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"Pilgrimage" and "Labyrinth": Walking and Metaphor in Tim Robinson's *Stones of Aran*

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Abstract. Tim Robinson's acclaimed two-volume account of the Aran Islands, *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* (1986) and *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth* (1995), originated both in the author's personal fascination with the islands and his professional, cartographic project when he was encouraged to produce a detailed map of the area. The digressive narratives in the companion volumes are structured around Robinson's walks along the coast (*Pilgrimage*) and through the interior of Aran (*Labyrinth*). His generically hybrid books combine topography, folklore, human and natural history, culture and nature. Although sceptical about the tradition of romanticising the Aran Islands and a self-professed non-believer, Robinson nevertheless tends to transcend down-to-earth, factual reporting towards reflections on the spiritual and the universal. This approach paves the way for the use of metaphorical language. The article examines the intersection between the scholarly and the creative, the objective and the personal in *Stones of Aran*, and especially the tension between the writer's simultaneous proclivity for and resistance to figurative language.

Key Words. Aran Islands, Tim Robinson, new nature writing, landscape writing, walking, metaphor.

Resumen. La aclamada obra en dos volúmenes de Tim Robinson sobre las islas Aran, *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* (1986) y *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth* (1995), tuvo su origen, por un lado, en la fascinación personal del autor por estas islas y, por otro, desde un ámbito profesional cuando fue animado a llevar a cabo un proyecto cartográfico, el diseño de un detallado mapa de la zona. Las digresiones narrativas en ambos volúmenes están estructuradas en torno a las caminatas de Robinson a lo largo de la costa (*Pilgrimage*) y a través del interior de Aran (*Labyrinth*). Sus libros, genéricamente híbridos, combinan la topografía, el folklore, la historia humana y natural, la cultura y la naturaleza. Aunque Robinson es escéptico con la costumbre de idealizar las islas Aran y se declara a sí mismo no creyente, tiende a trascender una narración tangible y factual mediante reflexiones sobre lo espiritual y lo universal, lo que da cabida al lenguaje metafórico. Este artículo explora la intersección de lo académico y lo creativo, lo objetivo y lo personal en

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Stones of Aran y, especialmente, la tensión que se detecta entre la inclinación a la vez que la resistencia del autor hacia el lenguaje figurativo.

Palabras clave. Islas Aran, Tim Robinson, nueva escritura de la naturaleza, escritura del paisaje, camino, metáfora.

I knock at the stone's front door.
"It's only me, let me come in."

"I don't have a door," says the stone.

From Wisława Szymborska,
"Conversation with a Stone" (1998: 64)

In an article published in *New Hibernia Review*, Eamonn Wall called Tim Robinson's *Stones of Aran* "two of the most celebrated texts to emerge from Ireland in the recent decades" (2008: 66). With hindsight, Robinson's writings[1] tend to be placed at the beginning of a new tendency, variously identified as landscape writing (Wylie 2012; Alexander 2015), or, more often, new nature writing (Hampton 2018). John Wylie situates Robinson's two books on Aran as well as his Connemara trilogy[2] in the category of "landscape writing" on account of their "dense, heady mixture of literary, historical and naturalistic themes" (2012: 367). The author's extended walks allow him to investigate in depth the places he encounters and produce multidimensional accounts of them. Wylie describes Robinson's narration as "one long hymn to the conjunction of life and land to be found in Aran and Connemara" (2012: 372-73). More specifically, in "Theologies of the Wild: Contemporary Landscape Writing" Neal Alexander associates Robinson's books with a strand of landscape writing which, by focusing on "the intensely particular", "establishes the basis for much more expansive metaphysical speculations in which the local and the cosmological are imaginatively conjoined" (2015: 4).[3] In defining landscape writing, Alexander stresses its subjectivity – it is, typically, framed by an individual perspective and preoccupied with conveying "the affective textures of lived experience in particular landscapes" (2015: 4-5).[4]

The above definitions manifestly overlap with the notion of "new nature writing", represented by a substantial number of texts published at the turn of the twenty-first century. Robert Macfarlane, both a theoretician and a practitioner of new nature writing, emphasises its

