

The Poetic Reconstitution of Place in The Poetry of Moya Cannon: Roots, Land, Home and Language

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Abstract: *The intricate relationship between place and the construction/reshaping of personal and social identities is a matter of fundamental interest. The article discusses how, in her work, the Irish poet Moya Cannon (Dunfanaghy, County Donegal, 1956) explores the 'sense of place', as presented by Seamus Heaney in his book *Preoccupations* (Faber 1980). One intends to analyse how this notion appears in Cannon's poems and unfolds into other significant perspectives and themes such as: roots (past, heritage, historical bonds and fractures), land (landscape, sacramental sites), home (memory, local belonging, displacement) and language (linguistic awareness, linguistic dispossession).*

Keywords: *sense of place, Moya Cannon, landscape, home.*

The constitution of one's identity, in individual and collective spheres, involves the amalgamation of complex characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, religion, social class and place; it is a long and deep process during which the person discovers, moulds, educates, rebuilds him or herself. Among the aforementioned characteristics, we focus on the notion of place as interrelated to poetry, considering that the poet, as Gary Snyder says, "plays an essential role in society, laying the foundation for people's self-understanding and connection to tradition and place" (1980. 171). The poet may raise questions that articulate two essential elements: to know *where* you are, and *who* you are; so, we intend to investigate how a poetic voice – that of the acclaimed Irish poet Moya Cannon, may stimulate the perception of our 'sense of place' and, thus, enhance the process of identity formation.

The relationship to place may be based on biographical, spiritual, ethic, ideological, or even narrative attachments, therefore, the expression 'sense of place' is naturally wide ranging. In anthropological terms, for instance, it encompasses various symbolic forms of *place attachment*; it is "more than an emotional and cognitive experience, and includes cultural beliefs and practices that link people to place" (Low

12). In sociology, as David Hummon puts it, this sense “involves a personal orientation toward place, in which one’s understanding of place and one’s feeling about place become fused in the context of environmental meaning.” (Low 254). In the field of literature, many are the perspectives; William Kittredge places

According to Cusick:

come to exist in our imaginations because of stories, and so do we. When we reach for a ‘sense of place,’ we posit an intimate relationship to a set of stories connected to a particular location (...) thinking of histories and the evolution of personalities in a local context. Having ‘a sense of self’ means possessing a set of stories about who we are and with whom and why. (8)

Stating that a place only becomes a place when the events that happened in it are expressed in literary forms, Wallace Stegner (1993) emphasizes that “no place is a place until it has had a poet. (...) No place, not even a wild place, is a place until it has had that human attention that at its highest reach we will call poetry.” (203). And as a third perspective, Seamus Heaney, in his essay “The sense of place”¹, discusses the connections – physical, sensory, cultural, spiritual – between individuals and places:

I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways which may be complementary but which are just likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious. In the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension [...] (1980. 131)

The “illiterate and unconscious” corresponds to the everyday, real and experiential way, while the “literate and conscious” means to be tuned in to places where knowledge (of myth, legend, archaeology, history) and reflection are essential. According to Heaney, it is the tense co-existence between the conscious and the unconscious that produces poetry. Besides, regardless of ideologies, creeds, political positions, cultural distinctions that may interfere in our subjectivity, there is “a sense of ourselves” that encompasses both, the geographical country and what Heaney has called “a country of the mind”, and we respond to both of them as the connected forces that compose our sense of place. As Heaney says:

It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a shared oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both, it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation. (*Idem* 132)

The “sense of place” comes from the interconnection between the world we live in, physically (the geographical spot), and the world we experience mentally (as

our personal identity). Heaney emphasizes that, beyond the geographical characteristics of certain places, there are ties between the “country of the mind” (*mindscape*) and the “geographical country” (*landscape*); it is the marriage of both that is to be revealed by the poet’s sensibility. So, the question now is: how does an “equable marriage” between these ‘countries’ is attained in the poetry of Moya Cannon?²

