step. But the solution is not simply to attempt to omit and simplify any of these aspects of experience:

To forget these dimensions of the step is to forgo our honour as human beings but an awareness of them equal to the involuted complexities under foot at any given moment would be a crushing backload to have to carry. Can such contradictions be forged into a state of consciousness even fleetingly worthy of its ground? (20)

Given the weight of these hindrances, the answer to this question would appear to be 'no.' Moreover, Robinson also declares the writing of an account of the search for such a

state of consciousness to be unachievable: "And the writing of such a work? Impossible, for many reasons, of which the brevity of life is one" (20).

This could be seen as an immediate confirmation of Wylie's view of the work as a disavowal of the possibility of a union of land and life and of dwelling *per se*. However, this passage comes at the very beginning of two volumes which, as noted, span nearly a thousand pages. If the impossibility of the task of taking the 'good step' is so definitive then one wonders why Robinson has bothered to write the rest of the books. I would argue that a more fruitful way of regarding this declaration is to see it as an opening gambit, a challenge which sets us a 'problem,' in the mathematical sense of the word, and that the books can be seen as a dialectical working through (though not necessarily a solution as such), via the step, of that problem. In fact, Robinson seems almost to revel in such a conundrum. In *Labyrinth* he explicitly states his enjoyment of living under the giant question marks of life. Referring to the constellations visible in the northern hemisphere he states: "However I do not envy those with a southern hemisphere to their minds, whose night skies are certified with the Cross. Mine are queried constantly by those three constellations, the Greater, Lesser and Least Question Marks, and I like it so" (392). With his relish for challenge and uncertainty, no sooner has he deemed it impossible than he shoulders the "crushing backload" in order to attempt the task. Hence Robinson's declarations are not always to be taken at face value, but rather as devices brought into play at various points throughout the diptych. The idea that there are some potentially misleading ploys is one which Robinson himself hints at. When questioned by Jos Smith about the Aran books' preoccupation with inexpressibility he replies:

I think if the gambit is used very carefully and sparingly, to say that something is inexpressible can be very expressive about it. But the ground has to be prepared so that the reader is conned into seeing what is being expressed even through the claim that it is inexpressible. (Smith, "Archipelagic Environment" 182)

Similarly, to say something is impossible can be very expressive about it, and when the ground is prepared with as much attentiveness as Robinson gives it, the reader can be encouraged to glimpse the possibilities which shimmer through the stated impossibilities.

Nevertheless, John Wylie singles out one particular moment of disillusionment to press home his argument that the message of the books is the absolute disavowal of the step and of dwelling. The episode occurs towards the close of *Pilgrimage* when Robinson is contemplating the crossing of An Chois to Straw Island, and takes the opportunity to reassess his quest and to ask: "What connotations has my ruling image, the step, picked up in this circuit of the island world now so nearly closed?" (363). What follows is a kind of dialogue with himself about the progress of the step. In a moment of gentle self-satire he shows himself to be prepared to celebrate the success of its failure, as it were, in his metatextual observation, "Well, a book that is committed to failure may allow itself an interlude of rueful celebration of its success" (363). He goes on with a playful allusion to Psalm 137 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept': "so I will sit down by the

waters of An Chois, bathe my bruised soles, and listen to the voices that say, 'How foolish an enterprise!'" (363). The psalm Robinson alludes to is one of dislocation and exile—so far, so good in terms of Wylie's argument—but psalms such as this one might also be seen as ventings of despair while gathering the strength and faith to persevere. Robinson's response to these 'voices' shows him already thinking about the next step: "Perhaps so. These are mighty abstractions, humanity and the world, and I repent my presumption before them. But here I am, as one always is, faced with the next step" (363-64). However, the dialogue does not end here, as Robinson falls once more into contemplation of failure: "All that lies to hand (man of straw, marooned on Straw Island!) is the wreckage of an ideal" (364), and utters what Wylie sees as the defining moment of the text's disavowal of dwelling: "The notion of a momentary congruence between the culture one bears and the ground that bears one has shattered against reality into uncountable fragments" (364). Yet again, though, the tone changes immediately, and Robinson begins to consider how he might find a way through this difficulty as he reflects on the qualities of the step itself:

These splinters might be put together into some more serviceable whole by paying more heed to their cumulative nature, to the step's repeatability, variability, reversibility and expendability. The step, so mobile, so labile, so nimbly coupling place and person, mood and matter, occasion and purpose, begins to emerge as a metaphor of a certain way of living on this earth. (364)

This suggests that a kind of provisionality—and ongoing possibility—is implicit in the step. Robinson concludes his dialogue: "This will do; this will get me across An Chois" (365).

