



June 1976

Kavanagh's Calculations and Miscalculations

Daniel J. Casey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 12, no.2, June 1976, p.65-82

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Kavanagh's Calculations and Miscalculations

by DANIEL J. CASEY

FOR ALL OF Yeats's eerie mythologies and Clarke's assonantal soundings and Colum's wandering drovers, the Kavanagh of the Canal Bank resurrection provides the surest voice of continuation, and "Continuation," he insists, "is everything."¹ Yeats has lingered on as a vestige of the Victorian myth² and Clarke lies deeply shrouded in the Celtic mist and Colum hovers always on the verge of Parnassian heights. But it is the arrogant and persistent Northern brogue of Patrick Kavanagh, the dung-heeled ploughman, that shouts from the bogland and echoes off Slieve Gullion's airy side:

I turn the lea-green down
Gaily now,
And paint the meadow brown
With my plough.³

Kavanagh, the self-conscious country rhymers, becomes for us the last of Cathbad's noble line, and his experiences, geographically circumscribed as they were, give full-blooded expression to the tortured soul of twentieth-century Irish poetry in earthy lyrics that are unequalled for imagery and power.

But the fuller appreciation of Kavanagh will have to resist impulses for canonization and come to terms with the contradictions that followed the poet down his days; his apologist will have to explain the poet and his works. And all the while there will be rasping, coughing protestations rising from the clay. Hadn't he already rejected the critical autopsy of the academic corpse-chewers? Hadn't he already written his life for posterity? In "A Wreath for Tom Moore's Statue" he protests

They put a wreath upon the dead
For the dead will wear the cap of any racket.
The corpse will not put his elbows through his jacket
Or contradict the words some liar has said.

1. Patrick Kavanagh, *Self Portrait* (Dublin, 1964), p. 6.

2. Patrick Kavanagh, "Pietism and Poetry" in *Collected Prose* (London, 1973), p. 245. Kavanagh's words were "Yeats, for all his emphasis on Ireland, was the last Victorian poet." See also "Auden and the Creative Mind," in *Collected Prose*, p. 251, where he echoes the statement.

3. Patrick Kavanagh, "Ploughman" in *Collected Poems* (London, 1972), p. 3. All subsequent page references for poetry are to this edition.

The corpse can be fitted out to deceive—
 Fake thoughts, fake love, fake ideal,
 And rogues can sell its guaranteed appeal,
 Guaranteed to work and never come alive.
 The poet would not stay poetical
 And his humility was far from being pliable,
 Voluptuary to-morrow, to-day ascetical,
 His morning's gentleness was the evening's rage. (p. 85)

The obsessions with death and critical calumny are frequently repeated in the later poetry. He dreaded the scavengers of academe with their shallow misinterpretations and their soulless summings up; he tells us, in fact, that he dreaded them nearly as much as eternal damnation.⁴

This appraisal reassesses Kavanagh's place as poet, novelist, and critic by introducing his own musings, providing, as it were, glimpses of "His morning's gentleness" and "the evening's rage." If Kavanagh's is the authentic voice of the Irishry—and it is a concession that he humbly allows—it should be pointed out, in the balanced view, that his poetry runs the gamut from crude doggerel to inspired lyrics; that his fiction, while humorous, is lacking in narrative commitment; and that his criticism betimes reflects the rantings of a fevered soul. Still, the talent is unmistakable, and, on the merits of possibly twenty poems, Kavanagh's primacy in Irish letters is secure. All that is left to the academic soul-snatchers is to question the making of the poet, to explain away the ineluctable mysteries of his craft.

*A man (I am thinking of myself) innocently dabbles in words
 and finds that it is his life.*

Self-Portrait

Weaned on hard-rhymed country songs, the stuff of school-book poetry, and the aphorisms of fair-going farmers, young Kavanagh fired his imagination on familiar "Come-all-ye" ballads of his day. His earliest notion of the poet, as a kind of rural rhymers verse-cataloguing memorable feats and *faux pas*, was exemplified by a local satirist known as the Bard of Callenberg.⁵ And he was influenced by local story-tellers and journeymen shoemakers, self-appointed custodians of the old mythologies who dispensed folk wisdom and hero tales on their winter *ceilis*. He had scant knowledge of Irish and probably scantier knowledge of Cuchulainn, Derdriu, Medb, and of Donn Cuailnge, whose bellowing once rang through the drumlins, but his senses responded instinctively

4. "Apart altogether from eternal damnation, the dangers of death for a writer are terrible with all those American specialists hanging around." Quoted from an R. T. E. programme, 12 August 1966, by Alan Warner. "Preface," *Clay is the Word* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1973).

5. The Bard of Callenberg (Callenberg) was John McEnaney (1871-1943), a gifted rhymers from Callenberg, Inniskeen. Kavanagh's recollections of the Bard appear in *The Farmer's Journal*, Dublin, 4 February 1961.

to the undulating rhythms of the fields while he wrote of mountainy goats and worrying winds in quare country turns of speech.⁶ After his tour of the Connemara Gaeltacht in the spring of 1932, he would reflect, "There was no culture in Connemara, nothing like County Monaghan where the spirit of the old poets haunted the poplars."⁷ Even the fields and townlands of his native parish whispered their names poetically—Mullahinsha, Drumnagrella, Drummeril, and shaded Shanco.