[1] Tim Robinson (1935-2020) grew up in Yorkshire and studied mathematics at Cambridge. He worked as a teacher in Istanbul and as a visual artist in Vienna and London before relocating to the Aran Islands in 1972 (Connelly 1996: 399). Subsequently, he settled in Roundstone in Connemara. Apart from his literary output, Robinson and his wife Máiréad were involved in the production of maps, their special focus being the Galway region – the Aran Islands, the Burren and Connemara ("the ABC of earth-wonders", according to Robinson), where they lived for over forty years (University of Galway Library n.d.). Robinson's work has received much acclaim and scholarly attention, both in Ireland and abroad (Gladwin and Cusick 2016: 3-4).

[2] *Connemara: Listening to the Wind* (2006), *Connemara: The Last Pool of Darkness* (2008) and *Connemara: A Gaelic Kingdom* (2011).

[3] The other two approaches, according to Alexander's overview, include "animal landscapes", in which non-human perspectives on places are adopted, and "travelogue", a genre of travel writing which chronicles the authors' exploratory journeys through landscapes (2015: 3-4).

[4] In an interview Robinson openly admitted that regardless of its claim to "objectivity and comprehensiveness", his study of Aran is an intensely personal narrative (Dillon and Robinson 2007: 37).

generic indeterminacy, describing it as "[r]agtag, wayward and polymorphous". While drawing on a wide spectrum of scientific discourses, new nature writing also incorporates elements of "literary criticism, psychogeography, anthropology, conservation and even fiction" (Macfarlane 2013: 166-67). The term itself gained currency after the *Granta* magazine devoted to it an issue under this title in 2008 (Hampton 2018: 455). Alexander J. B. Hampton sees Tim Robinson as one of the pioneers of the genre, categorising his oeuvre as exemplary of the subgenre of "topophilic writing". Of paramount importance in such prose is "an intimate relationship between the writer and the location". Hampton argues that topophilic writing is concerned with "the way we know places, not just the places themselves, and as such [these] works often include the human geography of history, folklore and etymology, interwoven with natural history" (2018: 456). Yet, in contrast to the natural history tradition, the authors take centre stage, which endows the new genre with a conspicuously personal dimension (Hampton 2018: 457). Remarking on the recent proliferation of British and Irish writers preoccupied with creative, "first-person led" responses to landscapes,[5] Macfarlane acknowledges Robinson's ground-breaking role: "a common experience among these writers, myself included, has been the unnerving sense that much of what might be 'newly' done in this area has already been long since anticipated by Tim" (2016: xvii).

However, at the time Tim Robinson's two volumes of *Stones of Aran* were published (1986 and 1995), he clearly had no sense of initiating any novel type of prose; rather, his project is underlain by the writer's awareness of the centuries-long legacy of diverse representations of the Aran Islands. Indeed, Robinson's first visit was partly motivated by Robert Flaherty's famous film *Man of Aran* (1934), which, in portraying the islands as the stage for a monumental struggle between man and the forces of nature, constitutes one of the landmarks in the mythicisation of Aran.[6] While Robinson as the narrator of *Stones of Aran* keeps an ironic and level-headed distance from Flaherty's vision and other, comparably romantic images of the place, during that first visit he was nevertheless captivated enough to relocate there from London in 1972 and spend the subsequent twenty years living on, walking through and writing about Aran.[7] At the beginning of his stay on Inishmore, the largest of the three islands, a local woman, observing his exploratory walks around the island, suggested that he should make a map of it (Robinson 1997: 355) – an idea to which he became instantly committed. In the end, Robinson mapped the island both literally and metaphorically – he produced a set of new, unusually accurate maps as well as an account of (nearly) all the accessible, factual, speculative and imaginative knowledge of Aran in the form of two companion books: *Stones of Aran:*

[5] To name just a few examples: Robert Macfarlane's *Wild Places* (2007) and *Landmarks* (2015), Richard Mabey's *Nature Cure* (2005), Roger Deakin's *Waterlog* (1999), Kathleen Jamie's *Findings* (2005).