The characteristics – topographical, historical, political, aesthetic, even archaeological – that mark Cannon’s poems are, most of them, naturally connected to Ireland but the “sense of place” in them leads us to a wide range of interpretative possibilities. Christine Cusick argues that in her poems Cannon

positions the natural world as the primary subject of its text, political concerns existing as only pieces of a too-often-simplified physical place. Cannon’s poetry does not name Ireland as nation or state, for politics are only slight allusions among the more central themes of human existence amid nonhuman nature. In addition, Cannon’s poetry pays attention to detail, maps personae’s traversing of the land, remembers the stories and myths that have shaped it, and honors unreachable presences of the natural world. (*in González 59*)

In a mobile and globalised society such as contemporary Ireland, the “sense of place” is a strong marker of identity. It happens to affirm the sense of belonging to a place – from the place where someone grew up to the broader relationship one has to the nation and even to the planet. Thus, while investigating the impact of “sense of place” in Cannon’s poetry, one is implicitly dealing with numberless cultural and aesthetic associations.

Excavating roots

In Ireland, for its rich past and its ancient lore and tradition, land as place is a vital element in the process of understanding the national identity and the sense of Irishness. In “Sense of Place” Heaney (1980) emphasizes that the Irish landscape is made of places immersed in processes of association with the ancient Irish culture (the world of the fairies, of the epic heroes and all its symbology). The encounter of the past and the present experiences of place, as one sees in Cannon’s poetry, is a sort of reconciliation with the communal roots.

In her work, Cannon as Éoin Flannery (2016) points out, “actively incorporates the materiality of deep historical and geological scale”; while thematizing place, individuality and humanity, she shows her sensitivity “to the much larger historical and temporal continuum in which these linguistic, spiritual, but ultimately, anthropocentric and anthropomorphic relationships are embedded.” (61-62). Cannon’s poems bring not only the lyric moment that energizes the text but also “the large history – literary, historical, ecological – that the work embraces. Her western landscapes proceed from an anti-hierarchical consciousness with the result that places and people share equal billing, as do human and non-humans, the living and the dead (Wall 159).

In a poetic search for rootedness, for that strong sense of attachment to a place, Cannon's poetry corresponds to a process of excavation. Through this process, the poems perform reconstruction of the Irish identity in a movement that interblends space, time, and historical fractures.³ By revealing new layers of meaning, and exposing past and present political violence as laminae in the soil, place helps transcending conflict and division. Place and the solid roots that persist over time, are not only the witnesses to historical transformations, but also the elements that ensure the preservation of many aspects of Irish communal culture.

According to Cusick:

Cannon's poetry extends a liberating commitment to the materiality of Ireland's physical landscape as something that both contains stories and exists as an archaeological and geological reality. In this way, her poetry recognizes the intersecting constructions of cultural scripts and material place. As such, excavation of the past requires a turn not only to the concepts and theories used to describe it, but also to the active experience of its natural gritty places. (*in* González 59)

In many of her poems, while describing prehistoric burials, ancient traces and artifacts that have survived, Cannon approximates the poet to the archaeologist. In an interview she, who graduated in History and Politics from University College Dublin⁴, stated: "I think I'd like to be reincarnated as an archaeologist and then a geologist after that! I've been fascinated by archaeology ever since I was a child." (Interview to McBride, 2015). Through images that evoke a digging of place, her poetry excavates many layers of the past. The layers of myth and language are excavated in "Isolde's Tower, Essex Quay" (from *The parchment boat* 12-13):

Is there no end
to what can be dug up
out of the mud of a riverbank,
(...)

This is no more
than the sunken stump
of a watchtower on a city wall,
built long after my Isolde might have lived,
built over since a dozen times,
uncovered now in some new work –
a tower's old root in black water
behind a Dublin bus stop;
and the story is no more than a story.
(...)

Referring to a child's ancient grave in France, in "Burial, Ardèche 20,000 BC" (from *Keats Lives*, 2015. 15), the persona evinces the noble and touching existence of anonymous people who, in remote times, lived and died outside history. The poem shows two complementary experiences of and in time, the ancient past and the persona's past

No bear or lion ever raked him up,
the five-year-old child,
victim of illness, accident or sacrifice,
buried in a cave floor
(...)
someone tied a seashell around his neck,
someone laid a few flint blades by his side,
and under his head someone placed
the dried tail of a fox, perhaps a white fox

Reproducing the "fluidity of place" in time⁵ the poem reaches a highly symbolic intensity. The nonhuman environment, with its power and presence, in its fluidity, transcends time and proves that the boundaries between natural history and human history are subtle, and the whole perception of the passing of time is permeated by all the complexities the fusion of place, roots, past, history engenders.