Among the schoolbook poets of yore, Moore, Campbell, Milton, Tennyson, and Mangan first touched the impressionable soul of the scholar. On hearing a classmate's recitation of Mangan's "Vision of Connaught in the Thirteenth Century," Kavanagh confesses, "I was rapt to the golden time in which poets are born."⁸ Cáhal Mór of the Wine-red Hand had broken into his dreams and excited his imagination to a religious fervor. Some years later a quarry laborer reminds him of Longfellow and introduces him to Dante; and a neighbor, the heir to a modest library, offers him Burns, Byron, and Shelley on loan. What he knew of prosody, he tells us, he learned from Father Cocoran's *Intermediate Poetry and Prose*: "I studied iambics, trochees, rhyme, and stanza. I counted the feet in the verses I read. I tried to write verse myself, but the number of feet per line varied to break my heart."⁹

It was in August 1927 that Kavanagh bought a dated copy of the *Irish Statesman* in Dundalk and read in it an article about James Joyce, poetry by AE, and the review of a book written by Gertrude Stein. August 1927 becomes a turning point in his life as a poet, though it is difficult to believe that, after reading the *Statesman*, he swept the table clear of his weary pastorals or that he immediately resigned his membership in the "Holy Poets' Club" of the *Irish Weekly Independent*. It isn't until September 1928 that Kavanagh's verses even begin to appear in the *Independent*, and it isn't until October 1929 that AE publishes "The Intangible" in the *Statesman*. The earliest printed poems are admittedly mawkish and clumsy, but there is discernible stylistic development from year to year. Pound, Lowenfels, H.D., and Stein, and all of the Cubists and Imagists had excited his "clay-heavy mind." "The Intangible" was light years ahead of "Farrelly's Half-barrel of Stout" and "The Inniskeen Hellions,"¹⁰ and the poetry of the post-1930 period showed remarkable maturity.

After quitting school at twelve, Kavanagh lived the uneventful life of a small farmer on the outskirts of Inniskeen for the next twenty and more years. His writing exaggerates "the barbaric life of the Irish country poor" and the hostility of the locals toward poets and poetry. Surely

6. According to Mrs. Kate Campbell, a classmate, Kavanagh learned no Irish from Miss Cassidy at the Kednaminsha National School.

7. *The Green Fool* (London, 1971), p. 309.

8. *The Green Fool*, p. 108.

9. *The Green Fool*, p. 245.

10. "My first song celebrated the drinking of a half-barrel of stout," Kavanagh recalls. *The Green Fool*, p. 246.

the Kavanaghs and their neighbors were living the elemental life of a graduated peasantry and some neighbors feared the poet's "black book" more than a summons; yet, they were his people and he was their poet. If he railed at being tagged "a big-nose humpy," and if he only tolerated the slagging of industrious farmers, he realized, too, that the McMahanons, the patrons of the Monaghan bards, lay centuries buried in the graveyard at the Round Tower and that a living, breathing poet would find no verse-buyers in a country of stubborn watery fields. His discouragement is voiced in "Shancoduff" (1934):

My black hills have never seen the sun rising,
Eternally they look north towards Armagh.
Lot's wife would not be salt if she had been
Incurious as my black hills that are happy
When dawn whitens Glassdrummond chapel.

My hills hoard the bright shillings of March
While the sun searches every pocket.
They are my Alps and I have climbed the Matterhorn
With a sheaf of hay for three perishing calves
In the field under the Big Forth of Rocksavage.

The sleety winds fondle the rushy beards of Shancoduff
While the cattle-drovers sheltering in the Featherna Bush
Look up and say: "Who owns them hungry hills
That the water-hen and snipe must have forsaken?
A poet? Then by heavens he must be poor"
I hear and is my heart not badly shaken?¹¹

The emphasis in each stanza is clear, for the hills are "My black hills," "my black hills that are happy"; they are "My hills," "my Alps," until at last they are the "hungry hills" of a lamenting, land-poor poet. The disillusionment comes in natural contrasts of light and darkness and is underscored by a series of brilliant images—the dawn-whitened chapel, the glare of the March water-shillings, the blinding sun penetrating the pockets of hill shadows—that finally give way to the chill of grey, sleety winds. Life is sustained at the heights of Shancoduff by each day's act of heroism; yet, the idle cattle-drovers sheltering under lowland bushes grieve the poet's heart with their loose talk of slopes forsaken by the wildest of wild birds. It's not that Kavanagh doesn't recognize the somber truth of the drovers' words. He is beginning to wonder whether he owns "them hungry hills" or whether they haven't cast a mysterious spell over him.

Of "Shancoduff" Kavanagh later says, "The poem is one of my earliest, also one of my best, but I never knew it then. I hadn't the courage of my simplicity, and such simplicity as remains with me has not come out of subtle, complex, useless journeying."¹² He would have

11. "Shancoduff" is collected in *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling and Other Poems* (London, 1960). It is noted Monaghan, 1934, in *Collected Poems*.

12. "Suffering and Literature" in *Collected Prose*, p. 278.

to travel out of the shadows of the drumlins in order to appreciate them more. But by now his twenty-year novitiate had been served, and he had experienced a pantheistic communion so intimate that he was moved to this profession of faith:

O pagan poet you
And I are one
In this—we lose our god
At set of sun.

And we are kindred when
The hill wind shakes
Sweet song like blossoms on
The calm green lakes.

