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Michael Patrick Gillespie

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The Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry:

Moya Cannon

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On March 29, 2001, Moya Cannon received the fifth annual poetry award of the Center for Irish Studies. The award bears the name of the Center's distinguished benefactor, Lawrence M. O'Shaughnessy of St. Paul. It was presented in private ceremonies at the University of St. Thomas campus in St. Paul. On that occasion, the following citation was read by Dr. Michael Patrick Gillespie of Marquette University, the incoming president of the American Conference for Irish Studies.

Here at the welcome end of a hard winter, we gather at the University of St. Thomas to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Center for Irish Studies with the giving of the fifth O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry to the Donegal-born poet Moya Cannon.

Generously supported by Lawrence M. O'Shaughnessy since its start in 1996, this internationally noted award has gone to Eavan Boland, John F. Deane, Peter Sirr, and Louis de Paor. Writing and publishing extensively in English and Irish, each of these poets shares two traits. Each possesses an untiring sensitivity to the contemporary impress of language in a rapidly changing, contemporary Ireland. Nourished by that sensitivity, each raises a voice that clearly claims the best attentions of any reader. Published several times over in the 1990s, Moya Cannon's two collections--*Oar* and *The Parchment Boat*--display those hallmark traits with insisting tact.

In both collections, Moya Cannon's lines wear her biography and her considerable learning lightly, though *Oar* begins with an epigraph from Homer and *The Parchment Boat* with one from Goethe. Cannon's childhood life in Donegal and her teaching life in Galway do provide the imagery of circumstantial settings. The uncanniness of Cannon's percipience comes not so much from trouble and the "Troubles" as from persistent and almost exilic sense of being hosted on the landscapes and in the languages of Ireland North and West.

Through the seas of living a daily life, the title metaphor of *The Parchment Boat* moves propelled onward by the choices of our speaking--by the oars of language. Cannon's reader hears this "or" most often in the startling, but understated terminations of the poems. This happens in "Thalassa." There Cannon poses an elemental alternative to our decisions "to go home," and we are led "down again / by the grey, agitated sea"--not "to," but "by." A world of meanings lies in that difference. Or, following "Thalassa," Cannon invests a "fading language" with the capacity to invent the oldest of emotions: "when someone, in anguish / made a new and mortal sound / that lived until now. . . ." That is how "'Taom'" ends. The poem's Gaelic title denotes both a paroxysm of passion and an emptying out. The voyage of intimate sensation of making language finds its best expression in Cannon's "No Sense in Talking." There, Cannon poses the sense of talking "the old dirty languages" of the stripped-down and primal worlds of Homer or of the poet of the *Táin*--the tongues that "still hold / touch in the ear / lick in the ear / secrets for everybody?"

To hold or clip a line unexpectedly, to pare the common syntax into unanticipated alternatives, to scrape away the usual flourishes--these elements of craft sustain Cannon's hard-won trust in language--the very trust that causes us to listen so attentively. Characteristically, they also delineate the urgency of her themes, not all of which are elemental or mythic. That craft makes possible

Cannon's "Narrow Gatherings," one of the finest extant poems on the "Troubles" in the North. Cannon's

poem views an Orange parade in the seaside resort of Portrush. It closes with a view of an Orange fife-and-drum band turning down the seaside promenade:

And after
come the marching children,
growing smaller and smaller
in their uniforms.

Detailed, specific, affecting, Cannon's lines make every word count. And they avoid costuming themselves in the usual moral certainties.

Going beyond...

The Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry
Moya Cannon

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Generously supported by Lawrence M. O'Shaughnessy since its start in 1996, this internationally noted award has gone to Eavan Boland, John E. Dunne, Peter Sier, and Louis de Paor. Writing and publishing extensively in English and Irish, each of these poets shares two traits. Each possesses an unerring sensitivity to the contemporary impasse of language in a rapidly changing, contemporary Ireland. Nourished by that sensitivity, each raises a voice that clearly claims the best attentions of any reader. Published several times over in the 1990s, Moya Cannon's two collections—*Our* and *The Parliament Boat*—display those hallmarks with insistent tact.