Landscape and "the power of place"

Place as landscape, in its unfolding aspects beyond the topographic territory, generates different associations and, thus, causes subjective reactions in the individual; as Cannon confirms: "I'm fascinated by the layering of human, and indeed, non-human experience evident in the landscape. That was the first imagery available to me when I started to write." (Interview to Katie Donovan, *The Irish Times*, 1997).

Exploring the unavoidable connection between landscape and the creative imagination of Ireland, Cannon's involvement with place/landscape, surpassing the mere description of the scenery, becomes a potent vehicle to articulate the experience itself, triggering cultural and aesthetic associations in a sort of poetic possession of the land. In expressing the materiality of the landscape, Cannon's poetry, "is a refreshing contribution to the Irish literary tradition of the Revival that often neglects the physical details of the landscape as it emphasizes instead its abstract cultural ties, both mythical and national." (Cusick *in* Gonzalez 58).

The poetic perception of natural landscape encompasses from the feelings for the local and ordinary place to the connection to sites that are sacramental. As Heaney (1980) argues, it involves "the power of the place":

The landscape was sacramental, instinct with signs, implying a system of reality beyond the visible realities. Only thirty years ago, and thirty miles from

Belfast, I think I experienced this kind of world vestigially and as a result may have retained some vestigial sense of place as it was experienced in the older dispensation. (...). There, if you like, was the foundation for a marvellous or a magical view of the world, a foundation that sustained a diminished structure of lore and superstition and half-pagan, half-Christian thought and practice.’ (...)
Such naming of examples is a pleasure to me that is, I believe, itself an earnest of the power of the place. (133-134)

Cannon’s descriptions of Ireland’s terrain, strengthened by her concern for the landscape credited with the qualities of a spiritual refuge, make her endow the place with philosophical qualities. Proclaiming the “power of the place”, Cannon’s poetry reveals the elemental forces present in Ireland’s natural world; in many poems one notes a fundamental attention to place – to landscape, seascape, hills, migratory birds, flowers, light, trees, lakes. Her poetry is highly informed by a sense of environmental awareness that reaches even the planetary dimension. While evincing nature’s values, exposing the processes by which landscape marks people, Cannon reveals an intense commitment to the sense of place. This is the landscape’s effect in “Hills” (from *Oar* 66)

(...)
I know the red grass that grows in high boglands
and the passionate brightnesses and darkneses
of high bog lakes.
And I know too how,
in the murk of winter,
these wet hills will come howling through my blood
like wolves.

Descriptions of secluded, untamed and distant locations in Ireland, and representations of wilderness or of nature’s grandeur recur in Cannon’s poems; in “Thirst in the Burren” (from *Oar* 53), for instance, landscape, in Galway, is dominated by the image of rocks:

No ground or floor.
is as kind to the human step
as the rain-cut flags
of these white hills.

Porous as skin
limestone resounds sea-deep, time-deep,
yet, in places, rainwater has worn it thin
as a fish’s fin.

The experiential knowledge of the place opens the poem up to vaster dimensions and evokes possible interactions between time, the human and the non-human. The persona is not the only force in the landscape – the power of place may be felt in the

effect of the natural erosion of the Burren; the limestone karst results from a process that is independent from the interference of human action. Besides, the affinity between the human and the non-human is expressed when the thirst of the fern equals the human thirst:

From funnels and clefts
Ferns arch their soft heads.

A headland full of water, dry as bone,
with only thirst as a diviner,
thirst of the inscrutable fern
and the human thirst
that beats upon a stone.

Cannon values the natural terrain and shows the effects of time on nature. She also shows the humble presence of man in the face of forces that shape and confront landscape; all this treatment to place evinces the possibilities for humans to deepen the interactions with nature, to the extent of cultural, material, *and* spiritual experiences. In reference to the sense of place, Heaney (1980) has argued that for some poets “their sense of place is a physical one” and that for some other ones it “might be termed metaphysical.” (149). No doubt Cannon reaches the metaphysical that comes from the interpretation of the exuberance of the physical world as witnessed by human beings.