We dream while Earth's sad children
Go slowly by
Pleading for our conversion
With the Most High. (p. 3)

"To a Blackbird" expresses Kavanagh's acceptance of the poet's sacred calling. He sensed that the powers were still intact, even if the stature of the bard had slipped to an irretrievable low in the countryside. If Kavanagh stayed on in Inniskeen, he would forever be "an inspired idiot"; still, he could not bide the provincialism of Dublin. Dublin had already been tried and found wanting.¹³

In 1936 Macmillan (London) issued *Ploughman and Other Poems*, a collection of thirty-one short lyrics. The majority are unexceptional exercises of the early years, though there are several that commend themselves. "Inniskeen Road: July Evening" is a lovely, sonnet-shaped meditation, a remembrance of bicyclists filtering to Billy Brennan's barn dance, whispering in "half-talk code of mysteries," using the familiar "wink-and-elbow language" of secret sharers, while our outcast poet is left the king of "A road, a mile of kingdom . . . / Of banks and stones and every blooming thing." "To a Child," the simplest of lyrics, is a soul-warning to himself: "In that little thing I had become airborne and more; I had achieved weightlessness," he remembers.¹⁴ "Ascetic" posits the sacramental essence of poetry and again sounds the poet's resolve to endure every privation for the art. The effect of the Ploughman collection is that it introduces vitality and freshness into Anglo-Irish poetry, and, perhaps more importantly, it promises an unspoiled poet of enormous talent. In May 1937 a more confident Kavanagh hies off to London: "I decided to go to London," he says. "Ireland was a fine place to daydream in. but London was a great materialist city where my dreams might crystallise into something more enduring than the winning

13. On 19 December 1931 Kavanagh first tramped to Dublin to visit AE, who parcelled some books for him to take back to Inniskeen. His first visit was brief, but he made occasional excursions thereafter. *The Green Fool*, pp. 292 and 319.

14. *Self Portrait*, p. 28. The sketch is the text of the R. T. E. programme, 30 October 1962.

smile on the face of an Irish colleen—or landscape.”¹⁵ But London was unprepared for him. Five months later he was back in Inniskeen finishing his autobiography and planning the next stage of the quest.

When, under the evil aegis of the so-called Irish literary movement, I wrote a dreadful stage-Irish, so-called autobiography called The Green Fool, the common people of this country gobbled up this stage-Irish lie. When, years later I wrote Tarry Flynn which I am humble enough to claim is not only the best but the only authentic account of life as it was lived in Ireland in this century (a man shouldn't be afraid to tell the truth even when it's in favour of himself), the principal people who enjoyed this novel were literary sophisticates; its uproarious comedy was too much for the uneducated reader.

Self Portrait

The Green Fool was undertaken at the suggestion of Helen Waddell, one of Kavanagh's London patronesses, not a Dublin-based executive of Yeats and Company. Though the poet may have first envisioned the book a likely companion piece to Joyce's *Portrait* or George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man*, it was, in fact, short circulated because of Dr. Oliver St. John Gogarty's libel action against publisher Michael Joseph.¹⁶ Whether Kavanagh had actually called on the good doctor and “mistook his white-robed maid for his wife—or maybe his mistress” remains a matter of impolite conjecture. The autobiography abounds in inaccuracy and includes entire episodes that are fabricated—the Lady Well Pilgrimage and the Carrickmacross Hiring Fair occur, but they are not the picaresque misadventures of a farmer's *amadán* that Kavanagh gives us.¹⁷

But *The Green Fool* is not a novel—neither in its conception nor in its development. It is rather the autobiography of a good-natured country liar, and its pages offer us insights that are personal and profound. His recollections of markets, weddings, dances, toss schools, and wakes conjure a magical milieu, and his memories of field fantasies evoke feelings of natural wonderment that set the wheel of his imagination into motion. The writer's heart is bared. He confesses to a certain perverse gratification at playing the poet's role. Turned out of a medieval castle near Tullamore by the custodians at night, he curses the place because that was the way the Gaelic poets of old would have handled the insult. And, when a would-be patron approaches him about commissioning a poisonous ballad against intolerable neighbors, Kavanagh admits to being charmed at the man's faith in the satirist's powers. “We were all poets, dreamers, and no man was old,” he says.

15. *The Green Fool*, pp. 333-4.

16. The book was withdrawn and Gogarty was awarded damages of £100.

17. The pictures that Kavanagh paints are authentic, though he was never a pilgrim to Lady Well and he was never hired out. See Warner, p. 27. In personalizing the accounts he probably thought to fill out background and avoid the dullness of a second-hand version.

If *The Green Fool* portrays a virtual *Tir na nÓg*, a Land of Eternal Youth, it presents a world of rural survival as well. Its inhabitants are hypocrites, double-dealers, and rogues of every description. Deceitful well-wishers take the measure of an ailing neighbor's field out of the skilful corner of an eye, and disputes over boundary ditches, more often than not, find their way to the solicitor's office. It is a strange *caveat-emptor* world governed by the wisdom of herdsmen and the dictates of a druid in a turned collar. Kavanagh's autobiography mixes a curious concoction of the sentimental and the real; still, it is a documentary that perfectly mirrors the mind of the poet and the world of the poet, and the peripheral distortions seem only to heighten the effects.

