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“Life as a Boneyard”: Art, History, and Ecology in One Tim Robinson Essay

Tim Robinson’s work is notoriously hard to pin down, as he embodies the interdisciplinary as much as any writer I can imagine. The poet Moya Cannon says that he is “one of the great restorers, or *re-storyers*, one of the quiet unravellers of imperium” (125). Cannon’s sentence, in the move from “re-storyer” to “imperium,” captures the intertwining of literature and history at the core of Robinson’s work, and his books should find homes on history syllabi and not just in the literature curriculum. And of course the increasingly influential field of ecopoetics, with its attention to the meeting points of the human and the non-human, provides another discipline that can claim Robinson. But again, Robinson’s work sits uneasily in a critical field, as many ecocritics are rejecting the values and goals of “nature writing” and its approaches to the natural world as a repository of the sublime; instead, they offer a vision of ecopoetics as a story of loss and criminality. John-Thomas Tremblay, in a firebrand essay entitled “No More Nature: On Ecopoetics in the Anthropocene,” offers a radical distinction between two ways of writing about nature: “Both creative and critical branches of ecopoetics depart from nature writing. Ecopoetics trades an Emersonian or Thoreauvian attention to sublime, untouched nature for sites of extraction, chemical spills, and other manifestations of ecosystemic violence.” Tremblay’s “to the barricades” attitude seems to reject any sense of the beautiful in writings about the natural world, but Robinson’s work only partially goes in this direction. He does reject the concept of pristine or untouched places, forcing a romantically inclined thinker towards disenchantment, but he also has an eye, and an ear, out for the beautiful.

The volume of the Connemara Trilogy entitled *Listening to the Wind*, to return to one of Cannon's terms, "restories" as deftly as does James Joyce's *Ulysses*, as Eamonn Wall has argued. Following Karen Babine and Christine Cusick, I am focusing on story more than mapping or place; following Wall, I am considering how each part of this essay is a meditation on our relationships with land and water. This brief essay considers these big things in terms of one small thing, a chapter from this volume entitled "The Boneyard," which is representative of Robinson's larger work, as art, history, and ecopoetics. The essay is unified by deftly woven themes of streams, memories, and what Robinson calls the "gargogyle logic" that seems to structure the universe.

This boneyard gathers a lot of bones. Across its twenty-four pages, it covers the following stories, as I imagine it as a short play with five acts: first, stories surrounding burial grounds for unbaptized infants, including theological and personal narratives; second, a meditation on the main cemetery near Goirtín, close to Robinson's home in Roundstone, with a few stories about some of those recently buried there; third, a report on various archeological discoveries about the region, going back to the Neolithic era, including the question of an extraordinary and quasi-mythical purple dye harvested from dogwhelk shells; fourth, a contemporary land struggle involving an endangered "tombolo" or sand bridge, dependent on vast numbers of small shells called foraminifera; and fifth and finally, a reflection, with narratives, on the work of "British land-artist Richard Long," whose stone artworks in the countryside give Robinson a way to finish off this chapter by considering our ability as humans to create art-works in conjunction with the non-human world. All five of these stories are in one way or another a boneyard, and so the chapter serves as a multiform *memento mori*. Each of the stories provokes on its own, contributing to our understanding of gender, faith, anthropology, biology, politics, psychology, and other things. I'll briefly draw out one thing from each section, as useful examples. But the most striking thing to me is the way the acts of this play echo each other, fueling a broader meditation.

The piece opens with an old man telling stories to Robinson, pointing out that a consecrated graveyard and a cemetery for the unconsecrated should always be separated “by flowing water” (93). Robinson then becomes a historian of these children’s graveyards, relating the number of them he learned while he was mapping in Connemara. This formerly rarely-spoken about practice has in recent years been much spoken of—for example you could turn to the poem “Cealtrach” by Mary O’Malley, or the Callini project tracing these graveyards. Robinson slides back in time to voice the traditional Catholic doctrine of limbo, before giving us the voice of one survivor of this practice, a mother named Mary Salmon, as well as the softer and gentler Catholic doctrine of the post-Vatican II era. He closes:

I cannot pass by the burial places of these failed attempts at life without registering my amazement and distress over the persistence of the **gargoyle-logic of limbo** into such recent times. Stony throats continued for centuries to roar forth the consequences of their false premises high above the heads of suffering humanity, oblivious to the fact that what matters when an infant is dead is not the welfare of a non-existent entity in a fictional hereafter, but the feelings of the parents, and perhaps particularly of the mother, who brought this scrap of humanity so briefly, or so nearly, into the world. A funeral, with the words set down to be spoken over each of us in our turns, and burial in the ground set aside for all our corpses, would have been a communal recognition of the little body’s attempt at personhood, and would have helped the bereaved to begin to let their loss fall into the past. When at a child’s funeral I hear our kind-hearted parish priest say, ‘God must have love little Jane so much that He called her to Him so soon,’ and the parents repeat the formula to themselves and even to me, I recognize once again that what to me is a sentimental inanity is a source of strength to others and is not to be despised. So, the centuries-long Catholic ban on burying the unbaptized in consecrated ground, necessitating the furtive, unceremonious spading-in of the dead baby or foetus under a boundary wall, in the haunted rath or among the stones of the seashore, was a bitter wrong. (97-98, emphasis added).

This is an overture, and those “stony throats” will return later in the play. So will the “gargoyle logic” he sees in Catholic doctrine, here focused on human teaching but later an image for creation itself. Those gargoyles are an art form, one that the chapter goes on to challenge. Judgment is directed here at the “inanity” of believers, but also at himself, the theological outsider but the remember of this diverse community. At the center of this passage is the buried child: “this scrap of humanity,” “the little body.” That body is bounded by a series of long-existent fabrications: doctrines, walls, stones, and the “haunted rath” or ruined earthwork. The passage searches for a peaceful coexistence with the past, for a *détente* between the briefly passing and what remains.

Act Two shifts from the metaphorical “stream of tears” of those suffering families across the literal stream separating the two graveyards, where the author gives us a quick and rather merry accounting of a few of the residents lying there. In his characteristic style, our author says he “likes fossicking and yoricking about in graveyards.” That’s the kind of vocabulary that in my experience students tend to hate, but that teachers or slow readers might well love. “Fossicking” is a word of Australian origin meaning searching for stray bits of gold in abandoned mine workings. If you google the word “yoricking” you’ll end up right where you started, with this Robinson quote; clearly it evokes *Hamlet*, and the title character’s encounter with the grave-diggers in the spot long inhabited by that jester and soon to be inhabited by Ophelia. The bones that Robinson holds up here, Hamlet-like, are those of three twentieth-century people whom he lovingly sketches in a quick bit of local history. But in another trademark move, he wraps this section up by shifting scale:

But all graves are memorials to time’s disrespect; the knowledge even of who lies in the older ones is mouldering in the newer, just as library shelves are filling with books on other books, which will never be opened and must eventually be pulped to give room for more. Cemeteries themselves get buried in cemeteries. (100)

This equation of bones and books, and graveyards and libraries, might chill a scholar. But as so often happens in Robinson's work, the chill of the *memento mori* is undercut by the playfulness of the speaker. This is his own art that he is casting off, his own "bones" that he is yoricking.

Act Three continues the radical shift in time span, but this time moving backward. Goirtín consists of an isthmus leading to an island, and that land-bridge leading out to the field on the island is actually composed of foraminifera, tiny shells of single-celled sea creatures. Referring to that fact, Robinson writes "the whole formation is a place of bones," and "a vast necropolis" (112), and then he multiplies that statement by reporting on archeological digs that discovered—or uncovered—remains of human settlements and refuse middens. Drystone walls exist next to other "remains" of early human settlement, going back to the Neolithic era. One type of remains is of particular interest, sparking a long meditation on legendary purple dyes, including the "Tyrian purple" produced in the classical Greek world. History here is part rumor, as some proud Irish nationalists want to claim that Irish dye production from the dogwhelk shells rivaled that wonder of the Mediterranean. Robinson teases us with that claim, convinced that some small production of purple dye from this natural source did exist, but then steps back. He concludes:

I have never even come across a scattering of broken dogwhelk shells here, but a Roundstone lady tells me that in her childhood she and her playmates used to collect them, and string them into necklaces. Nothing goes to waste; the nymph of Tyre needs the juice of the creature, and the girls of Roundstone its bones; both are moments in **the Earth's ruthless self-adornment.** (107, emphasis added).

Like Christy Mahon in Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, who "went on wandering like Esau or Cain and Abel on the sides of Neifin or the Erris plain," this passage yokes the western Irish desolation with the

mythical and primordial. Multiple artists inhabit this passage, from Mediterranean nymphs, to local girls, to the Earth itself as the overarching and “ruthless” master artist.