The progression of the passage as a whole suggests a dialectical movement, encapsulating Robinson's method for exploring his being-in-the-world. It is a strategy repeated elsewhere in the text, where a seemingly definitive statement is followed immediately by a qualification—a 'but' that addresses what has gone before and then leads onwards. Reflecting on the genesis of the 'good step,' Robinson writes: "Somewhere I have read of a temple built around a footprint of the Buddha, and, looking back, I see that it was a god's all comprehending step I had in mind when I set out" (*Pilgrimage* 368). For Wylie, this is evidence that the 'good step' "could not therefore be the step of a human" and so is "an impossible ideal" (374). He misses the force of "when I set out" (which perhaps hints at a later modification of this idea) and fails to take account of the ongoing progression of Robinson's line of thought, which continues:

But that footprint (is it in Ceylon?) is, I believe, the last, the take-off point for transcendence, and the next one, which would complete a step, does not exist; whereas in fact the earth and its powers of healing and wounding, of affirming and contradicting, of supporting and tripping you up, can never be finished with. (*Pilgrimage* 368)

Whatever the contradictions—the alternations of restoration and new wounds—Robinson argues, one walks on.

Psychogeographic Robinson

These explorations of his own psyche (the 'voices,' after all, seem to reside in Robinson's own mind), along with the use of gambits and ploys, introduce features more often associated with postmodern and urban styles of writing and hint at a psychogeographic dimension to Robinson's work. Psychogeography is an increasingly modish term that is, however, notoriously difficult to define: "despite the frequency of its usage, no one seems quite able to pin down exactly what it means or where it comes from" (Coverley 9). In part, this reflects the difficulty of trying to define an objective method for a practice that takes its cue from the subjectivity of its practitioners. It is perhaps best seen as a collection of practices of walking, observation, and writing that have been formulated and reformulated, and differently interpreted by a range of thinkers since the inception of the term in the Paris of the 1950s, but which are generally regarded as "the point at which psychology and geography collide, a means of exploring the behavioural impact of urban place" (Coverley 10). In the paragraphs which follow I discuss some of the ways in which rural and psychogeographic writing have been considered in conjunction, before attempting to pinpoint some of the Aran diptych's specific psychogeographic qualities.

There is a certainly a precedent for considering the common ground between rural and urban walking practices. Robert Macfarlane applies this notion to Robinson himself when he comments in his Introduction to *Pilgrimage*: "Long before psycho-geography became a modish term, Robinson was out on the *dérive* [...]" (x). He develops this idea of a rural drift further in *The Old Ways* with his description of the ornithologist W.H. Hudson's walks, guided by "the charm of the unknown," as "pastoral psychogeography" (20). This connection between psychogeographic walking and the rural is also made by Stephen E. Hunt in his 2009 essay, "The Emergence of Psychoecology". Discussing Robert Macfarlane, Roger Deakin, Richard Mabey and Mark Cocker, Hunt states: "Such green flânerie speaks of the emergence of a psychoecology, with richly attuned meanderings that have strategic affinities with the work of psychogeographers, such as Iain Sinclair and Will Self who in recent years have negotiated more urban terrain" (71). Hunt also sees his quartet of rural writers as spurred on by a passionate and purposeful concern about the state of the planet. He argues: "they contribute to a generation of new nature writing that is made piquant by its urgency, not so much a passive and regretful nostalgia as an urgent clawing for psychic survival" (77). Notwithstanding this comparison with urban writers and sense of psychoecological urgency, however, Hunt's reading of the works still carries hints of the Romantic legacy in his interest in the "psychological benefits of engagement with the natural environment" (73) and focus on the achievement of "joy in the natural environment" (77).

