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Title	"Chipped and Tilted Marys": Two Irish poets in their contemporary contexts
Authors	Coughlan, Patricia
Publication date	2009
Original Citation	Coughlan, P. (2009) '"Chipped and Tilted Marys': Two Irish Poets in their Contemporary Contexts', in Olinder, B. and and Huber, W. (eds), Place and Memory in the New Ireland, Irish Studies in Europe, Volume 2, Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, pp. 71–100. isbn: 978-3-86821-146-7
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
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Download date	2026-11-04 17:23:00
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/15586

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"Chipped and Tilted Marys": Two Irish Poets and Their Contemporary Contexts

Patricia Coughlan

> A chipped and tilted Mary
> grows green among rags and sticks.
> Her trade dwindles –... (Cannon, "Holy Well," *Oar* 16, ll. 15-17)
>
> She wasn't frightening at all
> as with her halo at a rakish angle,
> she trod on plaster clouds and stars
> behind a row of five pence candles...(O'Reilly, "Ninety[1] Eighty-Four," 15, ll. 5-8)

In this essay, after considering some ideological and critical contexts, I focus on two poets, Moya Cannon and Vona Groarke. These two differ in range and substantial achievement – Groarke's work is more varied and larger in extent; their styles are also quite different, Cannon preferring open, rhythmically looser forms, while Groarke is something of a virtuosa in the use of traditional metres and rhyme. I choose them partly for this contrast, and because both have produced work which deserves serious critical consideration as part of the developing contemporary canon and warrant the attention of readers on both aesthetic and thematic grounds. They offer, in quite different modes, a combination of poetic effectiveness with an unusually reflective contemporaneity. In particular, their work is a striking example of the vastly stronger presence of women in Irish poetry and their now far more evident contributions to it. Furthermore, while acknowledging their differences from the distinctive 1980s tones of strongly feminist writing, I find that their work does significantly advance the development of a feminine aesthetic in Irish poetry, in ways partly different from each other and partly – perhaps surprisingly – similar.

There are, of course, several more established voices with considerable reputations from the 1980s or earlier (Ní Chuilleanáin, McGuckian, Ní Dhomhnaill in Irish, Boland). A larger potential list overlaps with these (e.g. Meehan, Higgins, Hardie, Dorcey, and others) and there is a host of other more recent arrivals, some outstandingly talented, such as Caitríona O'Reilly (from whom I take the second quotation above), Sinéad Morrissey, Leanne O'Sullivan, Dorothy Molloy.[2] Between them, these poets conduct a sustained exploration of our times which I find to be more willing to address the much-changed conditions of contemporary Ireland than most work by male poets over a comparable period, at least as impressive aesthetically and more varied in method and tone. This is not to ghettoise them as women, but to be aware

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1 *Sic*; presumably a misprint for "Nineteen-."

2 Sadly, Molloy died as her first collection *Hare Soup* was in press.

of the continuing male domination of the received view of Irish tradition, a tradition of a more markedly masculine cast in poetry (and drama) than in fiction.[3] I find the work of women poets, at its best, at least as stimulating as an object of critical enquiry as the oedipal regressions and identitarian insistences of the canonical, which is to say masculine, tradition (Yeats, Kavanagh, Kinsella, Heaney, Montague, and others). Women's work, even when it is not avowedly feminist (as poetry from the 1990s onwards often is not), pointedly departs in various directions from the concerns of that canon. It also diverges from the rather laddish, jokey styles of some well-received younger Irish male poets, whose writing is modish in the manner of 1990s British figures such as Simon Armitage.[4]

I return now to Cannon's and O'Reilly's Marys – considering some others also – in order to develop my discussion further, especially insofar as it concerns women, focusing on this Marian ideal of femininity, so prominent in the dominant ideology of Ireland over many decades. Cannon's and O'Reilly's Marys are differently chipped and tilted. On the surface, Moya Cannon's "Mary" is a statue, which is damaged because of exposure to all weathers, set as it is in the open air by a holy well. But this physical attrition of the painted-plaster object by time and the rain further signifies the "dwindl[ing]" in late-twentieth-century Ireland of popular Catholic devotion, a well of faith which had seemed inexhaustible. Cannon wryly calls Marian intercession a "trade," gesturing with mild irony towards the more materialist 1990s. O'Reilly's poem, a lyric of childhood memory which also explores the polarities of gender roles, alludes to both the notorious Anne Lovett case and the brief resurgence in the mid-1980s of a cult of moving statues in rural Marian grottoes (see Tóibín). Her poem opens with the child recoiling from a male Irish saint who "meant business / with his high cheekbones and stiff mitre," and turning to Mary's "side of the altar" (ll. 1-2, 4). Both these lyrics are reflections about the inheritance of Marian piety, which, up to the rapidly secularising 1980s, had offered so powerful an instance of loving heavenly compassion and such a compelling ego-ideal to girls and women within Catholic culture.

Both are more or less demystifying, but the two also differ. Cannon's poem goes on to connect the physical properties of limestone, from which water can suddenly spring up and sometimes flood out, with the idea (a mental or spiritual one) of natural strength and the suggestion of communal renewal. This symbolic suggestion remains equivocal, however: "Images of old fertilities" may "testify" either to geological facts or to metaphysical blessings "in the hill's labyrinthine heart" (ll. 10-11, 22). By contrast O'Reilly plays out a sequence of individual feelings and reactions. Admiring childhood

3 Among many possible discussions of this and related problems, see for instance Ní Dhomhnaill, "What Foremothers?" and Ní Fhrighil's account of Boland's and Ní Dhomhnaill's perspectives on the question.

4 Guinness's anthology takes a different position on this point, bidding to create a new canon (the authors are presented as not just *some*, but *the* new Irish poets) and, as I shall argue, from a markedly east-coast, urban, and formalist perspective.

awe and self-identification with the apparently lipsticked but also barefoot image of femininity are followed later by fear at the uncanny power of "whole crowds of Marys" weeping "bloody tears in their groves, / making signs with fragmented hands" (ll. 15-17), and finally adult anger at the death – alone, after giving birth – of sixteen-year-old Anne Lovett and her officially fatherless infant. The poem's speaker represents Marian devotion, then, in three ways. First it is a childlike self-identification with, and cleaving to, a role-model and mother-figure combined. Then it becomes a state of terror before a supernatural power associated with physical injury: "bloody tears," "fragmented hands" (ll. 16, 17). It culminates in a sad disempowered entanglement – played out before a "hapless" Mary – in that collective hypocrisy which permitted the useless deaths of Anne Lovett and her infant. The poem's sensibility and setting are urban (the male saint, medieval bishop Laurence O'Toole, is patron of Dublin city). However, Marian shrines, most depicting Our Lady of Lourdes, are widespread in Ireland though they postdate the holy wells, which are much older spiritual sites, perhaps associated with fertility in the pre-Christian era.

Vona Groarke's long graveyard poem, "Or to Come" also describes a "grotto with the kneeling, ashen girl" (the teenage visionary Bernadette of Lourdes, but with more than a hint of Anne Lovett from Granard in the Irish midlands, Groarke's own home territory). The "blue-robed figure" has a "bemused face" and looks beyond a praying man "at a sky which she / seems to think may bring her some relief": this is a milder version of O'Reilly's fundamentally sceptical stance (Groarke, *Flight* 30). Both find an inter-text in Paula Meehan's fine earlier poem "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," which adopts a passionate tone rather than O'Reilly's and Groarke's dryer ironic one (Meehan ll. 41-42). By contrast with these other three texts, Cannon's delicate suggestion of a natural spirituality, or a spiritualised external nature, is connected with a countryside far from cities and with long-sustained vernacular spiritual traditions.

In their divergence, O'Reilly's and Cannon's lyrics conveniently indicate several sets of important contestations in post-modern Ireland: between urban and rural, secular and spiritual, traditional and modern feminine roles and identities. One, O'Reilly's, reads the supernatural as a projection of human desires and points to the social destructiveness of some of its past uses in Ireland. The other, Cannon's, is more tentative and indeterminate, leaving open the question whether a metaphysical reality exists, and more elegiac. Nevertheless they share an interrogative mode about inherited Irish ideological forms and practices which in the past had hegemonic status. Finally, where O'Reilly specifically addresses gender ("*her* side of the altar"), Cannon focuses her enquiry on the nature of the spiritual more generally, though significantly this has been realised through devotion to the idealised feminine figure of Mary by the well's past pilgrims.