From the past Robinson takes us into the present, and Act Four is the most ecologically focused section. The boneyard that is the sand bridge across to the island of Goirtín, called a *tombolo*, began to decay due to increased human activity. Robinson twice becomes an activist, as he fights first to help shore up the tombolo and then to prevent an Italian university research team from pillaging the sand for research on the single-celled creatures. The shoring up of the sand bridge is, as Robinson puts it, an “interference with nature” (109), but a necessary one:

We can no longer delude ourselves that there **is a Nature whose wild destructive and constructive forces derive a certain validation in our minds from their impartiality, their independence of our hopes and desires**; rather, we are part of the problem and so must be part of the solution, if such there be. In the meantime, piled sand and a healthy coverage of plant life are burying the tattered fences of Goirtín in their depths and restoring a simulacrum of untouched naturalness. (110, emphasis added).

Robinson admits that he is not advocating for any kind of wilderness ethic: he is an ecopoet who acknowledges the need for the simulacrum over the thing itself as it used to be. The tombolo is a boneyard of shells, and we must keep building it. Nature must be engaged with, even interfered with, if it is to be preserved. In this move Robinson exemplifies at least part of Tremblay’s distinction between ‘nature writer’ and ‘ecopoet’: as an ecopoet, Robinson underscores how nature is inextricably interwoven with human actions.

The final act turns to art. Richard Long is a landscape artist who created temporary installations out of stone in a natural setting. When Robinson decided to put one of Long’s Inishmor artworks on his map of

the island, the artist was a bit upset, but Robinson held fast to his principles about mapping what was there. Robinson sees his work as “the web of placelore” (115), and the art as part of that web. The web-as-network is another metaphor for this chapter, though it is a network that is as much temporal as spatial. Near Goirtín lies another of Long’s works of landscape art, called *Connemara Sculpture*, a series of small stones arranged to form a maze, near the shore. With time and weather, the pattern is fading but still present, as what Robinson calls, in consistency with this chapter, its “bones” (115). The fading of these bones sets up the eloquent peroration to the chapter, and I’ll note that while the comparison with James Joyce is often in terms of *Ulysses*, this section to me echoes the sweeping final lines of the *Dubliners*’ capstone, “The Dead”:

But if the spirit of the work has flown off into the realms of thought, its bones, remaining in actuality for at least a time, have equally complex destinies. If identified, as I have identified a few of them in Aran, the Burren and Connemara, they may even be preserved as memorabilia, objects imbued by touch with the charisma of the artist, contemplation of which might reveal the stages of his or her self-creation as a creator. One might take them as markers of exemplary terrains in which the formative process of nature are particularly clearly displayed at work. Unidentified, their origins unknown to the passer-by, they are minor enigmas of the landscape. As they slowly founder in the interplay of the elements, their status as the product of an intention becomes as hard to be sure of as those of the nearly effaced potato ridges or the random clutches of glacial erratics. Eventually they will be anonymous contributions to the compilation of the Earth, like the soft bones of stillborn babies rotted into that knoll by the seashore, or the husks of uncountable forams heaped onto the tombolo. We find ourselves in a world compacted out of our forebears. In art we take responsibility for this fact, or at least recognize our ineluctable complicity in its processes. It is as if we choose that our parents have to die; it is our fault. In growing out of childhood we drive them on before us into middle age; in adding a birthday to our lives we burden

them with another year; finally, one more day packed with hours and minutes for us is enough to push them over the edge. This is how we make room, make time, make the world, for ourselves.

This is the gargoyle-logic of creation. (115-116, emphasis added).

Stones, shells, famine-era ruins, the stone “erratics” moved by glaciers, unbaptized infants, human art—all contribute to the boneyard that is both this extraordinary place and this extraordinary piece of writing, as Robinson sweeps back over the earlier movements. The “gargoyle logic” of disdained doctrine from the opening act is reused (or recycled?) as Robinson’s own doctrine, the belief in the eventual anonymity of all these bones and stones.

Deeply feeling and appreciating the work of Tim Robinson doesn’t require reading whole volumes. The book *Listening to the Wind* can be consumed by the chapter, much like a short story collection; in fact, slowing down and lingering, visiting one place for a while, feeling the multiple histories and artworks alive and encoded in the environment, might be a fitting tribute to the author. And even this one chapter can open the door to a wide conception of topographical origins and changes. In the early 1970s James Lovelock and others developed the “Gaia hypothesis,” which evolved to become a powerful and useful metaphor for the earth as a balanced and self-correcting system. I prefer the perhaps complementary metaphor we get from Tim Robinson, of the ecosystem as a place of continual change, as a boneyard. “The Boneyard” can introduce a reader to Robinson’s broader work, which gives us a poignant and beautiful *memento mori* for and benediction on the west of Ireland.