[6] The significance of the Aran Islands in Irish culture is widely known. The islands have an impressive heritage of prehistoric archaeological monuments as well as of early Christian monasticism. According to Anne Korff, J. W. O'Connell and John Waddell, "there is no other place in Ireland where you will find such a wealth of archaeological and cultural material to hand" (1999: 10). They are also known for their seclusion, isolation, remarkable landscapes and the persistence of folk traditions. For all these reasons, the Aran Islands have been "narrated and constructed anew" for the past 150 years (Wylie 2012: 369). Moreover, as one of the few remaining Irish-speaking areas they continue to be construed as repositories of "authenticity and purity" (Wylie 2012: 370). Consequently, the islands attract visitors searching for "an auratic sense of celtic-ness, of almost-otherworldly wester-ness, sometimes folksy and rustic, sometimes wild and mystic" (Wylie 2012: 370). Tim Robinson's *Stones of Aran* is an outstanding late twentieth-century addition to the legacy of Aran writings. Korff, O'Connell and Waddell call him "one of the most brilliant commentators on the Aran Islands this generation has produced" (1999: 11).

[7] As an outsider who chose to settle in Aran and produced an influential account of it, Robinson is inevitably compared with J. M. Synge, the author of *The Aran Islands* (1907). Robinson's own thorough study of the islands alludes to the legacy of fictional and non-fictional writings set in Aran, where Synge's book remains an important intertext. Compared with Synge, Robinson takes much more interest in the geographical features of Aran. Commenting on the Celtic Revival writer, he observes Synge's conflict between realism and romanticism (Dillon and Robinson 2007: 39).

Pilgrimage and *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*. As Robinson says in the middle of *Labyrinth*, the plan to map the island "diverted [him] into [his] present walk of life, or at least a twenty-year-long detour from it" (1997: 355). The result is a piece of writing which, in the words of Robert Macfarlane, "is at once territorially specific and utterly mythic" (2008: x). The uniqueness of *Stones of Aran* derives from a peculiar combination of living, walking and writing, and, as this article will argue, in part also from an intertwining of the realistic and the metaphorical modes.

As is well known, metaphor is usually defined, after Aristotle, as "an implicit comparison, based on rules of analogy". Apart from analogy, traditional definitions of metaphor as a figure of speech also comprise transfer of a name or a descriptive term to another object (Ritchie 2012: 4). However, more recent definitions, departing from the narrow classical concept of metaphor as a rhetorical or aesthetic trope, and going beyond the comparison and substitution views, conceive of it as having pragmatic ("conveying meanings concisely") and cognitive functions as well – metaphors provide "words to describe things that have no literal name, or [render] complex abstractions easier to understand through concrete analogies" (Martin 2012: 864). Within the cognitive theory of metaphor, which highlights its role in everyday language, it is "a ubiquitous and indispensable linguistic and cognitive tool, which we use systematically to conceive of our more abstract, subjective experiences […] in terms of concrete, physical experiences" (Semino and Steen 2008: 235). Common to the diverse approaches to the concept of metaphor is the view that it "creates meanings not readily accessible through literal language". Metaphor also has the unique capacity to unify "the concrete and abstract, the sensual and the conceptual" (Martin 2012: 864). Within the very broad linguistic framework proposed by Elena Semino, metaphor is "the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else" (2008: 1). It is in such general terms that Tim Robinson speaks of metaphorical language when asked to comment on his writing; it is also the assumption in this article that it is in this latter, broader sense that his metaphors should be viewed. Embracing the comprehensive definition of metaphor as a trope which consists in "seeing, experiencing, or talking about something in terms of something else" (Ritchie 2012: 8), L. David Ritchie points out that another way of approaching it is to contrast metaphor with what it is not. Consequently, he proposes to designate metaphorical language as that which is not literal, where "literal" is understood as "a code-like one-to-one *mapping* of words with meanings" (2012: 10; original emphasis).