The extraordinary economic success of the Republic from the mid-1990s is known worldwide. Its social effects and those slower and deeper internal alterations of the Irish social order and of values which have been continuing since the 1960s are,

however, only beginning to be culturally assimilated. In particular, the crucial role of women in positive Irish ideological change has not yet been adequately considered.[5] The sequence of distressing and notorious events and revelations, mainly from the earlier 1980s onwards, concerning abuse of children and adolescents of both sexes and of women, which cracked open the apparently unified surfaces of Irish Catholic and cultural ideology, has likewise not yet been accommodated into the collective self-understandings of Irish people, despite its now-routine naming.[6] Concurrently, over roughly the same period the physical face of the Republic has been much altered by galloping and poorly planned urbanisation, together with a tilting of the population balance towards the eastern side of the island and, in rural areas, the gradual shrinking of agricultural livelihoods. Globalisation and undreamt-of affluence have worked simultaneously to distance more and more of the population from traditional rural ways of life and thus to undermine many of those cultural formations which in earlier generations had been felt to sustain Irish identity.[7]

These and other alterations in Irish life are still in the process of being registered in the literary imagination, and Cannon and Groarke both contribute actively to their mediation in Irish writing. Literature, however, never merely reflects social forces and items, but subjects them to a more gradual metamorphosis by its own inner forms and visible tropes. Furthermore, these two poets, as do many of those I have named above, bring Irish feminine voices – altered as these are and will further be by women's emergence and redress – to a new prominence in Irish collective identity and consciousness. They are active in the process of the necessary redefinition of Irish culture in post-modernity.

However, the conventions of poetry criticism – especially in reviewing – have been, or have become, decidedly unwelcoming even to much thematic, let alone social or ideological, discussion (and especially when that explicitly critiques social-structural gender arrangements). Only in criticism on major poets does theme become a category directly addressed, and in those cases it tends to focus primarily on the theme of the nation, its antagonists, and its survival or modification. I see this distaste for the visibility even of ideas themselves, let alone a politics, in poetry, as a kind of self-

5 See Connolly on both the deep, if hitherto unnoticed, continuity of Irishwomen's struggle for social agency and the intense resistance of historiography to acknowledging women's roles, conditions and contributions. Ferriter's is, to its credit, the first general history to attend at all adequately to this topic.

6 See longer discussion, Coughlan, "Irish Literature," and references therein. Inglis is indispensable, though its account of mothers in Irish emotional life could be seen as implicitly misogynist; Colin Coulter's edited volume is a vigorous critique of globalisation and the negative effects of neo-liberal economic policies on contemporary Ireland; this is a salutary counter-text to the unquestioning approval of the Celtic Tiger by commentators both in Ireland and internationally.

7 The thriving condition in post-modernity both of traditional music and of GAA games are counter-examples, which may be considered as maintaining the earlier forms of the imagined community.

denying ordinance which risks impoverishing the realm of poetry and has the effect of further isolating it from audiences and from recovering its traditionally powerful role in society at all.[8] Furthermore, strong formalist views currently prevail internationally in powerful quarters of reviewing, discussion, and reception of contemporary work in English. A fiercely regulatory approach is associated with a handful of well-placed and influential poetry critics.[9] This is inimical to poetic work which situates itself in any very marked ideological terms, whatever these may be. It also sets its face, in the interest of a somewhat reified privileging of narrowly defined formal skill, against avant-garde formal experimentation in poetry. It therefore has a reactionary effect on both the thematic and formal character of verse. This exacerbates the existing tendency of Irish poetry towards formal conservatism, dominated as it was for much of the last century by the long shadow of Yeats, who despite his own dismantling of grand narratives nevertheless bequeathed to his successors, especially those oedipally in search of an equivalent mastery, strongly traditional metres and styles.

Women's writing, when conceived as such, has often met with disapproval from the commissars of poetry reception, because it is said to be driven by an imperative outside the sacred circle of an aesthetic realm represented (in my view falsely) as capable of transcending, and indeed requiring to be purged of, questions of power. However, there is now widespread recognition of the 1980s flowering in Ireland of energetic feminist literary activity, though its achievement of aesthetic merit is still contested. Ailbhe Smyth and Eavan Boland were among the most prominent figures working to develop, in a male-dominated literary world, a writing and publishing milieu more welcoming to women.[10] Boland, in her dual role as both poet and critic, is the best known of a number of activists and had been part of the wider Irish women's movement since the late 1960s. Her essays critiquing the exclusion of women *qua* poets from the traditions of Irish writing, combined with their immobilisation as idea-

8 Denman, one of the finest Irish poetry critics, argues that "poetry speaks a language that is apart from the more general discourse of society" (2). However, the unusually strong oral traditions of Irish culture still give poetry a certain public reach and prestige unusual in other technologically advanced societies, and this cultural background is partly in tension with the more dominant and prescriptive sites of Irish poetry criticism – perhaps productively so.

9 Both Harvard critic Helen Vendler and Edna Longley in Belfast exercise considerable authority in the anglophone poetry world, in both cases formalist in complexion, though in Longley's case with a strong tendency to champion writers from Northern Ireland. Sadoff makes a lively and effective attack on New Formalism, especially in American poetry. With a different, partly populist, perspective, Bloodaxe publisher Neil Astley has argued that a clique of British male critics, especially those at the *Guardian* newspaper, also wield a baneful and fiercely regulatory power over the canonisation of contemporary poets' work.

10 Smyth's influential anthology, while aesthetically uneven, was nevertheless invaluable in positing a specific cultural position and voice for Irish women's writing.

lised symbols, appeared mainly in the 1980s.[11] Boland's representation of herself as a solitary pioneer may have been overstated.[12] But her main argument, denouncing the occlusion of actual women behind the stereotyped and silenced figures of Mother Ireland, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, and their variations, was rightly influential. It did not merely challenge male domination of Irish poetry and writing in general; it also initiated what is a continuing struggle to reconcile the emancipatory impulse of nationalism with the equally imperative claims of women to equality and to be heard as public voices. Or rather, it memorably and ably restated this tension: as we can see from Lyn Innes's vital work on the heroic phase of Irish nationalism in the Revival period and after, Boland's arguments were echoing the protests of many leading female figures in the national struggle, who saw themselves marginalised or excluded before, during and after the process of State formation.[13]

Boland's interventions have had much influence; however, it is currently being argued that women's poetry has now moved beyond feminism.[14] In 1999, Groarke herself disavowed that marked self-identification as *women* poets which had characterised her predecessors in the period of second-wave feminism (since roughly the 1970s). Working as guest editor in 1999 on a "Women Irish Poets" issue of the international poetry journal *Verse*, Groarke reported that "what I most enjoyed about the experience of editing this feature was the discovery that the best of Irish women poets are not writing 'Irish Women's Poetry'. There is no convergence of subject-matter, no orthodoxy of theme or tone" (Groarke, "Editorial" 8).

Groarke was commenting on the mass of submissions she received, from scores of amateur writers as well as published poets. But it is generally true that most of the female poets emerging from the 1990s to date do not announce themselves as feminist. Most show a definite, if implicit, shift away from the proclaimed motives and thematic concerns of their predecessors and older contemporaries – Meehan, Dorcey,

11 These are conveniently collected in Boland, *Object Lessons*. See Dillane for a pioneering discussion of the practical circumstances of developing Irish women's poetry over the two decades from about 1980. Several essays by Meaney offer important theoretical discussions of and from this period.

12 It excludes, among others, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, also writing distinguished poetry in Dublin since the 1960s. Apart from her poetry, Ní Chuilleanáin's edited volume (1985) was important then for its dual focus, not only on women's creative work but also on the way the prevailing male-dominated culture constructed women from outside.

13 Broom argues somewhat too optimistically that "the relationship between discourses of femininity and … of nation *naturally alters* when women become more involved in the actual institutions of the nation, and as social norms change" [113; my emphasis]. But perhaps there is nothing "natural" about such changes, which must be struggled for, particularly where foundational and therefore slow-changing cultural formations are concerned. See also Carol Coulter's comparative historical discussion of the tension between discourses of nation and female agency internationally.

14 Wheatley proposes that it is "[l]argely thanks to the efforts of Boland, Ní Chuilleanáin, McGuckian and others" that Groarke and her contemporaries "can afford to be more relaxed in their roles" as women writing (264).

Higgins, Mary O'Malley, who more openly question Irish gender, and in some cases class, arrangements.[15] This does not, however, amount to specific rejection of the fundamental aims of the women's movement; it may be rather that, like other women from about 1990, especially of younger generations, they are reticent about taking up ideological positions.[16]

Nevertheless, in the Cannon and O'Reilly poems I started with, we have seen both poets investigating (differently) the primary Irish ego-ideal for women, Mary, virgin mother, who shared a vital role with Mother Ireland in *her* various manifestations. O'Reilly's poem in particular takes up an emphatically gendered stance. It coolly indicts the double bind of Marian devotion, which traps women by making a claim to all-embracing maternal love within a social system which in reality functions by denial, silence, and the concealment of human suffering behind surface respectability. It would evidently be misleading to label these poets, or others I do not have room to discuss, as post-feminist. They draw upon the imagining into being by those very predecessors – perhaps especially Ní Chuilleanáin, who achieves a less obtrusively discursive lyric style than Boland's – of a range of voices and gestures thus made available for deployment by female poets. They proceed to adapt those voices towards their own poetic ends. This apparent muting of feminist aims may, then, partly register the pressures of those increasingly formalist requirements for poetry which I have noted. But it is also likely to be part of a generational reaction to the concrete improvement of Irish women's conditions and status by the many legislative reforms and social changes since the 1970s, which seemed to culminate, in symbolic terms, in the 1990 election of President Mary Robinson in the Republic.