Why he became increasingly distressed with *The Green Fool* is probably best explained from subsequent events. In 1939, after he had wrenched himself from Monaghan and packed off to Dublin, he was installed as the ploughboy poet come to resuscitate a once racy-of-the-soil literature from stagnation. He was welcomed by habitués of the "established" pubs, and he wallowed in the fatuous attentions of literary camp-followers. His country brusqueness had to be exaggerated to cover his inadequacies, and his pub performances lent even greater weight to the stage-Irish lie he was living. Through the bleak war years Kavanagh wrote features and reviews for *The Irish Times*, *The Independent*, and *The Press*, and made a reputation as a journalist on the dubious merits of his "Piers Plowman" commentaries. But at heart he was a poet, not a journalist, and the flame of his imagination was flickering madly to avoid the extinguishing pinch of wartime survival. He recalls those years: "I wasted what could have been my four glorious years begging and scrambling around the streets of malignant Dublin."¹⁸ When he finally awoke from the nightmare, he was furious with the dregs of Dublin who had deceived him, furious with the Monaghan bogland that bred him, furious with himself for his incredible naivete and for writing the autobiography that propped up that larger-than-life peasant image.

"The Great Hunger," published by Cuala Press, Dublin, in 1942, is Kavanagh's masterful diatribe against the woeful state of the peasantry and their acceptance of divine apathy. It raised hackles on the Irish censors and rattled the gates of heaven. A savage, hero-less anti-epic set in grudging Monaghan hill country, it rages against the tragedy of Patrick Maguire's birth.

Clay is the word and clay is the flesh
Where the potato-gatherers like mechanised scarecrows move
Along the side-fall of the hill—Maguire and his men.

The opening contradicts all prophesies and promises. "In the beginning was the Word" and "the Word made Flesh" are countered by Kavanagh's annunciation that "Clay is the word and clay is the flesh."

18. *Self Portrait*, p. 11.

Maguire's very existence becomes a denial of spiritual-physical life. He grunts and spits through a clay-wattled moustache, probes insensitive pubic hair with mud-gloved fingers, and sifts the clay that will eventually dribble over his coffin. Here is a grim Stygian world of mechanised scarecrows crawling along the side-fall of the hill. They move grotesquely, leaving no footprints, casting no shadows.

The October images, always dark and cold and clammy, yield no respite; and a muted rhythm prompts urgent questions: Who was it promised marriage to himself? Why had Maguire settled for his Mother's truths? Why had he made a field his bride? As a child he dreamed of lush rain forests, birds of paradise, and Amazon romances. He once laughed at the sun glistening in the trout pools and at the long-limbed girls stretched temptingly on the grassy banks. Why hadn't he done more than dream and laugh?

The drills slipped by and the days slipped by
And he trembled his head away and ran free from the world's halter
And thought himself wiser than any man in the townland
When he laughed over pints of porter
Of how he came free from every net spread
In the gaps of experience. He shook a knowing head
And pretended to his soul
That children are tedious in hurrying fields of April
Where men are spanging across wide furrows.
Lost in the passion that never needs a wife—
The pricks that pricked were the pointed pins of harrows.

O God, if he had only been the wiser! . . . The sigh is echoed.

The poet stations himself in the cottage doorway and reads, in the soiled pages of Maguire's life, "the apocalypse of clay." It is a sordid tale of selfishness and waste, shame and guilt, misery and despair. The spiritual vacuity is overwhelming. At mass on Sunday Maguire kneels beside a pillar so that he can spit without being noticed, he coughs up prayer phlegm, he amuses himself inverting sacred formulae. And at last he is elevated to collecting the coppers at the church door. Death and damnation are ubiquitous in this Bunyanesque, peasant soul-world where fear of God stays the passions and forbids even the mention of the unforgivable sin.

Maguire is tormented by loneliness. Secret masturbations and sexual fantasies crowd into his summer consciousness. He sins shamefully over the warm ashes, and he cannot banish his guilt. Here is the supreme irony; the omnipotent cultivator, the seeder and breeder of life, is out of step with Nature; he reproduces plants and beasts aplenty, but he cannot reproduce himself. Maguire has been emasculated by his mother's thin, sharp voice; he is shackled to the reluctant soil: "The twisting sod rolls over on her back— / The virgin screams before the irresistible sock." And his plight is compounded by the presence of an aging sister who "tightens her legs and lips and frizzles up / Like the

wick of an oil-less lamp." The catastrophe of these perversions and the hopelessness of lonely, loveless lives cry out to heaven for vengeance. "No escape, no escape."

"Was he then a saint? / A Matt Talbot of Monaghan?" Kavanagh insists on a summary of Maguire's virtues. He once showed compassion to an old woman who lost a cow, dragged a drunken neighbor home, wished the young all good wishes. He was generous to children his sister turned away. But surely sanctity is made of sterner stuff. If Maguire is a matriarchal statistic, if he is a victim of cultural imperatives, he is also the lonely victim of his own neglect. Whiling away his best years with the lads, he became at last the pitiable creature who had "left love too late." If Kavanagh cannot canonize the old peasant, neither will he damn him. Maguire will be laid, in time, in the shaded, deep-drilled potato-field where the seed will not sprout, and that, for the poet, must be the final irony. The parting glance shows Maguire framed in the doorway:

He stands in the doorway of his house
A ragged sculpture of the wind,
October creaks the rotted mattress,
The bedposts fall. No hope. No lust.
The hungry fiend
Screams the apocalypse of clay
In every corner of this land.