Tim Robinson's *Stones of Aran* arose out of the author's literal mapping of the islands – the work of a patient, meticulous cartographer resulting in a visual representation of the territory. But a vital and pioneering part of this work, as he repeatedly emphasises in his book, is to match places with their original, Irish names. The initial discovery he made was that whereas the existing Ordnance Survey maps either ignore or anglicise the Gaelic versions, effectively rendering them meaningless, the names that the Araners use iconically reflect features of the landscape. For instance, Barally is the anglicisation of the original "barr aille", literally signifying "the top of the cliff" – a name which is well-suited to the place (Robinson 2008: 50). But there are moments when, in describing his experience of Aran, the author admits to a Keatsian "negative capability" (Robinson 1997: 296) as he struggles at the limits of comprehension and the limits of language. Kelly Sullivan contends that *Stones of Aran* is permeated with the anxiety of representation (2009: 12). It is usually when he is faced with the subliminal aspect of Aran (although he himself carefully avoids this term, using it on only one occasion[8]) that Robinson, reluctantly and self-consciously, resorts to figurative language, describing the island "in terms of something else".

[8] Having reached the western tip of the island, and, at the same time, the end of his walk and his book, Robinson comments: "It is a sublime landscape – the adjective is inescapable – in its scale and clarity" (Robinson 1997: 445).

The very titles of Robinson's volumes appear to implicitly hint at the contradictory and competing impulses that motivated the project. On the one hand, the accounts are firmly grounded in the material, in the palpable solidity of stone. On the other hand, however, the perceptions and meanings that insinuate themselves while the walker visits particular sites seem to transcend the immediacy of material reality. A casual remark made in connection with the author's visit to the obscure ruins of a nameless early medieval Christian church, now looking more like an overgrown pagan shrine to nature and resonant with old stories, makes him reflect on the permeability of the distinctions between different perspectives: "here I found out once more how many crossroads of perception there are, in incalculable permutations with those of the physical path" (Robinson 1997: 101). Much as he self-consciously guards against the use of metaphors, there are occasions when they prove virtually irresistible. In an interview with Brian Dillon, Robinson ascribed the temptation of metaphor to the liminal location of Aran: "Living on an island, a little habitable space in the midst of a rampant wilderness, forces a metaphorical or allegorical dimension into everyday space". Yet, as he adds, "the metaphors I complain of are almost unavoidable, useful and not harmful if kept on the reins of scepticism" (Dillon and Robinson 2007: 41). For many readers, the title of his book must evoke John Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, which is an intended allusion. In a moment of self-doubt, Robinson writes: "Sometimes I fear that all the stones of Aran do not equal one flower-carved finial of Venice, or an uneven paving-stone in San Marco. Perhaps there is nothing here but dull limestone and lumpy granite" (1997: 211). Indeed, what meets the eye of a visitor to Aran is mostly just bare rock. And yet it took Robinson twenty years of walking, and about a thousand pages of writing, to explore the fact and fiction of Aran, still leaving him with a sense of incompleteness.

In *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* Rebecca Solnit defines walking as a privileged way of experiencing the self and the world rather than a straightforward activity of moving from place to place: "Walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord" (2002: 5). In their Introduction to *Walking, Landscape and Environment*, Anna Stenning and Pippa Marland ascribe to walking the capacity to trigger new perceptions: "Writing about walking, like the act of walking itself, informs new ways of looking at the world" (2022: 3-4). In *My Time in Space* (2001), Robinson defines his walking as an activity which enables him to experience a place intimately without losing the distance necessary for critical reflection: "This sort of walking is an intense cognitive and physical involvement with the terrain, close to but not lapsing into identification with it, not a mysticism; and not a matter of getting from A to B but of lingering, revisiting, cross-hatching an area with one's most alert and best-informed attention" (2001: 103). Eamonn Wall highlights that it is the act of walking that "makes Robinson's adventure possible" and "governs his methodologies of discovery" (2008: 66). Indeed, the author of *Stones of Aran* reiterates the island's potential to open up new vistas for him. For instance, a walk past An Aill Bhán (the White Cliff) brings him to the edge of a plateau where "the eye is suddenly made free of new expanses, broad and lofty by the measures one adopts after a time in Aran" (Robinson 2008: 60). Understandably, one of Robinson's reviewers calls him "a discerning and peripatetic philosopher" (Connelly 1996: 400).