Another factor may be the advent not just of post-modern*ity* (the historical period in which we all live), but of post-modern*ist* influences on both feminism and writing. We might see here the more diffuse and fluid anti-identitarian attitudes of third-wave or "difference" feminisms, which developed internationally from about 1980, reacting against the rather monolithic character of earlier second-wave or "Women's Liberation" formations from the late '60s onwards (see Segal 47). Difference feminisms can be political and have actively addressed questions of power when they reject the hegemonic white and bourgeois character of those formations. But other strands such as the effectively quietist – and overwhelmingly influential – thought of American theorist Judith Butler raise a question whether post-modernist feminist thought

15 Of the trio Meehan, Higgins, and O'Malley, the first two originate in the non-bourgeois environments of inner-city Dublin and Galway's public housing estates, and the third in remote, non-affluent Connemara: in the work of all three these origins are also thematic and performative. Dorcey's equivalent performative poetic identity is lesbian as well as feminist.

16 Reviewing Fleur Adcock in 2001, Fryatt commented critically on how "the repudiation of a confessional or feminist stance … has penetrated every level of women's poetic production," remarking pointedly that such repudiation would have excluded the work of Plath (87).

still carries forward the fundamental emancipatory aims of its second-wave predecessors.[17]

It is significant that in her "Editorial" Groarke goes on to say there are

> no received notions of what is appropriate or what is beyond our reach ... Despite my pleasure in completing this feature, I hope I will never do another on this topic. In fact, I hope that all such issues will eventually be redundant. In the meantime, any takers for a companion issue of "Irish Men Poets"?

The position she takes here is far from disavowing feminist aims themselves, only "received notions" about what should go on in poetry. What she resists is the prescription of subject-matter and any limitation on the "reach" of women poets, with whom she identifies ("*our* reach") as a collectivity. She is rejecting whatever she sees as restricting women's access to, and practice of, poetry-making, and vehemently expressing her awareness of the continuing fact that that access and that practice are still marked as a derogation from a male norm. Groarke's upbeat tone (perhaps psychologically necessary to a practitioner) is also countered by Catriona Clutterbuck's well-considered comment two years later that in "the current climate in Irish literary culture ... women's right of access to the poetry tradition has no sooner been secured than it is being undermined by denials of there ever having been real difficulty involved" (112).

Many read post-modernism as a depoliticising turn in which the active, socially transformative and emancipatory role of art has been lost or relinquished. One might argue that where poetry is concerned this coalesces with, or is even directly discernible in, the already-mentioned influence of New Formalism on the styles, diction, and rhythms of poetry in English. The influential and intellectually distinguished poetry journal *Metre*, edited either in Dublin or by Irish expatriates since its foundation in 1996, has to a degree a formalist agenda: its reviewers tend consistently to praise metrical and what one might call well-regulated verse over looser, more oral-influenced writing, on the one hand, and avant-garde work on the other. Guinness's "Introduction" to her Bloodaxe anthology and its selection policy might be judged broadly to share these tastes.[18] On the other hand, a commendable aspect of *The New Irish Poets* is its highly unusual even-handedness as to gender: of the 33 poets anthologised, fifteen are women. But it shows evidence of selectivity on the basis of region, which strengthens a certain flavour of east-coast urbanity. In 2003 Justin Quinn, sometime editor of *Metre* and himself a poet, made a bid to canonise what he called "The Irish Efflorescence": a group of younger poets, two of them *Metre* editorial board members, who met what one might call the house criteria of practising metrical forms and what he called "outward-looking[ness]." His list is disarmingly introduced as follows: "Rock and roll it isn't: Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey, Conor

17 Sullivan's "Feminism" is an outstanding discussion of these issues in the specifically Irish contemporary context.

18 Guinness approvingly describes *Metre* as an Irish version of the London magazine *Thumbscrew* ("Introduction," *New Irish Poets* 14).

O'Callaghan, Caitríona O'Reilly, Aidan Rooney-Céspedes, and David Wheatley aren't going to sell out the Point, but they are, in lower case, a new generation of important Irish poets." Other comments of Quinn's are worth noting also, both for their acuteness and for a certain tendentious, even partisan quality. Observing that they are not "preoccupied with the binary opposition of Ireland and England," he concludes that "it seems accurate to say that they are the first genuinely post-national generation." Neither are they concerned, he says, "with the myths of rural culture that animated Patrick Kavanagh's poetry"; and "while Eavan Boland, through tireless polemic both in and out of poetry, has cleared a space for Irish women poets to emerge, her style has not been taken up by her juniors; it is hard to imagine that she would want it otherwise."

Quinn's short essay is stylish, intelligent, and persuasive in its own terms. But it is also a good example of post-modernist disengagement. In its sensibility it too shows a regional bias (roughly towards the eastern half of the country), and one might even argue that it aims at a radical dismantling of the specificities of Irish poetic tradition. Groarke gets into Quinn's list; Cannon, a north-westerner who lives in Galway and does not use traditional metrical forms, does not. Both, however, are probably equally "post-national," and both also take a deep interest, *as poets*, in Irish histories, ancient and modern. Irish poetry considered as an institution would bear systematic social as well as regional and gender analysis. Despite an informal and popular view – coinciding with, and fostered by, often unthought assumptions within the academy – about the purity of poetry as a notionally non-ideological zone, questions of geographical origin, class, and ideological adherence are relevant, along with gender, to the production, dissemination, reception, and ultimate evaluation of poetry, and therefore to the reputations and perceived stature of poets.[19]

Both Cannon and Groarke are published by Gallery Press, the most prestigious of Ireland's few poetry publishing houses, though Cannon first published *Oar*. her début collection, with the then Galway-based Salmon, which focused especially on women's work. Cannon consistently sets Western scenes, Groarke either suburban or midland-rural ones. But both unselfconsciously use feminine viewpoints in varying ways. Cannon, while currently less prominent than Groarke, is fairly well recognised in Ireland; abroad, however, she has been rather more noticed by United States critics than British ones. In the mid-1990s she was invited to edit a year's issue of *Poetry Ireland Review*, the poetry journal of central importance founded in 1981, whose ideological, regional and stylistic character is rather more varied than that of *Metre* (*PIR* 38: 1994-95).

19 See Bertram's excellent and disturbing work on gender in British poetry; Mulhall's research for the "Women in Irish Culture Project" at University College Dublin and Warwick University promises to provide similar perspectives on Irish poetry. On the underlying masculinism of lyric subjectivity in general, see Coughlan, "The Whole Strange Growth."

Moya Cannon

The prevalence of western rural settings in Cannon's work and her own bilingual Donegal origins predispose us to read her as a poet of the Irish west and of cultural tradition. In part this is accurate, but it would be mistaken to interpret it as a sign of unproblematic adherence to traditional nationalist ideology. Her work tends to strip the inherited landscapes of the western seaboard of their mythical and stereotypical role in national identity formation. It resists projections of originary cultural purity upon those landscapes and tries to arrive, on the one hand, at a more material apprehension of them and their histories and, on the other, at a fresh vision of their cultural roles in post-modernity. "Murdering the Language," for instance, recalls the mental structuring of the world in the schoolroom by grammar – "[w]hat performs the action, what suffers the action?" (*Parchment Boat* 6). The protagonist notes that the children never wondered why, in the world, "victories won in blood are fastened in grammar" (l. 17). However, this poem's destination is not a straightforward nationalist or post-colonial one: it repudiates "the cold schools" to seek "a new, less brutal grammar" (l. 29) which could accommodate the fact "that this northern shore was wrought / not in one day, by one bright wave, / but by tholing the rush and tug of many tides" (ll. 31-33). The last stanza pivots the poem against its own apparent initial adherence to the familiar narrative of colonial oppression: the "*many* tides" [my emphasis] represent a model of diverse cultural fashioning, not just the *one* "bright wave" of notionally singular Gaelic origins.

The Heaneyesque word "tholing" indicates his strong influence on Cannon, not just in terms of diction and regionality. On a first reading, Cannon seems to be developing her thematic perspectives also from the early and middle Heaney's work. There is a stress similar to his on tools, things made, products of labour and craft (her two collections to date are entitled *Oar* and *The Parchment Boat*). Digging down into the land and finding older things buried under the surfaces figures prominently. She also draws on Kavanagh, especially on his work extolling attachment to place and the representative importance of rural districts considered remote from metropolitan perspectives.[20]

On closer acquaintance, however, it becomes evident that while Cannon has used such Heaney and Kavanagh motifs as starting-points, her imagination develops in different directions from the Estyn Evans impulses of the early Heaney and, ultimately, from the thematic uses to which Kavanagh puts his localism. Certain clusters of ideas and motifs are characteristic preoccupations. Nests and homing figure largely ("Crow's Nest," *Oar* 47, now anthologised for school students, is a prominent example). So is a motif of the crushing of objects and physical features by their mutual contact: in "Song in Windsor, Ontario" (*Parchment Boat* 32), ice-plates "crumple

20 She praises Kavanagh for managing "with all his contrariness, to cut through Celtic mist and Bohemian jungle to rescue real landscapes and townscapes and to find a solace, a kind of rooted transcendence in both," and cites R.S. Thomas on seeking "a state / not place of innocence and delight" ("Editorial" 2).

each other / to show / how mountain ranges are made" (ll. 7-10).[21] The fine lyric "Tending" (*Parchment Boat* 21), which achieves an Imagist effect, describes how the fire in individual logs quickly dies down unless their "burnt ends are tilted together," when in that "moment's touch, recognition," they produce "gold and blue flame" which "wraps the singing wood" (ll. 3-6). "Tending" offers, in six lines, a spare and poised objective correlative for the mutual wearing and attrition in human contact, amounting even to mutual using up and destruction, but also to moments of ecstasy and transfiguration. Its quality of brevity and containment is characteristic of Cannon's best work. In a minor key it echoes Donne's classic formulation of this idea in "The Canonization": "Wee are Tapers too, and at our owne cost die" and "Wee dye and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love" (ll. 21, 26-27). But where Donne characteristically combines the erotic and the sacred, Cannon's small ecstatic epiphany of mutual immolation is not so expansive. "Tending" neither demands nor rules out an erotic reading. Another piece, "Eros," explicitly concerns human sexual attachment and uses natural processes as its images; it also dwells on a necessary sweeping away and breaking open of surfaces. Pointedly resisting the transcendent, it defines erotic delight as "not at all like being in heaven / but like being in the earth" (*Oar* 36, ll. 2-3). Like "Tending," however, "Eros" withholds gender marking and so it develops a shared experience without differentiation.