While these new formulations clearly demonstrate a desire to push at the generic parameters of landscape and nature writing in recognition of its increasing complexity and hybridity, neither 'pastoral psychogeography' nor 'psychoecology' seem to fit

Robinson's work fully, since it is neither predominantly pastoral nor ecological. The Aran books do not significantly play into Terry Gifford's summary of the broad meanings of pastoral, with its emphasis on marked urban/rural distinctions and trajectories of retreat to idealised rural settings followed by a return to the urban (*Pastoral* 1).³ Nor, in Hunt's terms, are they particularly concerned with the recovery of 'joy' in the natural world or with environmental perspectives. While Robinson is fully conversant with ecological and environmental issues, he resists the kind of urgency Hunt describes. He calls the apocalyptic environmental discourses of our time "secular eschatologies" ("Introduction" xxxix), and he stresses that the 'good step,' though it may encourage an ecological attitude, is not a construct built around a sense of environmental imperilment: "Nor is the ecological imperative, that we learn to tread more lightly on the earth, what I have in mind" (*Pilgrimage* 19-20). And, as already suggested, Robinson's encounters with the natural environment and his reflections on his own psychology are not always spurred on by an interest in 'joy' as such, nor necessarily joyful in their result.

The Emergence of 'Psycho-archipelagraphy'⁴

In my coining of the term '*psycho-archipelagraphy*', I argue both that Robinson brings something of an urban sensibility to archipelagic writing, and that his playful manipulation of form and the text's elements of provocation and trickery along with his documenting of moments of dislocation, despair and boredom, encourage a more extended comparison with psychogeography. I will deal briefly with the urban influence first. In an interview with Jos Smith, Robinson expresses a sense that in his move to the far west of Ireland from London he was bringing with him a kind of urban energy: "I had an idea that all the rich and heady stuff brewed up in cities could flow out into the countryside and revivify it" ("Archipelagic Environment" 178), and in the essay "Taking Steps" he suggests that the 'good step' itself had an urban genesis: "I know that the step [...] is not some poetic flower picked of my own creative fancy by the wayside of my life, because, looking back, I see it implicit in the work I was doing in London" (*Setting Foot* 213). This, in a sense, is the opposite of a pastoral trajectory—Robinson takes the energy of the metropolis into the countryside rather than retreating to the countryside to revivify spirits depressed by urban life before plunging back into that life.

The detailed attentiveness of archipelagic writing also has its counterpart in urban writing. Iain Sinclair suggests in *Lights Out for the Territory* that the interest of

³ Neither do they fully correspond with the six points of Gifford's innovative and influential formulation of 'post-pastoral' in *Green Voices* (1995: 121-ff), largely because of their lack of a specifically environmental focus.

⁴ The term "archipelagraphy" appears to have been first used by Elizabeth DeLoughrey in her 2001 essay "'The litany of islands, The rosary of archipelagos': Caribbean and Pacific Archipelagraphy." She describes it as "a historiography that considers chains of islands in fluctuating relationship to their surrounding seas, islands and continents" (23). My use of the term here (in conjunction with the prefix 'psycho') draws more on the notion of a localised intensity of focus that, in addition to a comparable interest in island interconnections, characterises the archipelagic perspectives of the AARP and the journal *Archipelago*.

“the born-again *flâneur*” who walks the city streets lies “in noticing *everything*” (4). Robinson certainly attempts to notice everything and finds himself overwhelmed by the wealth of detail which presents itself: “Everything is burning with particularities: *I fly like this, I jump like this, I eat this, my wings have six red spots on black, nothing else is like me!*” (*Labyrinth* 585-6). Moreover, as already suggested, there are elements of mischief and humour in the Aran books which also play into a psychogeographic reading. Coverley states: “With roots in the avant garde activities of the Dadaist and Surrealists, psychogeography and its practitioners provide a history of ironic humour that is often a welcome counterbalance to the portentousness of some of its more jargon-heavy proclamations” (13). This seems peculiarly applicable to Robinson whose densely descriptive passages—the austere passion Macfarlane rightly identifies—are from time to time leavened by moments of pastiche and parody, as well as the ploys discussed above. Thus we find passages such as the ‘Bad Review’: “for Robinson would clearly have us know he is no mere polymath of the natural sciences but a literary adept too” (*Labyrinth* 415). The ‘review’ reveals Robinson’s ironic self-reflexivity, his willingness to examine and mock his own literary legacies and pretensions (incidentally, at the same time, puncturing the ambition of ‘new nature writing’ to “see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect” (Cowley 9) long before that term was coined). Identifying the very legacies Wylie discusses, Robinson’s pastiche goes on, “Although Robinson disclaims aspirations to transcendency he seems drawn to the brink of it, perhaps by some dim afterglow of belief as is betrayed by the title *Pilgrimage* itself” (*Labyrinth* 416). There is also a King Lear-like dramatic monologue set against the backdrop of an immense storm, which finds Robinson cursing his own hubris in attempting the step, a cod-academic dissection of Robinson’s theme, and even a voicing of his dog Oscar’s thoughts—a character who, incidentally, also doubts Robinson’s ability to perfect the book of the good step.