The implications of the subtitles in Robinson's volumes appear to be concessions to the appeal of metaphor in the recounting of walking which involves a complex, multilayered experience of exploring and reflecting on the island. As "pilgrimage" and "labyrinth" indicate, the structure of each volume is aligned with the pattern of the author's walking; in the former, he chooses to move along the perimeter of Aran and investigate the coastal areas, whereas in the latter he travels on foot through the interior. As Michael Quigley notes in his review, the notion of "labyrinth" implies that "the survey of the interior of the island […] presents almost

an infinity of possible avenues of exploration" (1998: 117). Concurring with this assessment, Kelly Sullivan notices a stylistic shift to a more personal, less honed mode of writing when the author turns inward, making his way "through the brambles and rabbit warrens", without the outline of the shore as a guide (2016: 112). In fact, the walks described in each book are a condensed version of the innumerable actual walks that Robinson took during his long stay in Aran. His narration methodically focuses on the places encountered during his peregrinations, encompassing geological and botanic accounts, archaeological findings, the history, folk lore and traditions connected with particular locations, myths, legends and speculations, as well as accounts of the life of contemporary Araners – all in strikingly seamless, multidimensional combinations. The reviewer John Gray describes Robinson as a polymath with "almost poetic talents" who can easily slip from one body of knowledge to another, effectively passing off "what is an extremely dense text, as a natural and free flowing one" (1986: 26). John Wylie notes that walking is for Robinson both an "empirical mode of investigation and encounter", and a replication of the Romantic tradition of solitary, contemplative communion with the countryside and nature (2012: 370). But, denoted as a form of pilgrimage, Robinson's walking, in the words of Eamonn Wall, "combines the practical and the sacred; in fact, one cannot exist without the other" (2008: 71). Robinson's own reference to pilgrimage is a self-conscious allusion to the Christian tradition of journeying to important spiritual destinations. The journey itself, with the discomfort, danger and sacrifice that it entailed, as Kristin Johnston Largen claims, "was seen as a part of the effort, but not an end in itself". However, gradually the tradition of pilgrimage underwent "a shift in focus from a specific destination or route", to an experience of renewal (Largen 2021: 13). The other guiding metaphor in Robinson's walking and writing, namely the notion of labyrinth, which was generated in the author's mind by the sight of the astoundingly intricate network of the stone walls in Aran, also has its antecedent in the tradition of medieval Christian walking. Although, according to Largen, its origin remains obscure, walking a labyrinth had a spiritual and religious dimension (2021: 13). The author of *Stones of Aran* draws no essential distinction between a pilgrimage and walking through a labyrinth: "Even a pilgrimage narrow-mindedly devoted to one end is endlessly ambushed and seduced by the labyrinth it winds through" (Robinson 1997: 424). In the contemporary, secular counterparts of the Christian pilgrimage, the physical journey is still intertwined with some form of spiritual or therapeutic experience (Largen 2021: 14). Walking itself, as Eamonn Wall argues, "implies a faith in slowness, as well as a humility about one's place in the world" (2008: 74).

Aran, renowned for its medieval saints, with remnants of monastic sites, saints' graves and holy wells, has traditionally been a pilgrims' destination. Robinson, however, openly professes to be an atheist, dismissive of what he calls "teleological pick-me-ups" (Robinson 2008: 357). Likewise, he distances himself from "Celticists of every specialism" who have made the pilgrimage to Aran in search of the authentic Ireland, Celtic mysticism, druidic lore and such like (Robinson 2008: 15). Nonetheless, the spiritual and quasi-religious connotations inherent in his references to pilgrimage in his own writing are not unfounded, nor are they ironic. Walking itself, rather than its destination, is worth the effort, and its meaning is contingent upon the walker: "the only cure is to walk on, out of the state in which nothing matters into its mirror image, […] in which everything matters" (Robinson 2008: 357). Without sharing old beliefs, he nevertheless reiterates timeworn practices by choosing to start his circuit of the island in the east and move clockwise, in the footsteps of the islanders' penitential walks, but "at an inquiring, digressive and wondering pace" (Robinson 2008: 25). The walk appears to have an ancient, pre-Christian provenance: "The circuit that blesses is clockwise, or, since the belief is a thousand years older than the clock, sunwise" (Robinson 2008: 25). In *Labyrinth,* too, Robinson chooses a meaningful direction, walking from east to west, in recognition of the west's mythic connotations in the Irish tradition (Robinson 2008: 176). Yet, his circuitous walk

has no particular destination; completing the circle, or covering the entire area of Aran, is an aim in itself. Like a devoted pilgrim, Robinson stays faithful to his chosen route, despite its challenges, hardships, riddles, and the occasional temptation to stray off his path. In *Pilgrimage*, when seeing a group of tourists relaxing in the village of Cill Rónáin, he declares: "I will not follow them because of the vow or *geasa* this book is under, to complete the circuit of the coast before broaching the interior" (2008: 294).