"Oysters" (*Parchment Boat* 20) proposes an obvious analogue between the animal's physical life and a human ideal of emotional being:

> the pull of that huge muscle beside the heart
> which clamps the shell shut
> before a hunting starfish or a blade
> but which opens it
> to let in the tide (ll. 23-27)

comes together with the capacity to incorporate foreign objects and "endless filtering/ to sustain a pale silky life" (ll. 16-17). This implies the value of receptivity and not shutting the self away from the surge of circumstances, while retaining both the ability to protect the self from injury and the instinct to tell the difference. There is a suggestive parallel in Ní Chuilleanáin's fine Magdalene poem, where water-weeds lying "collapsed" under the surface all "wait for the right time," then when the tide turns, "[f]lip all together their thousands of sepia feet" ("St Mary Magdalene Preaching at Marseilles," *Magdalene Sermon* 23). In Ní Chuilleanáin the mystery of Magdalene's self-alteration from sinner to saint is signified and deepened by this rhythmic, slightly comical beauty of the water-weed's turning at "the right time." The two poems meet in

21 On crushing, we might compare Eavan Boland's "The Latin Lesson," where the crushing of eucalyptus leaves to make aromatic oils is used both negatively, to symbolize the negative effects of Catholic models of femininity and convent education, and positively, to stand for the processing of the words of poems to make meaning (*Outside History* 78-79). Boland leaves the image poised between the two, but her interest is in the crushing effects of the actions of *culture*, whether benign or not, whereas Cannon steadily focuses on *nature* and its effects of attrition.

turning what in nature is a mechanism into a poetic sign for human acts and experiences, and in particular for the capacity to change direction in the human self: a notion close to Keats's "negative capability." Both implicitly disavow notions of human agency as complete conscious control, and also western narratives of the domination of nature as a prime aim of human knowledge and action. One might consider Cannon, in particular, as an eco-feminist. While she does not, to date, thematically foreground gender, nevertheless her work does at many points support a gendered reading: the non-gendering in "Eros" is itself an implicit comment on the conventional polarisation of male and female in poetic expressions of sexuality. I shall return to gender and its role.

In Cannon's poetry belonging to the west is a vital element whose performative importance outstrips her biographical origins. It combines with the unobtrusive but exact and deep knowledge of Irish linguistic and material culture shown by her personae to complicate and alter the unitary, perhaps even monolithic, character of Boland's sense of Irish tradition. Boland's celebrated and much-needed critique of the subaltern positioning of women in Ireland, paradoxically carried out by means of the notional elevation of an iconic feminine, found its most apposite application to Revival traditions of Irish writing in English, and it cannot reliably be applied, without major revision, to writing in Irish and to Gaelic cultural traditions in general. Cannon's immersion in these traditions might predispose her to resist this overarching and uninflected character of Boland's generalisations. Also, her characteristic poetic subjectivity avoids the dominant model ultimately derived from Romanticism. In that model, individual introspection plays the crucial role: it elaborates a constitutively masculine suffering subject who wrestles with inner conflict, meanwhile projecting this oedipally upon a landscape conceived as more or less passive and maternal, alternately nurturing and cruel (Coughlan, "Bog Queens" and "Strange Growth"; Sullivan, "Treachery"). Cannon sedulously avoids instating such a persona: her conceptions both of selfhood and of nature are at odds with this dominant tradition. It is the point at which she most markedly diverges from both Heaney and Kavanagh, despite their influence upon her poetic voice in other respects. The overt tensions in her thematics are between modernity (here taken together with post-modernity) and closeness – sometimes presented as harsh exposure – to those non-human phenomena which we can only, inadequately, name as "nature." Also, it is a conscious gesture in her style to understate rather than advance propositions emphatically: "In today's soundbyte culture when people are assailed by stimulation all the time, they become sated. To get their attention, you have two options: either by using shock tactics, or through understatement. I prefer the latter. You have to take the risk of speaking quietly at times" (Donovan interview). We should not misread this restraint as mere diffidence: it is a deliberate speaking-position, adopted throughout her work. Furthermore, we have seen that she is far from unproblematically nationalist, and she also resists pastoral appropriations of the Irish landscape. "Holy Well" is one example of her delicate interrogation of contemporary Ireland's abandonment of its own vernacular religious practices, but we should not over-read the many realisations of a felt

power in natural objects and, especially, processes either as nature-mysticism or as what is known in contemporary New Age discourses as "Celtic spirituality."[22] I believe her poems apprehend and present this power rather as the cumulative trace, in our minds, of the hundreds of previous generations who inhabited this terrain.

To consider other characteristic ideas and motifs of Cannon's may help in understanding her vision. Along with the crushing I have noted, a recurrent motif is the process of things being wound into other things, classically in nests, literal or figurative (in *Oar*, the crow's nest low down in the ruined house near the Atlantic cliffs, but also the nest-like structure on a river weir in which fast-food cartons and a Coca-Cola can have been caught up; see "Crow's Nest" and "Nest," *Oar* 47, 46). There is a related idea of being – or not being – caught inside something and trapped, such as the tiny "room-sized fields" in "West" (19). The motif of collecting objects (typically, as birds do to make nests) produces one of her finest poems, "Votive Lamp" (52), significantly placed last in *Oar*. This uses an individual persona, not adopting the muted "we," indicating a community, which is a much more frequent position in Cannon. Moving house, the speaker is landed with – clearly unwanted – Catholic devotional objects from previous occupants. After "the Pope and the Sacred Heart / went off on the back of a cart" (ll. 1-2), with its dismissive rhyme, she cannot quite get rid of the red brandy-glass-shaped light which shone upwards onto the Sacred Heart image in so many Catholic houses for generations. Now its "red glow" illuminates instead her collection of "my life's bric-a-brac" (l. 31), including a dead friend's photograph, "three hazelnuts gathered from a wall," and a postcard "from Asia" of three "leather-skinned shamans" (ll. 19-21). With a wry wit, this addresses the situation of very many Irish people in post-modernity. No longer within the former nearly all-embracing circle of Catholic belief and practice and aware of other meaning-systems, many feel a contradictory combination of relief at something escaped (well caught in the "Sacred Heart / back of a cart" rhyme) and of longing for Catholicism's totalising, Providential account of the world, recalled from childhood: "If I'd been brought up in the clear light / of reason / I might feel differently" (ll. 9-11). Cannon's idea of removing the Sacred Heart image itself, but being unable to dispense with the light that shone on it, is a spare and powerful image for the vanishing of the transcendental signified, the fleeing of the oracles, but the unsettling persistence of the place where they were, in other words, of the desire for inner meanings which they purported to satisfy. Ultimately, the poem retains the *idea* of the sacred, but it is significant that the word is used to name her own saved and found objects, which seem to "cluster" around the light. Furthermore, she has "designed none of this" (l. 24); the poem keeps in play both the notion of some residual force which causes this effect and the very different,

22 As I believe Cusick does. While her serious and extended discussion of Cannon's work is timely and welcome, I am sceptical of Cusick's repeated identification of humility before nature as a moral ideal in Cannon's work and of a tendency to over-extend the attribution "Celtic" to all of Ireland's early inhabitants. Haberstroh helpfully, though briefly, situates Cannon as a questioner of the romanticising reification of the west of Ireland.

ultimately secular one: "whether / the small star's constancy, / *through other lives and other nights*, / now confers some sanctity" on *her* cherished collected things (ll. 29-31; my emphasis). This seems to redefine "sanctity" as our sense of the past, of the unseen presence and steadying, benign power o*f our willingness to reflect* on our predecessors' lives in "other nights": perhaps of their sheer endurance. The poem is especially interesting because, like "Holy Well," it refrains from metaphysical insistences. Instead, it frames a place now empty, like the lamp which no longer shines on a sacred image. The protagonist's aloneness and her demystified state of mind signify the persistence of unfulfilled longing and of spiritual *potential* into Irish postmodernity. Cannon remarked to an interviewer in 1997 that "the meaning we find in the world around us is always our own projection" (Donovan).[23] This is a perspective as secular as Coleridge's Kantian statement that human enlightenment by nature is always the result of self-projection upon the inanimate: "...we receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does Nature live" (Coleridge ll. 47-48).[24] Her work is important to contemporary Ireland, because it resists two opposed but equally reductive stances towards Ireland's inherited beliefs and practices of devotion: she avoids both the advocacy of a re-mystifying Catholic hegemony and a detached, tourist-like appropriation of older cultural patterns as folkloristic "local colour."