Playful though they may be, these interludes also hint at a psyche willing to contemplate its own darker places. Returning to the more solemn aspects of Robinson’s text, I would suggest that it is his recording of the faultlines in his own experience which gives his work one of its more distinctively psychogeographic elements. While the title *Pilgrimage*, as Robinson himself admits, resonates with Romantic narratives of spiritual connection with the earth, *Labyrinth*, the title of the second volume, has a different set of associations. Although the original labyrinth of classical mythology was situated on the island of Crete, the word has drawn more urban associations in recent centuries, and certainly features in psychogeographic urban literature. De Quincey, now viewed as a psychogeographer *avant la lettre*, talks of “the mighty labyrinths of London” (*Confessions* 38), Iain Sinclair’s *Lud Heat* uses the term “city labyrinth” (54), and Coverley refers to the “urban labyrinth” (15). It is clearly a term with dark implications, connoting not only the disorienting tangle of city streets and their equally tangled histories, but also the psychological puzzles they evoke in those who walk those streets. So it is with Robinson’s *Árainn*. In his essay “Taking Steps” Robinson describes the movement of *Labyrinth* as “working its way with incredible tortuosities through the interior” (*Setting*

Foot 213). Again, this is not the landscape of pastoral restoration, but one which at times has much in common with the physically and psychically disorientating twists and turns of the metropolis. Thus we find that Robinson's fourth visit to the fort of Dun Aonghas has left him exasperated, "because once again I have failed adequately to *be* in this strange place, this knot of stone from which the sky has broken out" (*Pilgrimage* 109, emphasis in original), and see that walking is not necessarily restorative: "Sometimes this difficult mile, from the last of the cliffs to the bay of An Gleannachán below the village of Eoghanacht, can close on the mind like a trap" (168). Returning to Bun Gabhal and recalling his first visit to the place, Robinson admits: "I felt then that I would never know anything of the life of that place, and so it has turned out" (*Labyrinth* 594). In a deadpan parenthesis he even confesses, "(I have to admit to myself that I sometimes found Aran boring and repetitious)" (584).

The Aporia of Dwelling and Performing the 'Good step'

As we have seen, Wylie finds in these declarations of defeat proof that the Aran diptych reveals the impossibility of the kind of fusion of land and life Robinson seems to be searching for. He identifies the notion of the 'good step' as an 'aporia,' which, drawing on Derrida, he defines as "a figure of doubt, contradiction and dislocation that haunts from within any ontological claim" ("Dwelling" 375). He explains his application of this term further, stating that,

As aporia, therefore, the good step presents an image of unity and unification that is impossible, and that unravels from within the communion of land and life it purportedly expresses. The good step, supposedly an articulation of the quintessence of dwelling, in actuality *displaces dwelling*. (375; emphasis in original)

Wylie's argument here rests on his sense of the inherent contradictions which arise in the quest for the good step. For him, the step is from the start an impossible ideal and so its pursuit is forever haunted by an inner emptiness. Robinson himself seems to hint at an aporia in the step, but a slightly different one. Towards the end of *Labyrinth* he states: "The either / or is this: to be simply present and not to know and remember it, or to be reflectively aware, which implies the mediation of imagery, of mirroring—and reflection multiplies mirrors as fast as mirrors multiply reflections" (*Labyrinth* 608). It is perhaps consciousness rather than the step itself, then, which presents Robinson with his most challenging conceptual riddle; he can either be simply present in a place and heedless like the dolphins (or Bate's swallow), but then he would not know or remember his being there, or be reflectively aware, which leads him into a labyrinth of sense impressions and distorting reflections. How can he respond to this riddle? One answer is by recording the minutest particulars of the island: "Writing is my way out of this labyrinth [...]", "this Aran-building method, the slow deposition of facts and observations, coalescing and fusing under their own weight into tablets of stone" (*Labyrinth* 608).