Despite the author's empirical stance, such declarations cannot be regarded as a fanciful though essentially futile re-enactment of antiquated customs and beliefs. The author investigates each site on his way, or each station on his pilgrimage, with extraordinary attention and commitment, presumably comparable to the reverence with which medieval pilgrims approached Aran's holy places. Robinson defines his pilgrimage as "the ritual of attending to things one by one as we come to them" (1997: 423). Drawing on his extensive research, he tends to represent each location as a complex, multilayered entity at an intersection of natural and human history, a product of the natural forces shaping it over millions of years as well as of the human activity on the island in the past centuries, or decades, including the recent encroachment of technological amenities and the tourist industry. Notwithstanding his scientific bent of mind, Robinson acknowledges the fact that the identity of a given place is also comprised of the local customs, oral traditions, myths and legends. It is a sign of his respect for the latter that he attempts to integrate them with factual knowledge. For example, faced with the presence of two impressive boulders on the shore of Aran, believed to be stone boats in which two medieval Irish saints, St. Enda and St. Colm Cille, arrived on the island, he nonetheless attempts to establish with which saint each of them is more likely to be associated. This passage is a paradigmatic instance of how, in Robinson's account, the stones of Aran may belong to different realms at once, depending on the perceiver – either a finite, palpable part of the material reality, or a meaningful sign of something immaterial. Although, as the author demonstrates, a geological explanation can be given for the origin of these supposedly miraculous stones, they still remain, as he concludes, in the category of miracles owing to their capacity to direct our thoughts beyond the literal and the material. In a diction which is little short of poetic, Robinson asserts:

> The idea of the miracle is required as the blazingly distinct emblem of all the possibilities lying muffled in any given place and time. As such, the miracle must stand apart from all rational orderings; the moment of its happening must be free from the threads of causality linking all moments; and its retelling should reflect this if it is to accomplish the refocusing of our blurred perceptions of the here and now. (Robinson 2008: 253-54)[9]

Infrequent as such epiphanic moments are in Robinson's narrative, they nevertheless stand out in his accounts. Indeed, one such instance of heightened perception underlay the very conception of the book. Although *Stones of Aran* was written in parallel to his cartographic work, the inspiration, by Robinson's admission, came to him when "one blinding day" on an Aran beach he watched dolphins swimming near the shore and was struck by "their unity with their background": "their mode of being was an intensification of their medium into alert, reactive self-awareness; they were wave made flesh, with minds solely to ensure the moment-by-moment reintegration of body and world" (Robinson 2008: 19). Whereas, figuratively speaking, Robinson walks along multi-level paths, on one of these levels he is propelled by the

[9] This is an example of what Hampton calls "spiritually-inflected language", which, as he argues, is characteristic of new nature writing. Hampton's claim that "[i]n a post-secular space the sacred once again becomes available, albeit tentatively" appears pertinent in attempting to describe the nature of Robinson's moments of insight (2018: 459).

desire to replicate, in the human sphere, this sense of integration with the world. This desire is expressed through one of the organising metaphors of his narrative, the concept of "the good step". This desire is expressed through one of the organising metaphors of his narrative, the concept of "the good step". Although it appears to carry ethical implications that would be appropriate in the context of a quasi-religious pilgrimage, Robinson's nebulous explication of the term suggests an adequacy between the path of life and the ground on which one treads, or, in more down-to-earth diction, at a state of awareness of the natural and human strata that constitute the world one lives in, which might be expected to produce a sense of personal unity with it (Robinson 2008: 19-20).