Two striking nature-poems, "Hills" (*Oar* 30) and "The Foot of Muckish" (*Oar* 32), like her work in general, avoid the controlled iambic rhythms of her younger contemporaries; they work primarily by metaphor. "Hills" concerns the intense attachment of the persona to a local mountain landscape, "my wild hills." It sets up a trope of startling physicality to realise this bond, alternating erotic moments with predatory ones. First, "[m]y wild hills come stalking" (l. 1), and the speaker fails either to "cast them off" (l. 3) or limit their power by "lyricis[ing] about heather" (l. 6). The compelling power she knew in childhood, when they seemed "half the world's perimeter," overcomes such "elegant" and "disinterested discourse" (ll. 8-9). Now they return forcefully upon her, insisting on their inextricable and vital place in her consciousness:

> I know them blue, like delicate shoulders.
> I know the red grass that grows in high boglands
> and the passionate brightnesses and darknesses
> of high bog lakes. (ll. 12-15)

They are figured as the contours of a human body, but writ larger and stranger, and intensely rendered, with erotic vividness: "red," "high," with "passionate brightnesses and darknesses." The culminating conceit has them present in her very body and yet

23 Compare "Night" (*Parchment Boat* 40), which describes a brilliant night sky as "our windy, untidy loft / where old people had flung up old junk" (ll. 24-25), including "a clatter of heroes, / a few heroines..." (ll.27-28).

24 A reviewer's comment that Cannon's landscapes "exist as both the territories of primal forces, and the heartlands of a folkish Catholicism" is not only unsympathetic to her project: it may also miss the careful indeterminacy of her perspectives as to metaphysics or at least the distance her speakers maintain from literalist or traditional belief (Guinness review).

simultaneously outside civilisation: in "the murk of winter / these wet hills will come howling through my blood like wolves" (ll. 17-18). We cannot read this fantasised land-body as gendered because the signals are contradictory. In traditional terms, hunters and wolves both connote aggressive masculinity, as "delicate shoulders" usually do femininity. Furthermore, if the speaker has, metaphorically, a passionate affair with this landscape, both s/he and it are rendered as both active and passive. Cannon does make the poem turn on a binary, but it is that of wild/tame, nature/culture. The speaker's disavowal of the elegant detachment of mere lyric discourse, including perhaps her own at an earlier time, repudiates a nature-poetry based on scenery which seeks to contain the material land and even virtually to consume it.[25] Finally, the hills seem both outside and within the human, ready to return as a never-tamed nature, "howling through my blood" (l. 18) and imperfectly repressed by her inchoate efforts to "cast them off" (l. 3). Cannon's opposition of lyric elegance and an intense, potentially predatory passion suggests the beautiful/sublime distinction: the utterly untameable quality of these hills makes them non-human and decisively raises them above the feminised realm of the aesthetic. In this respect the poem seems after all to show Romantic influences, but to the extent that it does, it constructs the protagonist as a non-feminised subject: the sheer intensity of "these wet hills" possesses, but also empowers, her. Cannon may allude to Kavanagh and adopt his trajectory through repudiation of the native terrain to rapprochement, as in his poem "Innocence" (101). But she notably steps outside the conventional identification of the feminine with nature and of nature as feminine which Kavanagh performs when he makes his woman-landscape equivocally spouse and mother and has his speaker first cast her from him and name her "a ditch / Although she was smiling at me with violets," then in the end return to "her briary arms" (Kavanagh, "Innocence" ll. 9-11).

Sonnet-length, "The Foot of Muckish" (*Oar* 32) stages an epiphany from childhood. The town-dwellers on the coast visit the wild terrain of Muckish mountain only to cut turf and so, in the adult persona's phrase, consider it "beyond our pale" (in miniature mimicry of the division of wildness from civility during settlement periods in Irish history). The middle section is a scene: as the "clumsy, dark-hearted child" of ten comes down the mountain "over the last shoulder," the smaller mountain opposite "rose up in a cliff" and "rocked a lake between its ankles" (ll. 7-10).

At first this seems threatening; it recalls the much more tremendous passage in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, where the boy in the boat feels the towering mountain gather itself and pursue him as he rows frantically down the lake (I, ll. 404-12). But Cannon switches the affect of her poem away from this terror: the hill which rises up so suddenly at first seems threatening, but the gesture resolves itself into one of contain-

25 Cusick reads this as referring to Yeats's and Synge's Revival representations of western landscapes and their "privileging of cultural scripts" (74); to me it seems closer to recent work such as Michael Longley's, with its careful naming of bird and plant species, which might be read as a gesture of control such as Cannon is resisting here.

ment and protective love which strongly suggests a parent holding and rhythmically rocking a child sitting at its feet. This modulates into the offering of a gift, making the enfolded lake

> A sixpence
> a home for all the little dark streams,
> a moon
> in the miles of acid land. (ll. 11-14)

In the Ireland of Cannon's childhood, the silver sixpenny coin was the classic gift or "tip" a child got from a visiting uncle, or the parish priest, or any other adult from outside the household. The homeliness of this cultural memory reinforces the kind-parent image from just before, making the landscape a protector and gift-giver. Then "a home for all the little dark streams" gathers in the "dark-hearted" child, deepening the previous suggestion of holding and blissful enfolding. Then the lake is transformed from the pleasingly round and shining sixpence into "a moon," not unattainably far away but present to human sight, shining over "the miles of acid land."[26] This final phrase reasserts the wild inhuman character of the terrain, yet the feeling of loving protection, gift, and illumination – all sparely indicated – counterbalances this harshness, comforting and enlightening the "clumsy" child still half-present within the poem's adult speaking self.

The twenty-syllable last stanza is verbless, Imagist or haiku-like, and instead of the experience of fearful diminution which the foregoing non-human land might suggest, it is at once joyful and consolingly miniaturising. The child-sized persona is echoed strongly in "all the little dark streams" for which the lake, itself nurtured by the parent-like, rocking mountain, provides "a home." The troping of the lake both as sixpence and moon makes both seem like gifts to the child, the coin almost magically becoming a pure, shining circle, immemorial symbol of completeness, soaring above the "miles of acid land." Cannon here re-imagines the landscape as cradling and tendering, while the poem's temporal moment is, significantly, a liminal one between day and night, where a lake glimmers with the last light of day and at the same time holds the promise of moonlight.

Other intertexts suggest themselves, particularly and contrastingly, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's "Cailleach," in which a daughter experiences as terrifying hallucination her mother's earlier dream of being an earth-giantess, feet in the sea and, for shoulders, the mountains encircling the bay (*Feis* 31; Smyth 215-6). One might well read Ni Dhomhnaill as ironising, even sending up, Heaney's pervasive female gendering of natural features. Cannon's landscape, by contrast, is non-gendered: adults of either sex might rock a small child between their ankles or marvellously bestow sixpence on a little girl or boy unpractised (in earlier generations) in getting or spending. So if her poem is also an implicit response to Heaney's gendering system, it uses

26 Possibly Somerset Maugham's once very widely-read novel *The Moon and Sixpence* suggested this associative chain.

a different tactic from Ní Dhomhnaill's: the speaker has her own rational subjectivity, of which she recalls the ten-year-old stage, and is part of a human community with a pragmatic relation (the harvesting of fuel) to the bogland below Muckish. No sense of identification with the landscape is involved, nor is there any sense either of wooing or being born from it, as in Heaney's headily erotic and murky bogland tropes.

The final Cannon poem I shall discuss is "Listening Clay" (*Oar* 33), which focuses on those sounds that "were here before the word, / and have no significance in law /... / sounds without a history" (ll. 9-10, 13). While proposing a continuum between human and non-human, it diverges sharply from Kavanagh's seamless joining of nature with the Christian sacred. Cannon's interest is in the assertion of an immemorial and irreducible underlying reality to be encountered both in non-human natural phenomena and in those instinctual behaviours which humanity holds in common with it. The dedication "for Caitríona" once again signals the poet's divergence from stereotypical and traditional nature-as-feminine personifications, just as her treatment of nature avoids mystification. Here two rational subjects are posited, one inviting the other to consider the class of sounds "that we can, / and do, trust." These are listed with spareness and restraint:

> a gale in the trees,
> the soft click of the stones, where the tide falls back,
> a baby crying in the night. (ll. 4-6)

In an intensified tone the next stanza holds these sounds above mockery and distinguishes them from cerebration, commerce, history, law, and the word itself. Hélène Cixous seizes upon Lacan's theory that the place of the feminine in language is "refusal of the discourse of the master" and of "the tyranny of all-knowing" and turns it, against itself, to assert a positive position: this poem parallels Cixous' move (251).[27] Cannon uses language here to speak the unspeakable, to represent that which, while it is outside the realm of the Lacanian Symbolic order, nevertheless can be apprehended:

> Endlessly repeated,
> immutable,
> they are sounds without a history.
> They comfort and disturb
> the clay part of the heart. (12-16)

Neither persona nor dedicatee is identified with these literal, pre-linguistic sounds. Instead, both are placed, with the implied reader, in a shared human category by the striking figure which closes the poem: just as comfort and disturbance must co-exist, so these sounds, like the being of their hearers, are at once material ("clay part") and al-

27 Qtd. in Yorke 116-117 and 214 n.14. Mitchell and Rose describe how for Lacan "the absolute 'Otherness' of the woman ... serves to guarantee for the man his own self-knowledge and truth." They link this fundamental gendering to his "attempt ... to rejoin the place of 'non-knowledge' which he designated the unconscious ... and thereby to undercut the very mastery which his own position (as master and analyst) necessarily constructs" (50).

ways already infused with feeling ("of the heart"). The internal rhyme of "part" and "heart" further binds together this concrete body and its own inescapable infusion with emotion.