Another way of stepping through the aporia is to act out through his writing the whole experience of attempting the 'good step,' with all its contradictions, for others to witness. This, I would argue is what Robinson does, cumulatively, in the Aran diptych. As *Pilgrimage* draws to a close, he talks of "Having now acted out to the best of my capacity the impossibility of interweaving more than two or three at a time of the millions of modes of relating to a place [...]" (363), suggesting that he himself views the work as performative rather than purely descriptive. John Caputo, in his analysis of Derrida's aporia of hospitality, suggests that it "is not conceptually resolved by a bit of intellectual adroitness, but strained against performatively by an act of generosity, by a giving which gives beyond itself, which is a little blind and does not see where it's going" (112).

Similarly, for Robinson, dwelling is an aporia that cannot be resolved by intellectual adroitness; it is not a matter of objective knowledge, but an inexpressible experience which he performs for us—in an act of generosity that gives beyond itself, and cannot necessarily witness its own journey. This is another feature that encourages a more subtle comparison with psychogeography, in the sense that its practitioners construct through their walking a textual trace they cannot themselves read. De Certeau's 'ordinary practitioners,' are walkers "whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read" (128). Robinson is perhaps not an 'ordinary practitioner' as such, and he is not traversing a city. Moreover he leaves more than a textual 'trace' since he does, in fact, bring back the more tangible text of the Aran diptych. However, there is still a sense that he cannot himself witness what he has accomplished. Thus, concluding *Labyrinth*, he states:

I have brought back a book as proof I was there. Perhaps when I open it in seven years' time it will tell me what I had hoped to learn by writing it, how to match one's step to the pitch and roll of this cracked stone boat of a cosmos; but for the time being I cannot read it. (608)

Robinson cannot yet read the book of the good step but in his walking through the landscape he has traced out a text for us, the readers, to read.

Conclusion

For Wylie, the answer to Robinson's question of whether we can match our step to the cosmos is definitive: "It can't be done" ("Dwelling" 379). For me, however, the abiding sense of the Aran diptych is that it *might be done*, that we might be able to fall into step with the cracked stone boat that carries us, with 'step' being the operative word. Perhaps Robinson is not after all really seeking to build *without contradiction* those "broad-eaved Heideggerian dwellings" (*Setting Foot* vi) he speaks of, but to work dialectically and performatively with his 'good step' through those very contradictions that characterise our being-in-the-world. His work gives rise to the sense that neither displacement nor connection is 'originary' but that we move between the two. While undoubtedly drawing on Romantic legacies of landscape writing, Robinson also scrutinises and critiques them. Likewise, the commitment to carrying out an intensely

detailed, localised account of Árainn—which can be seen as strongly indicative of an archipelagic approach—does not prevent him from disclosing moments of profound and sometimes comical psychic dislocation and disappointment. The Aran diptych thus constitutes the advent of an extraordinarily innovative form of landscape writing, which I have called '*psycho-archipelagraphy*.' This form enables Robinson to explore the challenges of the quest for the 'good step' without reaching after certainty as to the nature of dwelling. Land and life are not sutured together so much as involved in a constant interplay, the representation of which is made more difficult by its reflection in the distorting mirrors of human consciousness. It is a phenomenon that can only be revealed to us through the dogged and generous *performance* that the Aran diptych represents. This performance shows us, cumulatively, that the 'good step' lies in the taking of the step, over and over, rather than in any final resolution of the quest. The model of dwelling that emerges is one that honours the flawed subjectivity and the moments of disorientation of the dweller while at the same time striving, through the intensity of its focus, to bring to the earth a consciousness as "adequate to the ground it clears as is the dolphin's arc to its wave" (*Pilgrimage* 20). And when, human, all too human, we falter in the attempt? Well, as Robinson says, "Adequacy is for archangels" (Interview n.p.). For the rest of us there is always the next step.

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