One of the ways in which the author keeps such high-flown imagery in check is by acknowledging to himself (and the reader) that the quasi-metaphysical framework of his narratives of Aran is his own invention. In *Pilgrimage*, he writes about "the construction of [his] metaphysical Aran" (2008: 132). Robinson has sufficient self-reflexivity to see that the wish to read the messages supposedly encrypted in natural phenomena borders on the pathetic fallacy, and reminds himself: "The sea does not riddle, dolphins do not pray, the vagrant bird neither trusts nor distrusts Robinson, waves never sign anything; what I myself witness is my own forgery" (Robinson 2008: 233). He contends that the use of "overluxuriant metaphors" spuriously ascribes to non-human reality the ability to communicate with us whereas "[w]e ourselves are the only source of meaning" (2008: 233). However, as one of the frequent self-reflexive comments in the book, this contention also exposes one of the main challenges that he faces as a writer rather than marking a substantial change in his approach, which consistently oscillates between the literal and the figurative. The stones of Aran, which are the subject of his persistent questioning in both books, continue to puzzle and intrigue the observer. On the one hand, Aran is described as a "stone-deaf land from which all our apostrophes reecho, readdressed as […] the apology of the human mind to itself" (Robinson 1997: 339). On the other hand, the author willingly commits the pathetic fallacy by, for instance, personifying a boulder perched on a crag as a mentor: "pedagogical on its podium, [it] demands clarity of thought: observe this, comment on that, deduce the other" (1997: 241).

The same duality inherent in Robinson's meaning-making strategies – trying to interpret the intrinsic significance of particular sites while imposing his own impressions on them – is manifested at every step of the author's pilgrimage through the labyrinth of Aran, and the concomitant meanderings of his mind. His "pilgrim's progress" involves not only getting to know places, but also "experiencing" (Robinson 1997: 93) them. The latter process is expounded in the description of An Screigín, the scraggy western end of Cill Éinne. Having detailed the particularities of the site, he waits for the data to cohere in his mind: "It has been important to me […] to linger in such places until their fragments reform into a whole like a reflection in a disturbed pool" (Robinson 1997: 93). His mental images of places normally focus on a certain dominant aspect: the remains of St Enda's monastery resonate with Early Christian spirituality (1997: 49); the great fort of Dún Eochla, whose origin is shrouded in obscurity, still seems to exist in the times of legendary heroes (1997: 202); Evelyn's shop in Eochaill is a secular confessional for village news and gossip (1997: 203); the Well of the Four Beauties (the setting of Synge's play *The Well of the Saints*), although no longer a place of pilgrimages, retains its air of quietude and poignancy (1997: 226). The exploration of Baile na mBocht, a plateau above the village of Eochaill, a monotonous terrain with the rubble of a deserted settlement, depresses and disturbs the visitor, making him feel "the crushing weight of nothingness above it, the harsh, empty, birdless blue skies of those long afternoons. The light was nullifyingly even, reducing the mysteries of the past to tedious puzzles. An old, poor place, it seemed, all grappled down into meaninglessness by the briars" (Robinson 1997: 217). In moments such as these, when a place encountered during his walks through Aran acquires meaning, or, as the case may be, a sense of meaninglessness for the author, he tends to resort

to figurative language in order to convey his new insight. It is pertinent to recall at this point the commonly held view that enhancing the world is one of the chief motives for the employment of metaphor. In his book on metaphors, Denis Donoghue argues that "they add perceptions that were not there before" (2014: 188).

Despite his thorough knowledge of Aran, Robinson remains an outsider, who cannot share the Araners' "easy acceptance of the strangeness of things" (2008: 245). He can imagine the perspective of a local farmer, pausing in his digging and "shaking his head over my wandering and staring about his island" (2008: 258). Taking advantage of his own liminal position, as a man familiar with the island and yet amazed and puzzled by it, Robinson aspires to encompass "that unsummable totality of human perspectives upon [Aran]" in his book (2008: 8). Whereas he zooms in on minutiae while walking and writing about the island, he does not lose sight of the cosmic framework in which he originally cast it. As he confesses in *Pilgrimage*, what captivated him at the beginning of his stay were

> the immensities in which this little place is wrapped: the processions of grey squalls that stride in from the Atlantic horizon, briefly lash us with hail and go sailing off towards the mainland trailing rainbows; the breakers that continue to arch up, foam and fall across the shoals for days after a storm has abated; the long, wind-rattled nights, untamed then by electricity below, wildly starry above. (2008: 17)