Vona Groarke

In the first poems of her début collection, *Shale,* Vona Groarke builds up a landscape stripped to almost archetypal elements: shore, river, lake, island, lighthouse, windmill, stones, trees. A characteristic focus on dwelling-houses, however, quickly becomes apparent and marginalises the former elements, which nevertheless remain as mutely oppositional presences, beyond and outside houses. Place-names are infrequent in Groarke, though some topographical features, especially the many lakes which characterise the midlands, her region of origin, are discernible in her work. Occasionally, a location is named for thematic purposes, her Edgeworth poem "Patronage" (*Shale* 22) offering the most obvious example. Groarke's Irish landscapes markedly avoid invoking the chthonic or any hint of cosmic gendering. In some of her finest poems the settings, like Elizabeth Bishop's, function as grounds of philosophical reflection by a human subject who is characterised by her thought and constituted in meditation. These poems are effective in devising tropes to bring insight to the themes – philosophical, aesthetic, or social – broached in the poems; there are already good examples in her first collection.

Groarke's 1999 *Other People's Houses* names a preoccupation which could be considered central to her work as a whole. She circles round the ideas of house and home, proposing ideas both of safety and enclosure, sometimes as protective and enabling, sometimes as confining and provoking frustration. However, her representations of domesticity differ from those in Boland and, indeed, in Rita Ann Higgins. Groarke's cooler and better-regulated speakers strike quasi-Augustan notes, sometimes similar to those of Derek Mahon. Using an ironic, poised narrator, she skillfully deploys quotidian detail to produce a formally elegant, tactically detached, and ultimately dystopian vision of post-modern Ireland's suburbanisation. Many of the pieces in this volume have a strong degree of public referentiality: for instance, the technically accomplished "Open House" (*Other People's Houses* 16), which is in forty-six rhyming couplets and near-perfect traditional metre.[28] At the level of theme, however, there is almost always a half-hidden risk: that these carefully managed enclosures – of the soulless Tiger-era estate "Sycamore Court," but also of the speaker's own surface composure – will be cracked open by some apocalyptic force. That force is, however, not always imagined as an interior one. Thus, the narrator is divided physically from her neighbour (in the poem's inspired phrase, "sleeping partner," with its tension between connotations of business and sex) only by "one course of bricks," albeit socially by all the fencing off of bourgeois codes of individuality, and only an extraordinary event could bring them together. Such a fateful happening can, however, only be imagined as half religion and half kitsch: "as happened to Lazarus, or the guests on *Blind Date*" (l. 90). The limitations of this speaker's imagination are meant as satiric, but Groarke's own forms are so neat and her control of her material so strong that the poems can give the impression of over-regulation and thereby themselves risk mirroring the over-ordered pastiche of civility which they are satirising in the social world.[29] Generally she is at her most interesting and intense in the briefer, more lyrical and sombre pieces. Her quasi-meditative, philosophical work, such as "What Becomes the River?" (*Shale* 13), the fine title poem of *Flight* (*Flight* 16), and others broaching the experience or apprehension of loss – of meaning or of some part of the self, or both – and psychological terror are well worthy of more and more sustained attention by readers and critics (see Morrissey). I shall discuss these last.

28 This is predominantly anapaestic, a galloping "da-da-*dum*" rhythm which in English poetry usually suggests comic effects; Groarke combines this with iambs and occasional trochees at the start of the line.

Thematically, one might divide Groarke's work to date roughly into four main kinds, with some overlap. First there are social-satiric poems, set in a recognizable Ireland and wryly anatomising the visual aspects of our surroundings, especially of the contemporary built (all too often jerry-built) environment. The second kind is the loose narrative of a female persona who traverses some unsatisfactory, alienating relationships and sexual encounters to reach a lasting love-partner, who becomes a husband, and to set up a two-child family in a suburb. The moves between houses can be read as successive moments in this narrative, whose conventional character is sometimes mildly guyed by the main speaker. More often, however, the poet stages epiphanies which aim to valorise the situation emotionally, despite its surface adherence to social norms frequently ironised. Groarke thus interweaves her interest in the concept of home and in the range of its possible realisations, relatively successful or largely failed, with her representation of a familiar and rather normative bourgeois romance. These poems about spousal and family contentment and children are much more conventional and reach less towards that creative disturbance where the highest potential of the lyric form is seen.[30]

The third kind is linked with the first two in again focusing on the house, domesticity and related matters (cooking, farming). These pieces echo the first kind in sketching Irish houses of various sorts; but now their public, often historical, thematic aspect is dominant. Some of Groarke's most praised and prize-winning poems are in this vein, for instance "Imperial Measure," about the incongruous luxury with which the 1916 rebels were victualled, "Or to Come," an impressive long poem in "Country Churchyard" mode, and "The Way It Goes," about a decayed, perhaps "Big," house, all collected in *Flight* (63, 30, 20 respectively). These pieces overspill the short lyric genre to become

29 Reviewers at the time expressed impatience and a sense of repetition and confinement at this collection's unvaried focus on the topic of houses (e.g. Costello 51).

30 Such as "Sunflowers," "Maize," and "Tonight of Yesterday" (*Flight* 23, 24 and 25), the last two dedicated "for Tommy" and "for Eve" respectively.

descriptive poetry, frequently elegiac in tone, and in this developing towards a non-lyric genre, they interestingly indicate the influence of Goldsmith, whose *Deserted Village*, Groarke observes, was inescapably present in her midlands childhood.[31] Groarke's account of earlier Irelands, of several kinds and periods, and of their complex legacy, is a topic worthy of longer investigation, but it is important at least to observe the complexity with which she approaches the theme of Irish histories in a pluralistic way, as many rather than one. In this respect, despite its urbanity of tone, Groarke's work meets Cannon's.

A number of shorter pieces, more clearly lyric in genre, also exemplify this investigation of past, and by implication, public social values. "The Lighthouse," about rural electrification, explicitly announces itself as diverging from a received narrative by beginning "I heard her tell the story another way" (*Other People's Houses* 34). It centres on three women in a household and their sense of alarm and estrangement when they first turn the switch and see themselves "stranded in a room that was nothing like / their own /.../ their house undone and silenced / by the clamour of new light" (ll. 26-27, 29-30). The transformation destroys "the music / of the room when it was still" (ll. 9-10): the fire's "rustle," a teaspoon's "single held note" (l. 11), knitting sounds and the clock's "flutter." It also sweeps away the "familiar shine" (l. 19) of the china cups, the copper pans, and a wedding ring (l. 20). Female companionship is indicated only by these discreet metonymies, but meanwhile outside this domestic context the priest preaches about "the dawn of a new age" and a "crowd of overcoated men" are cheering for "progress and prosperity" (ll. 21, 22, 25). Groarke sounds a minority note here: in holding back from an uninflected endorsement of the process of modernisation in Ireland she indicates a position about what is currently a vexed question among social and cultural critics. It is significant that in registering losses as well as gains, Groarke adopts a viewpoint specifically marked as feminine.[32] The poem's picture of women's shared, contented being within their house implicitly poses questions about the rhetoric of "progress and prosperity" as unalloyed good, both then and now.

Another piece with a markedly feminine perspective is deftly humorous. In "The House of Hair" (*Other People's Houses* 22), a hairdresser's salon is a converted brothel, and the professional service she capably performs is now for both men and

31 Groarke, who was born "two fields away from Lissoy parsonage," has drawn parallels between Goldsmith's vision of depopulation and economic mismanagement and socially destructive forces in contemporary Ireland, where "traditional rural communities are swamped by dormitory estates and golf courses are made from redundant farms" (Viney). See also Groarke, "High Talk."