In both collections, Moya Cannon's lines wear her biography and her considerable learning lightly, though *Our* begins with an epigraph from Homer and *The Parliament Boat* with one from Goethe. Cannon's childhood life in Donegal and her teaching life in Galway do provide the imagery of circumstantial settings. The uncertainty of Cannon's perception comes not so much from mobile and the "Tosbha" as from persistent and almost elastic sense of being rooted on the landscapes and in the languages of Ireland North and West.

Through the sens of living a daily life, the title metaphor of *The Parliament Boat* moves propelled onward by the choices of our speaking—by the ours of language. Cannon's reader hears this "our" most often in the startling, but understated terminations of the poems. This happens in "Thalassa." There Cannon poses an elemental alternative to our decisions "to go home, and we are led 'down again / by the grey, agitated sea'—not 'to,' but 'by.' A world of meanings lies in that difference. Or, following "Thalassa," Cannon invests a "fading language" with the capacity to invent the oldest of emotions: "when someone, in anguish / made a new and mortal sound / that lived until now..." That is how "Taois" ends. The poem's Gaelic title denotes both a paroxysm of passion and an emptying out. The voyage of intimate sensation of making language finds its best expression in Cannon's "No Sense in Talking." There, Cannon poses the sense of talking "the old, dirty languages" of the stripped-down and primal words of Homer or of the poet of the *Táin*—the tongues that "still hold / touch in the ear / lick in the ear / secrets for everybody!"

To hold or clip a line unexpectedly, to put the common syntax into unanticipated alternatives, to scrape away the usual flourishes—these elements of craft sustain Cannon's hand-worn trust in language—the very trust that causes us to listen so attentively. Characteristically, they also delineate the urgency of her themes, not all of which are elemental or mythic. That craft makes possible

Cannon's "Narrow Gatherings," one of the finest extant poems on the "Tosbha" in the North. Cannon's poem views an Orange parade in the seaside resort of Portrush. It closes with a view of an Orange life-and-drum band turning down the seaside poemers and:

And after
come the marching children,
growing smaller and smaller
in their uniforms.

Detailed, specific, affecting, Cannon's lines make every word count. And they speak containing themselves in the usual moral certainties.

Going beyond the choice of *Our*, in *The Parliament Boat* Cannon summons the angel of simultaneity in a poem titled "Driving through Light in West Limerick." We find the premise of the poem in a question from *Our*, where Cannon does not "know whether / sacred objects and images tend to cluster / around a constant light...." Surprised while driving round a low hill out into the Burren, Cannon summons both a sensation of light and the sense of enlightenment commanded by memories of both a Quattrocento icon of a sinner and elevation out of the twentieth-century underground in London. Effortlessly weaving together allusions to Dante, Blake, and Yeats, Cannon's poem answers the close of "Narrow Gatherings" with a bright moment that is rapture.

Cannon both comes over and extends the themes and art of *Our* in *The Parliament Boat*. Her landscapes alter a little from Dublin to Ontario to Galway, but her use of them does not. Her pronouns dip into the plural, but the vision she shares remains singular. Language and the search for a "less brutal grammar" still fills at the center of each poem, as does the urge to renew—by way of an implied pun—what our words had better mean. Note the humor that starts the end of "Milk":

This is kindness
which in all our human time
has refused to learn propriety,
which still serves nothing,
but the depth of kindness,
the depth of thirst.

Extracting of language and demanding of attention, Cannon's art is hard to practice. The poems are slow to accumulate on the page, especially the printed page. That is not simply the cost of an engaged and busy life whose details the poems themselves often eschew. Rather, Cannon's admirable tactical economies of expression enrich her reader's experience by declining conventional chances to exploit antithetically our experience of Ireland's languages and landscapes. So it is in recognition of that spare fidelity to nuance of language and perception that we honor the accomplishment of Moya Cannon by inviting her into the company of Louis de Paor, Peter Sier, John E. Dunne, and Eavan Boland with the giving this evening of the fifth Lawrence M. O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry.



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The Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry: Moya Cannon, in the first approximation, the calculus of predicates meaningfully crosses out the short-lived large circle of the celestial sphere.

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