Home, belonging and the memory of place

Historical and political reasons make the notion of “home” extremely complex for an Irish writer; it is even difficult to consider the sense of home as a natural state in Irish culture. Home is not only the dwelling place, but a number of combined “connections and affectionisms” that establish our place in the world.⁶ Heaney (1980) argues that place epitomizes a communal situation but, before that, it is a symbol of a personal drama and adds:

Tory Island, Knocknarea, Slieve Patrick, all of them deeply steeped in associations from the older culture, will not stir us beyond a visual pleasure unless that culture means something to us, unless the features of the landscape are a mode of communication with a something other than themselves, a something to which we ourselves still feel we might belong.’ (132)

Through history, the experiences of common people show that “home” is not simply the reference to a familiar place. As Fintan O’Toole (1998) affirms, home has to be worked for, achieved, it is a hard goal and to reach it one needs “to be armed with advices, with warnings and incantations that form invisible threads for you to follow. The advices that we hope will lead us safe home are what we call a culture.” (166-167).

Regarding “home” in Cannon’s poetry, it is a manifold concept, as Irene Nordin (2010) attests:

Certainly Cannon’s work attends to specific localities, both in Ireland and elsewhere, consistently returning to the notion of dwellings, ritual, and the familiar, but she does so, in many ways, at the same time as casting such anthropocentric patterns of behaviour and custom within both familiar and less familiar contexts. Cannon is alive to the fact that dwelling/unhoming, rootedness/alienation, habit/disorientation are each two sides of the same cultural coin. In other words, as we approach her work we cannot blithely assume the fixity of home as an immutable and dependable truth within her writing. (248)

In the poem “Little Skellig”⁷ (from *Hands*, 2011. 24) the precious act of returning home is experienced by both a human and a non-human being/entity; commonplace is transfigured and the persona enjoys a sense of wonder:

The boatman in his yellow coat
restarts the engine and twists for home.
Salt water sloshes across the deck
then one gannet plummets
and there is something
about the greed and grace
of that cruciform plunge
which shouts out
to our unfeathered bones.

Again, a glimpse of that sense of “understanding” life is offered to the reader; through the return home, the deep connections between nature and beings are shown as a web of interdependent elements. Also the reflection on the memory of the place is strong in Cannon’s work, as we see in “Winter Paths”:

There is something about winter
Which pares all living things down to their essentials –
(...)
Once, after searching a valley,
Summer after summer,
I went in winter
And found, at last, the path
(...)
The way cattle and goats
And women and men
Had passed, winter after winter,
Drawing aside or shoving past stray strands of briar,
Wondering if they’d know their way again in summer.

The poem suggests that, by returning to a place, in both the physical and in the mnemonic senses, we may gain understanding of ourselves. The hidden path that “reappears” in the quietude of winter brings with it the memory of the place, for humans, other animals, greens, and offers them a new strength, the conviction that they belong to that place.

The available metaphors

As an essential element in the definition of identity, language happens to cement the historical, political, cultural, social, religious relationships one has to place. In her poems, Cannon thematizes place as intricately associated to the concept and the use of language; in “The poetry of what happens” she elucidates that: “Almost from the start the metaphors available to me related to landscape, language and place-names, that most tangible of etymologies, the interface between language and landscape (*in* Haberstroth 2001.128).

Cannon’s concern with language, its origins, possibilities and diversity, began in childhood. She grew up in north-west Donegal, her family spoke Irish at home and, although she lived in an English-speaking area, many of her neighbours used archaic Gaelic words. The problematics of possessing two different languages and relying on two systems of loyalty in the same place, as Heaney (1995) has observed, makes “... the Irish writer responsive to two cultural milieu, the Irish place invoked under two different systems of naming” (188). Cannon has never written poetry in Irish although it is her first language. As she says in an interview to the *Galway Advertiser*:

Your maternal language is always your heart language and it is still that for me. I tried to write in Irish but it just didn’t work. I suppose my Irish is a childhood Irish; it isn’t good enough to write poetry. (...) But it comes out here and there like bones or rocks sticking out. I’m very grateful my parents passed on Irish to us, it is a room I love to walk into, it gives me access to a whole cultural sensibility.” (McBride 2015)