32 The poem's negative judgement about the modemising effect of electrification is strikingly paralleled in Clear: "But new facilities created new work. Electrification showed up the dust and the need for interior decorating ..." (169), and "[a]quification and electrification ... lessened the opportunities for contact with neighbours" (183). However it is important to note that these are counter-currents to the concretely positive effects of electrification on women's labour and consequently their lives (170, 202). On wider debates about the modernisation model, see Connolly 10-13, McCarthy 12-41.

women. The poem keeps a straight face about its own sustained *double entendre*, emphasising the hairdresser's skill, grace, sexiness ("she was quick and supple and made-up," l. 4) and her perfume ("[i]t drew the room around her fingertips, / the turn of her breasts, her thighs, her shallow hips," ll. 8-9). She is calmly aware of her own attraction. The men would "close their eyes as she'd finish them off," brushing away the hair from "each chin" (ll. 10-12). The poem's persona waits her "turn" to have her hair cut "up short" and given her to have a wig made. Instead she puts it away and when after three years she finds it, in the last lines of the poem, it has "loosened out and strayed / to fill the bag with soft, dark fur / that didn't smell of me, but of her skin" (ll. 16-18). It is a sensual moment, charged with the unsettling presence of another woman's active sexuality which ambushes the speaker within her own house (turning it too into a "house of hair"). Groarke shows skill and panache in her diction and her activation of the hair-sex connotations: the final "loosen[ing] out" and "stray[ing]" echoes the "calls at *wayward* hours" (l. 2; my emphasis) which the hairdresser continues to get from "gentlemen not looking for a trim" (l. 3), and the speaker's own shorn haircut seems to be a transfer of sensual power from her to the other woman, a sexual energy which is stored, dormant, in the drawer, to be erotically reactivated in this last stanza.

If "The House of Hair" notes an erotic frisson below the everyday surfaces of small-town life, other short poems approach contested Irish histories from varied angles. but also work from notably feminine perspectives, for example "Shot Silk" (*Flight* 62) and "House Fire" (*Other People's Houses* 37). "Shot Silk" explores the past confinement of gentlewomen indoors with their stitching work, while "candles flinch / from a fire seen on the hill." "House Fire," in form a prose poem, is about the Traveller custom of ritually burning the caravan dwelling of the recently dead, with all their possessions inside. In both of these, as in a third, "Workhouses" (*Other People's Houses* 36), Groarke develops a searching historical reflexivity, marked by compassion, from the vivid imagining of temporal detail. She has perfected the skill of staging her scenes with such restraint that no intrusive propositionality or argument is required. Thus, while some of these poems' settings suggest Eavan Boland territory, the two poets' styles differ sharply, because Groarke usually achieves those general judgements which are always present in poems by poetically incorporating them in the material itself and making them seem to arise from it without strain. Boland, by contrast, especially in her work on more public and historical themes, tends towards semi-detachable statements or declarations. She also deploys the questionable device of assuming, as poetic speaker, the identity of some female victims of history, for instance, the Famine emigrant aboard ship.[33] The risk of appropriating the positions of such subaltern subjects in the past is more subtly negotiated in Groarke.

33 "I am the woman / in the gansy-coat / on board the *Mary Belle*, / in the huddling cold ...," "Mise Eire" (Boland, *Outside History* 28-31). Meaney argues that Boland sometimes presents "versions of femininity ... shocking in their stereotyping," despite her seeking, as Broom puts it, "to oppose women's histories" to previous "appropriation[s] of the feminine to evoke the nation" (Meaney 146, quoted in Broom 116).

In these poems about Irish histories, she makes especially effective use of the uncanny: eerie events are suggested, or an aura is generated, to mark the incommensurability of historic suffering and of the hardships of others with glib post-modern attempts at assimilation. Far from the wax figures of the heritage industry, Groarke's sense of history is mordantly etched, and taking her work as a whole, the nuanced quality of these historical scenes resists accommodation to either of the binaries – revisionism or nationalism – which have riven Irish historiography and public discourse.[34] "Shot Silk" renders life in gentry houses not as a gracious cultural idyll with peacocks and metaphorical gazelles in the manner of Yeats, but as claustrophobia, containment of female desire, and self-importance, the whole paradoxically and shakily held together by the sense of external threat, more like Bowen's consciously preposterous enclaves and their equivocal relation to their radical antagonists in the hills.[35] In Groarke "a seam of dust is brightened by a flicker of outside," and the woman sewing a rent in her calfskin glove will "leave no mark" (ll. 13, 20).

At the other extreme of rank from this shut-in affluence, the workhouse, even when stripped to its site alone, so retains its charge of terrible abjection that "the field around" one of these ruins is still "never ploughed in Spring" (*Other People's Houses* 38). The prose-poem "House Fire" (*Other People's Houses* 37) develops a powerful, if implicit, argument. Organised as seven short stanzaic paragraphs, it attends delicately to the symbolism of the burning, so much at odds with the vesting of security in material houses by settled people: "The fire was to silence whatever might call her [the dead woman] back. The fire was supposed to set her free." The "supposed to" frames the symbolic effect of the burning with scepticism on the part of the – evidently settled – speaker, who also records how the Traveller group leave immediately afterwards. There is subsequent "talk" of whistling sounds and blue lights in the wreck, and a *cordon sanitaire* around the spot ("[n]o one will touch it") is preserved by everyone from the local authority and shoppers to "the usual scrappers," "the winos and the skangers." This suggests both the near-universal social aversion and self-distancing from Travellers in contemporary Ireland and an underlying unease about the social other expressed as fear of haunting. Ironically, despite the "sagging roof and shattered glass," in life the Traveller woman kept her windows "netted and intact." She had a sense of order and exercised it in her surroundings, implicitly contradicting the stereotype of Traveller chaos and filth. The flicker of uncanny effect in the poem leaves these antinomies unreconciled. The poem ends with "indelible shadows on the lock-up wall" left by the fire, symbolically signifying the projection onto these

34 This reflective ideological understanding may be connected with the fact that she holds a qualification in Heritage Management and has worked as a curator.

35 "Ladies had gone not quite mad, not even that, from in vain listening for meaning in the loudening ticking of the clock" (Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* 174); see also *The Last September* (passim).

others of the settled community's anxiety about the viability of its system of purity and danger.[36]

There are many other fine Groarke poems which would repay discussion, several foregrounding questions of gender. Among these is "Thistle" (*Flight* 18-19), based on a girlhood memory of haymaking, where the child sent merely to weed at the hayfield's edge – "the only girl / in a field bristling with hands, a stray in the herd" (ll. 15-16) – resented her solitary and repetitive labours and the men's and boys' visibly productive, satisfying and communal ones. Then she sang "small words in a small tune to kill the hours / that *skirted* their rough talk and fine acres" (ll. 35-36; my emphasis). Now grown, she has become both a car driver, speeding by, and the memorialist (perhaps in less "small words") of the once universal annual hay-saving, now short-circuited by modern silage machines.[37]

"The Idea of the Atlantic" (*Shale* 20), headed "for my mother," concerns a mother's terror of the ocean and the daughter consoling her and leading her to the "land-locked" place (l.29), where she will "make peace with the dark" and never have to fear the storm (ll. 32-33). With the powerful opening image of a file of the drowned who walk blank-faced at the bottom of the sea, the poem pits human affection and protective love against the ocean's terrible destructive power. Here the antinomy of sea and land carries the force of death versus life, in a poem ultimately not about topography: this ocean and land are places in the psyche. Its narrative is dreamlike: "[i]f once you look down, you'll be lost" (l. 9). The daughter-speaker enacts a tender assurance, piquant because it swaps roles and makes her into the saving guide. In this respect it recalls poems by Mary Dorcey which also focus on the mother-daughter relation, where the elderly mother grown childlike must be looked after by the adult daughter.[38] Dorcey, however, works with a looser, more oral style, and Groarke is much more tight-lipped and formally contained; in her poem the role-exchanging character of the relationship is not stated but allowed to arise implicitly.

It is evident at this point that despite Groarke's uninterest in the kind of explicit feminist statements made by much 1980s Irish women's poetry, very many of her poems either adopt woman-identified perspectives or can be understood as feminist critique, or both. I have already noted her pointed comment in 1999 about the disparity between the general public awareness of Irish male poets as a coherent group, and the absence of such awareness in the case of Irish female ones.

I turn finally to the fourth kind of poem Groarke writes: the philosophical, meditative lyric. This strand of her writing carries especial aesthetic and thematic effect. Of

36 I draw here on Hayes, who both historicises and theorises representations of Travellers, and on Douglas' classical anthropological study of pollution and purification ritual.

37 This piece is intertextual with Heaney's "The Wife's Tale," also a haymaking poem; Groarke's implicit revision of Heaney would bear analysis.