"The Great Hunger" stands out as the panorama of a rural wasteland and a searing indictment of indignities that infest the lives of the Irish country poor. In its grotesque images and sexual perversions and empty rituals, Kavanagh had, he thought, purged his soul of hatred for a way of life that he put behind him. But the shock of recognition was too traumatic. He had, after all, said some "queer and terrible things" in "The Great Hunger," so he pronounced it a humorless failure.¹⁹ But the epic failure of the poem is certainly not its savage intensity. If it fails, it fails because Maguire finishes as neither hero nor anti-hero, because he finishes up a player who cannot even know that he has acted out the tragedy.

A Soul for Sale, Kavanagh's collection of eighteen poems *cum* expurgated text of "The Great Hunger," was enthusiastically received when published by Macmillan in 1947.²⁰ "Pegasus," "A Christmas Childhood," "Memory of My Father," and "Stony Grey Soil" are a few of its titles that gained in popularity and made their way into the anthologies. "Pegasus" makes Kavanagh's case against poetic prostitution. It plays on the now familiar metaphor of a soul-horse on the auction block: "My soul was an old horse / Offered for sale in twenty fairs" (p. 59). Rescued from the clutches of clerics, statesmen, and crooked traders, the unbridled steed grows wings and soars beyond the fetters of

19. *Self Portrait*, p. 27.

20. Part of Section II of "The Great Hunger" was omitted.

the world into the ethereal realms. "Pegasus" means to be angry, but Kavanagh is quite right in saying that it is more whining than angry.²¹ Its overworked metaphor limps to the finish line in a feeble tercet:

As I said these words he grew
Wings upon his back. Now I may ride him
Every land my imagination knew.

"A Christmas Childhood" and "Memory of My Father" strike the common chord. The first is a reminiscence played against the background music of December echoes—music in the paling post, in Father's melodian, in Mother's milking can—and revives six-year-old wonderment at a Christmas townland in the frosty dawn. The second is less personal, less nostalgic; it depends as much upon shadowy derelicts in Gardiner Street and Bayswater as it does upon the poet's father. Still, it reaches inward with

Every old man I see
Reminds me of my father
When he had fallen in love with death
One time when sheaves were gathered. (p. 73)

And "Stony Grey Soil," probably the most quoted poem in the Kavanagh canon, storms against the poet's lost Monaghan youth and against coarse iron implements put in his way. Apollo's archer accuses the thieving clay and hurls Olympian curses on her:

You flung a ditch on my vision
On beauty, love and truth.
O stony grey soil of Monaghan
You burgled the bank of my youth. (p. 82)

But, after twenty lines, there is a sudden turn-about, a calm that stirs softer remembrances of tame hills and shaded fields where lyrics were born and dead loves once lived. The stony soil, the steely plough, and the Monaghan quick-clay had impoverished the poet, but they had also given him the raw materials from which he forged his poems.

Many of the poems in *A Soul for Sale* are successful, but "Advent," a meditation in three movements, is the masterpiece of the collection.

We have tested and tasted too much, lover—
Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.
But here in the Advent-darkened room
Where the dry black bread and sugarless tea
Of penance will charm back the luxury
Of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom
The knowledge we stole but could not use.

And the newness that was in every stale thing
When we looked at it as children: the spirit-shocking
Wonder in a black-slanting Ulster hill

21. "From Monaghan to the Grand Canal" in *Collected Pruse*, p. 227.

DANIEL J. CASEY

Or the prophetic astonishment in the tedious talking
 Of an old fool will awake for us and bring
 You and me to the yard gate to watch the whins
 And the bog-holes, cart-tracks, old stables where Time begins.

O after Christmas we'll have no need to go searching
 For the difference that sets an old phrase burning—
 We'll hear it in the whispered argument of a churning
 Or in the streets where the village boys are lurching.
 And we'll hear it among decent men too
 Who barrow dung in gardens under trees,
 Wherever life pours ordinary plenty.
 Won't we be rich, my love and I, and please
 God we shall not ask for reason's payment.
 The why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges
 Nor analyse God's breath in common statement.
 We have thrown into the dust-bin the clay-minted wages
 Of pleasure, knowledge and the conscious hour—
 And Christ comes with a January flower. (p. 70)

The first movement signals a return to the Advent-fascination of childhood, to black bread and sugarless tea, to the valley of penance that ends in the vision of light. The second leads from childhood's darkened room to adult experiences that trigger reentries into childhood—the newness in stale things, the wonder of the black hill, the cue from the old fool's tedious chatter. Suddenly, in those sensations, we are transported to the yard gate “to watch the whins / And the bog-holes, cart-tracks, old stables where Time begins.” The excitement of Advent sacrifices and Christmas expectations are magnified in the added discoveries of mysterious bog-holes and cart-tracks and stables. And Time, of course, begins in a stable.

The final movement of the poem narrows the differences between faith and reason. In old sayings, girls' palaver, lads' lurching, and a barrower's labour, we become privy to miracles of “God's breath in common statement.” And, having shed “clay-minted wages,” we are perhaps better prepared for Christ's coming with a January flower. As long as we have not tested and tasted too much, the poet confides, the chink of life can be narrowed enough to filter out the reason that obscures miracles in nature. A January snowdrop is just such a miracle.

“Advent” simultaneously suggests the penitential season, the promise of Christ's coming, and Christ's actual coming. Seasonal images double back on themselves, multiplying meanings, and paradoxes of penance and luxury, newness and staleness, astonishment and tedium, serve to heighten the Advent ambiguities. The first two stanzas of seven lines move the meditation from the subconscious to conscious. The third stanza, double in length, not only allows for a passage of Time, it travels in more complex, cerebral lines, and speaks with the mature resonance of age. “Advent” is an important poem because it shows the depth of Kavanagh's faith and his acceptance of a divine presence in nature. But

it is also important because it demonstrates his mastery of language and level of technical excellence.