Many of the poems written by Cannon are inspired by the nuances of Ireland’s bilingualism, evincing the way the past preserves the relationship between place and language. In “Murdering the language” (from *The Parchment Boat* 1998. 24), Cannon contrasts the endurance of the language to that of the shore, depicting Ireland as a shore that is washed over by human impacting actions, and to which each invasion added new layers:

(...)
When we whispered in our desks
we spoke our book of invasions –
an unruly wash of Victorian pedantry,
Cromwellian English, Scots,

the jetsam and the beached bones of Irish –
a grammarian's nightmare.
(...)
Our language was tidal;
It lipped the shale cliffs,
A long tedious campaign,
And ran up the beaches, over sand, seaweed, stones.
(...)

In “Prodigal” (from *Oar* 19), allusion is made to the return of the prodigal son, but the poem describes a return to the mother, the “dark mutter tongue”:

Dark mutter tongue
rescue me,
I am drawn into outrageous worlds
(...)

Old gutter mother
I am bereft now,
My heart has learnt nothing
but the stab of its own hungers
and the murky truth of a half-obsolete language
(...)

give me somewhere to start,
green and struggling, a blasé under snow,
for this place and age demand relentlessly
something I will never learn to give.

We see the remains of the tongue, the “half-obsolete” Irish that nourishes and shelters, providing “somewhere to start”, the possibility of returning to the values of an older culture that reappear in language. “Prodigal” can be interpreted “as a woman poet defining her own struggles with language, and as strong a political statement (...) that blend Irish and English in a testament to the poetic power of both languages.” (Haberstroth 1996. 216). Other poems, as “Scríob” and “Taom”, that include Gaelic words, illustrate how Cannon uses the Irish language and enacts the problematics of the coexistence of two languages. “Taom”, the Irish word that means “an overwhelming wave of emotion”, describes the consolation that comes from the surfacing of the Irish word:

Surfacing from a fading language,
the word comes when needed.
A dark sound surges and ebbs,
its accuracy steadying the heart.

Dealing with the interrelation between place and language, Cannon gives access to fundamental questions that involve linguistic awareness, linguistic dispossession and even the desire to repossess the language.

Moya Cannon's poetic practice, while exploring the many potentialities of place – as connected to roots, past, home, language, landscape, history –, and thematizing place as a real experience, clearly accomplishes the “equable marriage” between mindscape and landscape. She demonstrates a serious understanding of the aesthetics of place, and of the importance of the “sense of place” in the formation of both individual and collective identities. Gary Snyder (1998) has stated that “Our place is part of what we are” (27) and no doubt Cannon has fully absorbed this essential notion. Across her work, one notices the centrality of place, her special concern for the treatment of place as a source of inspiration, its attachment to fundamental questions of language and cultural resistance, and as a vital element in the familial, local and national binding of people. In her poems, by performing a poetic reconstitution of place, Cannon promotes our awareness of place as poetic transcendence.

Notes

- 1 The lecture “The Sense of Place”, delivered in 1977, was reprinted in his book *Preoccupations* in 1980.
- 2 Poet, translator and editor, Moya Cannon (born in 1956 in Dunfanaghy, County Donegal) has published five collections of poetry. She won the 1991 Brendan Behan Memorial Prize and the O Shaughnessy Award.
- 3 We refer to the violent and traumatic experiences of human history and of Irish history – from the silencing of native voices to the political separation of the Island.
- 4 She was also awarded an M. Phil in International Relations at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.
- 5 Cf. G. Snyder (1998. 27): “Yet even a ‘place’ has a kind of fluidity: it passes through space and time – ‘ceremonial time’.”
- 6 Old Irish used to contain this idea within itself, as O'TOOLE (136) explains: “In Irish, the terms *sa mbaile* and *sa bhaile*, the equivalents of the English *at home*, are never used in the narrow sense of home as a dwelling. They imply, instead, that wider sense of a place in the world, a feeling of belonging that is buried deep within the word's meaning.”
- 7 Reference to the Skellig Islands (in Irish: *Na Scealaga*), two small and rocky islands in County Kerry.

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