38 See especially "Trying on for Size," Dorcey 25.

these poems, less numerous than her more social and historical work, I have room to discuss only two, one from *Shale*, "What Becomes the River?" (*Shale* 13), and the later "Flight" (*Flight* 16). The theme of the first is ceaseless process in the physical world, with its never-finished breaking down and building up again, and the sheer opacity of natural objects and energies to human thought. With an unmarked speaker who adopts no subject-position ("I," "we" or for that matter "you"), the poem opens and closes with the same sequence of words: "Breathe the clean air of death. The river." But their syntactical function changes, from the initial command or injunction to the statement of a purpose at the end. Austere, unadorned, and technically skilled, in its five three-line stanzas this meditation achieves a cool containment recalling Wallace Stevens. Among Irish predecessors, it is more akin to Thomas MacGreevy at his sparest, or Beckett, than it is to the dominant Yeats or Kavanagh modes. Groarke takes her epigraph for this collection from Elizabeth Bishop, some of whose work "River" also recalls, especially in its implicit disavowal of the emotive lyric speaker.[39]

"What Becomes the River" offers two apparently contradictory propositions, themselves Zen-like paradoxes: that "this is always something else," and yet that "everything becomes itself" (ll. 13-14). However, a third statement allows their reconciliation, at a price (identity as usually understood by humans): "Everything becomes the river" (l. 11). The river is the flow of sheer process, indivisible ("is this the same sea or a different sea / that comes a little further on the shore?" (ll. 3-4)), and, like the cold sea in Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" (though without Bishop's startling metaphor of the earth's rocky breasts), it is indifferent to human reactions.[40] "[E]ach wave breaks / and is broken like a stone" (ll. 6-7). Formally, without quite being a sestina "River" resembles one, by repeating certain key end-words: "river" (ll. 1, 11, 15), "stone" (ll. 2, 7), "still" (ll. 9, 10). Its use of caesura, to make a pause in a line, and of enjambment, to draw the eye and ear on over the ends of lines, is especially beautiful. This makes it seem to enact, in words and rhythm, the alternation of absolute arrest and unstoppable flow in the phenomenal world, which is the poem's argument. The opening and closing lines, taken together, exemplify this enactment: in line 1, "[b]reathe the clean air of death. The river..." the mind craves the completion offered in line 2, "...has no more strength than a stone." But by the time we reach line 15 and the end of the poem, we are ready for the first line to become the last and we can

39 The Bishop epigraph, from "The Riverman" (105-09), is "I waded into the river / and suddenly a door / in the water opened inward" (ll. 22-24). Although "The Riverman" draws on shamanistic material, has an indigenous Brazilian speaker and is not a meditative lyric, it has another passage which seems to prefigure Groarke's poem: "Look, it stands to reason / that everything we need / can be obtained from the river" (108-10). Wheatley also notices "River" and finds a resemblance to Louise Glück in its elemental quality (261).

40 "...dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free, / drawn from the cold hard mouth / of the world, derived from the rocky breasts / forever, flowing and drawn..." ("At the Fishhouses," 64-66, ll. 79-83).

now recognise that "[t]he river" is both the only closure we can expect and a consummate one; so now we can agree "*to* breathe the clean air of death. The river" (l. 15; my emphasis). The enjambment mimes the endlessness of process, the Heraclitean flow according to which everything becomes the river: even the sea is "held close" in it, *in potentia* (l. 12).

The opening appears dark, even suicidal in mood, when it invokes death and endows it with the quality of "clean air." Yet, within the poem's systematically, ascetically reduced world, there is extraordinary consolation in the climactic proposition, which has the quality of a revelation: "That everything becomes itself..." (l. 14) and because we cannot stop there, we are willing to fall or flow, joyfully, over the final line-break in order "...to breathe the clean air of death. The river." The elegant balance of this double formulation recalls St Augustine's injunction, which Beckett admired: "Do not despair: one thief was saved. Do not presume: one thief was damned." That everything becomes itself is a triumph, but it does so only in order to breathe the clean air of death. "What Becomes the River" attains the peculiar power to send us back through its own sequence, rearranging itself in our minds as we think and rethink it, coming up against the paradoxical perfection of its sheer simplicity.

Thematically it overlaps to some degree with Cannon's "Listening Clay" – the poems share a gesture to the irreducible pre-verbal reality of the physical world (the sea, waves, stones, wind) – but the effect is ultimately different, since Groarke's voice removes itself scrupulously from any acknowledgement of feeling, while Cannon's includes human empathy as elemental, with its "we" stance, its dedication to a named other, and its inclusion of "a baby crying in the night." Groarke's is purer, Cannon's more humane.

At first reading, "Flight," which is much longer, offers more items from the actual world and is less ascetic than "What Becomes the River," but it gives this impression primarily because of its rich store of metaphors. The whole poem considers flight as an image of writing. It starts with jet-trails, "bleached flight-lines" in a pale dusk, already dissipating even as one sees them. They are likened to how the breastbone of a tiny bird, "golden oriole or wren," would look if it were "ground to powder" in the speaker's right hand. "Flight" does not stage personal lyric emotion; all we know of the persona is the constitutive activity in which we see her/him engaged: that of poet.[41] There is a "*my* right hand" (l. 6; my emphasis) but no "I": the speaker is kept carefully minimal. Principally, "Flight" brings together intimations both of the gift – or achievement – named in its title metaphor and of the death awaiting all living things. The tenor of this governing metaphor is the exhilaration and felt power of achieving meaning in language, and this is indicated in the many references to the activity of writing: "uninscribed" (l. 1), "calligraphy" (l. 17), "slight / precision of the black and

41 Since the speaker's gender is particularly unmarked, I say "her/him" to avoid the usual assumption either of a masculine default position or of an alignment between the gender of speaker and poet.

white" (ll. 22-23), "squat characters" (l. 26), and the self-referring "these lines" (l. 39), the poem's last words. Successive bird-descriptions and references are, with one important exception, the primary metaphorical material (or vehicles) marshalled to illustrate and thicken this tenor. The poem works calmly through this series of tropes towards an ending of elegiac poise and quiet expressive power. Near the beginning, there is an almost-definition of poetry as "the point at which two rumours coalesce, / one to do with vision, one with voice" (ll. 7-9). "Vision" represents understanding, poetic and philosophical insight, and "voice" the words of actual poems, the realisation of "vision" in language. The poem's beauty derives partly from Groarke's formal virtuosity, which is never more satisfyingly exercised than here. Since "Flight" is *about* poetry, it elegantly functions both as theme and form, method and meaning. But as well as this "voice" there is also a luminous "vision" in another sense, of the detail of the world: for instance, "the calligraphy of swallows / on a page of cloud; tern prints on snow..." (ll. 17-18) and a vivid description of how a bird works up to taking off: "[o]ne minute, it's ruse and colour, the next, wingspan and whir" (ll. 10-11). Colloquial language is unsettled, made to come alive in an almost Beckettian way: "...something loses the run / of itself and slips airborne" (ll. 13-14), "soon to be thin air; nothing to write / home about; an advancing quiet ..." (ll. 34-35).

Despite the thematic austerity and apparent abstraction of "Flight," there is a striking thread of explicit gendering in its argument, in its one main non-avian trope. In the tenth stanza, patterned delicately with half-rhymes and assonances, we come

> to a sequence of hard words laid
> one on the other and back again
> like a schoolgirl's braid,
>
> chaotic and restrained; that cannot
> be taken in hand; that's here now, but
> working up to clearing itself out... (28-33)

The schoolgirl's braid – or plait – is of course a social artefact, though made, like poems, from natural material. It weaves together in a pattern the strands of an unruly, abundant bodily thing, hair (making an interesting subdued echo of "The House of Hair"). The braid is a paradox, both "chaotic and restrained," and the poem describes it as on the point of escape, ready to dissolve itself (echoing the earlier metamorphosis of "ruse and colour" into "wingspan and whir"). By synecdoche, the braid in turn signifies the schoolgirl herself: a figure of promise and intense energy, tightly contained for the moment but about to move out, to take off towards an unknown freedom. The whole tenor of the image is to celebrate – explicitly as an image of poetry-making – this disruptive potential, here pointedly marked as feminine. In the poem's complex system of thought this is set against death which, at the end of the poem, "like a moth in a paper lantern, / is rattling in even these lines" (ll. 38-39).

In this conclusion Groarke quietly arrives at an assertion about the potential of poetry which is probably most familiar from Shakespeare's sonnets: the idea of the immortality of art, which Shakespeare himself took over from numerous predecessors in the

Western tradition (e.g. Sonnets 55, 63-65, 81). But her version altogether strips the idea of the charge of personal feeling and individual triumph in that tradition. At first glance the ending looks simply like a rueful but dignified acknowledgement of mortality, and it *is* such an acknowledgement. But Death's "rattle" faces two ways. It powerfully suggests the terrible sounds of the deathbed, but it also describes the moth, struggling inside the paper lantern. If we think carefully about the metaphor, we remember how it is the moth's instinctive attraction into the paper lantern – now become its chamber of death – which causes its eventual immolation. But death rattles inside the poem *like* the moth inside the lantern: so, looked at the other way round, it is the poem – "even" these lines – that kills it off. The brilliance of this figure is in holding together both meanings: the wry acceptance of death's inevitability and the quality of freedom and permanence – of a kind of "flight" beyond death – a good poem can have, in the realm of the imagination. Like the effect of "What Becomes the River," the poem simultaneously registers both loss and gain: the moth in the paper lantern can fly like the birds, but at the end is trapped by its attraction to the light, and, unlike the schoolgirl growing up, cannot fly *away*. So flight, contradictorily, faces both ways: it stands for release, freedom, soaring, the triumph of the work realised, but also for how we are drawn on to self-immolation by our irresistible desires, and death rattles in all we can utter.

Like the best of Cannon's work, Groarke's most effective poems may originate in the specific times and places of Ireland in the 1990s and may often use those circumstances as their point of departure and their context, but in both cases they often also reach a more general applicability, by their poetic skill, grace, and vision. Both also unselfconsciously add to, adapt, and re-envisage both Irish and feminine ways of viewing the world and of remaking it in the virtual realm of poetry.

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