There are several other revealing poems in *A Soul for Sale* that have gone unmentioned. "Temptation in Harvest" confesses, "I turned to the stubble of the oats / Knowing that clay could still seduce my heart / After five years of pavements raised to art" (p. 66); "Spraying the Potatoes" teems with half-forgotten sensations that revive an exiled poet's flagging spirits; "Art McCooley" recaptures his lost country love-enchancements. Between the whine of "Pegasus" and the rage of "A Wreath for Tom Moore's Statue" there are audible yearnings for Monaghan's stony grey soil and the imperishable memories of childhood.

In 1948 Kavanagh published a highly romanticized comic novel about a Cavan poet named Tarry Flynn.²² It was autobiographical fiction that covered the same ground as *The Green Fool*, but it was *fiction* and that made the difference. In *Tarry Flynn* Kavanagh created Dargan, a backwater parish peopled by eligible fillies, anxious spinsters, and would-be lechers of all ages. It was a parish of breeders where early marriage might have been—but was not—occupation-inspired. There were, of course, extenuating circumstances to explain the high incidence of celibacy but the likeliest explanation was the reticence of Irish country lads to forsake "ladhood" until they had reached pensionable age. Tarry Flynn was one of the lads.

At twenty-seven Tarry loves Mary Reilly, lusts after Molly Brady, and longs for May Callan and Josie Dillon. In fact, girls occupy about ninety percent of his conversation with his neighbor Eusebius. But the loving, lusting, and longing come to naught, and the talk is merely talk. Our hero is no man of action. Tarry skitters through fields foraging for the local lovelies, skirts the snares of Father Daly and the curate, and occasionally outwits the wheeler-dealers at the fair, but he is still a babe in arms. He is his mother's son, always his mother's son, and he is willing to endure every hardship—well, nearly every hardship—rather than displease that mother. So it is that Tarry occupies the poet's chair on the fringe of Dargan society and contents himself imagining trysts and triumphs, writing ragged rhymes, and waiting for his time to come.

The shallowness of country life is not entirely omitted from *Tarry Flynn*. In Mary's "arrangement" with Petey Meegan, Joe Finnegan's assault on the land-grabbing Tarry, and the fire-and-brimstone preaching of the Redemptorists there are reminders of rural small-mindedness. But Maguire is kept well back in the wings; Kavanagh is determined that this comedy will be born. It is Tarry's uncle who finally rescues him, who prompts him to shake the dust of Cavan from his heels and go on the world. His uncle's wisdom is uttered in maxims: "The only thing worth having are talent and genius," he says. "The best way to love a country like this is from a range of not less than three hundred

22. *Tarry Flynn* (London, 1948).

miles," he says. "It's not what you make but what you spend that makes you rich," he says. The uncle who had learned not to care had made Tarry his soul apprentice. "Some day he too might grow wings and be able to fly away from this clay-stricken place. Ah, clay! It was out of clay that wings were made." Yes, Tarry would quit Dargan for some newly created world.

Though the characters are authentic and the situations are amusing, *Tarry Flynn* never makes top grade as a novel.²³ Kavanagh relies too much on comic relief without developing a convincing plot line, and he fails to achieve metamorphosis where metamorphosis is needed. In correcting for the "distortions" of *The Green Fool*, he has given us a fool who is less capable of flying from that "clay-stricken place." Stephen Dedalus might soar beyond the nets, but Tarry Flynn hasn't come of age; he simply isn't equipped.

In the ten years since coming to Dublin, Kavanagh had been entrenched as the resident peasant, the reluctant heir to Yeats's legacy. Besides writing hundreds of articles and reviews for the major newspapers, he had published "The Great Hunger," *A Soul for Sale*, and now *Tarry Flynn*. Still, he was dissatisfied. He waged frontal assaults on the establishment, discredited "the pygmy literature" of the Revivalists, and disclaimed his own Irishness: "Irishness is a form of anti-art," he said.²⁴ Now he rejected his own early poetry as "atrocious bad verse" and renewed his attack on the autobiography that he had made over into a novel. In the light of the recent work, his writings of the thirties seemed unpolished, even shabby. But his bitterness against the coarseness of rural life had been spent in "The Great Hunger," and the balance of his love-hate for Monaghan had been tipped by more soul-shattering urban experiences. Monaghan was gaining ground as Kavanagh dipped his pen in gall and turned on the profligates of Dublin with a new vengeance.

In the *Envoy* "Journals" (1949-51), *Kavanagh's Weekly* (1952), and his libel action against *The Leinster Leader* (1954), Kavanagh unleashes a terrible fury on all sides. And in "The Paddiad," "Jungle," "Adventures in the Bohemian Jungle," and other poems of the early fifties, he storms against the corruption of the muse by combined bardic, civic, and sacred orders. But these testimonies and satires are probably more indicative of the poet's intense psychic turmoil than a genuine antipathy toward what he perceived as worthless and vulgar writing and hostile institutions. He was afraid that the well of his inspiration had run dry. He sensed that the jackals were gathering for the kill. "Pre-lude," a later poem, explains the position:

But satire is unfruitful prayer,
Only wild shoots of pity there,

23. Kavanagh modelled his characters on friends and neighbors in and near Innskeen and used local names. A schoolmate of Kavanagh's confided that there wasn't a character in the novel she didn't recognize.