In the words of Neal Alexander, "Robinson's texts […] constantly verge upon more expansive topics and territories" (2015: 13). Implicit in his reflections on Aran is the conviction that this tiny patch of land is a part of the cosmic whole; hence, to invoke a broad definition of metaphor, by writing about Aran he is also "seeing, experiencing, or talking about […] something else" (cf. Ritchie 2012: 8). The author, as Eamonn Wall argues, sees the micro in terms of the macro, and vice versa (2008: 71).

In Robinson's universalising comments, Aran emerges as a spatio-temporal unit the existence of which may be related both to the perennial global interaction of land and sea, and the immense geological time scale. Its genesis connects it with the limestone region in mainland Ireland, other limestone areas in Europe and America, and further, going back in time, ultimately also with the primeval Pangea, which makes Aran a relic of the transitory unity of the earth as a whole (Robinson 2008: 7-8), but also a microcosm in its own right (Robinson 1997: 303). The author's dedicated quest for meaning in every little detail of Aran is foreshadowed by his perception that "the ocean encircles Aran like the rim of a magnifying glass, focusing attention to the point of obsession" (2008: 16-17). Given the cosmic duration which Robinson outlines in the opening of his book, Aran's lifespan must be seen as limited – the land that constitutes the islands was once temporarily raised to the surface but will inevitably dissolve, in some unimaginably distant future. And yet a miniscule phase in the long-term process of erosion resulting from the interplay of land and sea on the edges of the island is accessible to the human observer, who is confronted with elemental forces "far beyond the human scale" (Robinson 2008: 112). Keeping both the human and non-human time scale in sight, Robinson marvels at the "coincidence" of his own life intersecting with a spell in the existence of Aran (2008: 5). His fluctuating perspective accounts for what Kelly Sullivan describes as his "double-vision" – the rival tendencies to "look closely" and "look universally" (Sullivan 2009: 12), to keep his eyes "on the ground" (Robinson 2008: 168), and to submit to the appeal of a more distanced view, charged with larger significance. As he admits in *Labyrinth*, the stone walls of Aran pose both a physical and mental, literal and metaphorical obstacle, "not merely to the body but to the understanding" (1997: 10). In spite of the fact that he is able to map and measure them and discern their correlations with the features of the land, they still appear to be a disturbingly "transcendental structure" (1997: 11), evocative of some

opaque meaning. In an extension of this perception, the author concedes that what *can* be comprehended and verbalised about Aran hints at the obscure realm of all that has escaped his scrutiny; effectively, he describes his book metaphorically as an island standing out of "the sea of the unwritten" (2008: 370). His cartographic work gives him an identity in the eyes of the islanders: "I am Fear na Mapaí, the man of the maps" (1997: 178); it is obvious, however, that his walking and writing have other purposes too, though they are certainly less graspable, as is exemplified by Robinson's self-authored and self-mocking review of his own work included in *Labyrinth*: "Although Robinson disclaims aspirations to transcendency he seems to be drawn to the brink of it, perhaps by some dim afterglow of belief as is betrayed by the title *Pilgrimage* itself. But what is the point of a pilgrimage to an empty shrine?" (1997: 307)

As has been argued in this article, for the most part Robinson's account of Aran remains firmly grounded in the realistic and the factual, but now and again it visibly strives to convey meanings that resist the constraints of literalness. Wallace Stevens said that "reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor" (cited in Donoghue 2014: 188). Yet it seems that the problem faced by the author of *Stones of Aran* is usually the opposite – he tries to resist the pull of metaphor in order to adhere to the real. He expounds on the problem overtly in *Labyrinth*: "I am no abstract, deep-sea philosopher; if I raise a metaphor as a sail to catch the winds of thought, I am soon overturned by shoals, or fly to the horizon and lie becalmed there. Therefore I choose this Aran-building method, the slow deposition of facts and observations" (1997: 455). However, the fact that, paradoxically, the author has resorted to figurative language to undermine his metaphors once again demonstrates their indispensability when writing about the stones of Aran.

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