24. *Self Portrait*, p. 15.

COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY

And you must go inland and be
 Lost in compassion's ecstasy,
 Where suffering soars in summer air—
 The millstone has become a star. (p. 131)

The prose was too intemperate, the poetry too pitying.

It was a long journey for me from my Monaghan with my mind filled with the importance-of-writing-and-thinking-and-feeling-like-an-Irishman to the banks of the Grand Canal in nineteen fifty-five, the year of my hegira.

"From Monaghan to the Grand Canal"—*Studies*

The early fifties, culminating in the *Leader* debacle, were years of disappointment for the poet, but he had at last dragged himself to the edge of the jungle and muffled the demon's terrifying roars. After a brush with death in a Dublin chest hospital, his soul rose phoenix-like from the ashes, newly inspired, newly dedicated. "For many a good-looking year I wrought hard at versing but I would say that, as a poet, I was born in or about nineteen-fifty-five, the place of my birth being the Grand Canal."²⁵ He had come full circle and he had *re*-learned the difficult art of not caring. Away from the noon-glare of Dublin and moonless lanes of Mucker, he had discovered a canal half-light conducive to contemplation.

He was still the dung-heeled ploughman with a healthy contempt for pedants and smiling public men, but that glimpse of Death had softened his blows, inspired his laughter, and revived his faith in the past. Some years earlier, he had written these lines in "Art McCooey": "Unlearnedly and unreasonably poetry is shaped / Awkwardly but alive in the unmeasured womb." Those weathered bogmen had formed his poet-soul; it was, as he said, "a fusion of crudeness in a pure flame" (p. 77). And now, standing on the Canal Bank, he experienced the same emotion he had experienced looking off to Slieve Gullion from the sharp slopes of Monaghan many years before.²⁶

In *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling* (London, 1960) Kavanagh unleashed the full force of his enthusiasm upon the land. The Canal sonnets possibly best illustrate the dramatic shift in content, mood, and technique. "Canal Bank Walk," one of the most moving of Irish poems in English, perfectly reflects the poet's transcendental serenity.

Leafy-with-love banks and the green waters of the canal
 Pouring redemption for me, that I do
 The will of God, wallow in the habitual, the banal,
 Grow with nature as before I grew. (p. 150)

The spiritual renewal of his walk bursts along the "Leafy-with-love banks" where waters of redemption pour, and the poet prays for the

25. *Self Portrait*, pp. 27-8.

26. "From Monaghan to the Grand Canal," p. 223.

eloquence to capture the spontaneity of the scene. He focuses upon the commonplace images of a stick lodged in the canal, lovers kissing on a bench, and a bird gathering for a nest, and he extends the commonality of the experiences in his use of worn-out clichés—"delirious beat" and "fabulous grass." In short, "Canal Bank Walk" achieves the sonnet perfection of the Bard's best efforts The Bard of Avon, not the Bard of Callenberg.

But, if Kavanagh mines the richness of the English sonnet in "Canal Bank Walk," surely he strikes the mother lode in "Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin, 'Erected to the Memory of Mrs. Dermot O'Brien.'"

O commemorate me where there is water,
 Canal water preferably, so stilly
 Greeny at the heart of summer. Brother
 Commemorate me thus beautifully.
 Where by a lock Niagariously roars
 The falls for those who sit in the tremendous silence
 Of mid-July. No one will speak in prose
 Who finds his way to these Parnassian islands.
 A swan goes by head low with many apologies,
 Fantastic light looks through the eyes of bridges—
 And look! a barge comes bringing from Athy
 And other far-flung towns mythologies.
 O commemorate me with no hero-courageous
 Tomb—just a canal-bank seat for the passer-by. (p. 150)

As Yeats sounded the Innisfree lake waters lapping, so Kavanagh locks in his stilly and greeny canal waters, so he releases them to roar Niagariously in "tremendous" mid-July silence. The octet moves as sluggishly as the waters themselves in irregular and enjambed lines that finally flow into a steadier iambic pentameter by the third quatrain. The hinted half-rhymes of water-Brother/roar-prose/bridges-courageous sets a relaxed, casual tone, while the slangy force of "Brother," "tremendous," "Fantastic" serve to counterpoint suggestions of Ledeian swans, Parnassian islands, and old mythologies. The swan is a distraction, the giant-eyed bridge stares, and the "barging" mythologies intrude on the sacred loveliness of place. They break the contemplation. No wonder the poet opts for a simple commemorative seat rather than a hero-courageous tomb.

In "Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal" Kavanagh may have exceeded the conventions, but he has shaped his sonnet to the mood. "Real technique is a spiritual quality, a condition of mind, or an ability to invoke a particular condition of mind," he tells us.²⁷ And, having read the poem, we must believe him.

There are other lyrics in *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling*. The sonnets—"Yellow Vestment," "October," and "Kitty Stobling"—radiate

27. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

warmth and love and compassion. "Memory of My Mother" coaxes a smile from his dead mother's countenance with recollections of no consequence. "Is" reaffirms the poet's intention to avoid self pity, to stop taking himself too seriously. "The important thing is not / To imagine one ought / Have something to say, / A raison d'être, a plot for the play" (p. 154). What is important is "To look on . . . / In the business of love." In the poetry of the Canal Bank resurrection, there is a denial of "The Great Hunger" and "Pegasus" and "The Paddiad"; Kavanagh has again wiped the slate clean; he dons the white robe of innocence.

*One wiseacre said that a garage in Monaghan couldn't be
poetry and another of the same mental ilk said that I was
going back to me roots and I was good at that country stuff.*
Self Portrait

In the sixties Kavanagh frequently returned to Inniskeen to take mental stock, but he had written harshly about his neighbors, and he had scored the soil of Monaghan—it would forever be stony and grey. From the dark corners of McNello's Pub he now heard stage whispered "incantations of ugliness" and met malicious stares. In "Literary Adventures," he tried to explain himself to "them."

I am here in a garage in Monaghan.
It is June and the weather is warm,
Just a little bit cloudy. There's the sun again
Lifting to importance my sixteen acre farm.
There are three swallows' nests in the rafters above me
And the first clutches are already flying.
Spread this news, tell all if you love me,
You who knew that when sick I was never dying (p. 187)
...

It is one of his best attempts at verse journalism. Certainly it is more satisfying for its ease and sincerity than "Sensational Disclosures," "The Same Again," or "Thank You, Thank You."

Many of the later poems have humorosity to spare, but they lack discipline. In coming full circle, retreating back into the womb, it is as if Kavanagh has reverted to the outrageous rhyming of "Farrelly's Half-barrel of Stout." The last poems are full of sound and flurry, though they add not a cubit to his stature. The poet is spent. In 1967 he marries in Dublin, he dies in a nursing home there, he is buried in Inniskeen.

I do not know what age I am,
I am no mortal age;
I know nothing of women,
Nothing of cities,
I cannot die
Unless I walk outside these whitethorn hedges. (p. 127)

It has already been said that Kavanagh made his living as a journalist

and critic, not as a poet. Between 1939 and 1967 he turned out millions of words of throw-away prose for the press. His earliest journalistic criticism was superficial, while later incautious contributions to *The Bell*, *Envoy*, *Nonplus*, and other literary magazines earned him the reputation of being the *enfant terrible* of Irish letters. Yeats, "by no means a very great poet," became Kavanagh's favorite whipping boy, and Yeats's disciples were dismissed as mere "inventions."²⁸ According to Kavanagh, Synge was "a minor poet," Clarke was "mediocre," Higgins was "insincere."²⁹ What began as a scattergun attack on nationalism and the Irish Movement carried over to more current fare. There were no hard and fast criteria that Kavanagh applied; his was an evolutionary aesthetic, a shifting poetics that reflected his changing moods.³⁰ When he finally calls the question on himself, he is forced to admit, "Ultimately criticism is useless. The only thing the appraiser can say is: This man is good, read him, or the contrary."³¹

Kavanagh the critic credited George Moore and William Carleton and James Joyce the "authentic" voices, and he spoke with reverence of Melville, Hamsun, and Le Sage, but he had no patience with the middling writers or the academic critics promoting their causes. "A sweeping statement is the only statement worth listening to. The critic without faith gives balanced opinions, usually about second-rate writers," he says.³² Faith is probably the most important ingredient in the Kavanagh formula. It explains in some fashion, why he missed the mark on Yeats, Synge, Stephens, Clarke, and Colum. It explains, too, why he missed the mark on his own earlier poetry and prose; he lost faith in it.

Ploughman, the first collection, contained "Inniskeen Road: July Evening," "To a Child," and "Ascetic." "The Great Hunger" might have been more accurately described as a savage success than "a humourless failure." *A Soul for Sale*, in spite of its whine, provided a glimpse of a poet at Parnassus. Yet, it was only in the Canal poems and after, and in a few of the earlier, simpler lyrics that Kavanagh believed he had shown the world his genius. The best poems are most often those that are direct, uncomplicated, and free from petty sophistries. "All we learn from experience is the way from simplicity back to simplicity," he says.³³ But in denying the virtues of so much worthwhile poetry that had gone before, he had not only failed to discriminate, he had sold himself short. In contradicting Kavanagh, this review has emphasized the excellence of poetry he has dismissed; it has played up

28. "Literature and the Universities" in *Collected Prose*, p. 238.

29. See "The Trial," "William Butler Yeats," and "Literature and Universities" in *Collected Prose* for Kavanagh's comments on the Irish Movement.

30. Hubert Butler's estimate of Kavanagh the critic is that "Mr. Kavanagh's mind when he abandons poetry and fiction is like a monkey-house at feeding time." "Envoy and Mr. Kavanagh," *The Bell*, XVII, No. 6 (September, 1951), 35.

31. "George Moore" in *Collected Prose*, p. 259.

32. "Signposts" in *Collected Prose*, p. 25.

33. "Suffering and Literature," p. 278.

The Green Fool as fascinating autobiography and played down *Tarry Flynn* as a novel whose humor is lost on "the Big World." It is certain that Kavanagh's reputation rests squarely on the merits of his poetry, and possibly on the exceptional merits of a score of poems. After Yeats, it is Kavanagh who has most influenced the course of modern poetry in Ireland. After Yeats, it is he who has distinguished himself as the most gifted Irish poet of the century.

A poet's age cannot be reckoned by cuttings on his tombstone. As a sharer in the inner vision, he shuns the silence of the grave and dies only when his poetry ceases to exist. Kavanagh cannot be contradicted when he insists, "I am no mortal age . . . I cannot die." His immortality is commemorated in a monument more impressive than the dolmens; he is commemorated by a seat on the Grand Canal.

State University of New York
Oneonta