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Patrick Kavanagh and the Killing of the Irish Revival

by ROBERT F. GARRATT

WHEN W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, George Russell (AE) and George Moore shaped the literary movement now known as the Irish Renaissance or the Irish Revival, they were responding both to a cultural and artistic void in Irish literature and to their own needs as aspiring writers. Much of the early momentum of the Revival was generated by the rediscovery of Celtic materials which not only provided a context and a tradition connecting modern Irish writing with its ancient literary past, but also offered, as the young Yeats said often in his letters to Katherine Tynan, the opportunity for the Irish poet to be innovative. In a letter dated 13 August 1887 he writes, "but remember, by being Irish as you can, you will be more original and true to yourself and in the long run more interesting, even to English readers."¹ Again in May, 1888, "I think you will be right to make your ballad Irish. You will be so much more original."² Yeats, AE and others felt that by being deliberately Irish one could create in poetry a freshness and uniqueness that would distinguish it from the English tradition. The results of their efforts are now a part of literary history.³ Not only did they gain the benefits in their own writing but they also inspired other writers to develop Irish material.

But the founders of the Revival did more than encourage younger writers to take up Irish themes. In their decision to found a national literary society and a national theater in Dublin, and to live and work there as writers, they created a literary capital, the center of the Irish movement. The important effect of this activity was that the Irish Revival had a distinctly urban feature, characterized by a sub-culture, a kind of literary fraternity which gathered regularly for conversation and exchanged ideas.⁴ A generation later, however, the tightness of the sub-culture existed without the glowing results in poetry, drama and fiction.

1. Alan Wade, ed., *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (New York: MacMillan, 1955), p. 51.

2. Wade, p. 71.

3. Studies of the Irish Revival are numerous, dating back to Ernest Boyd's pioneer study *Ireland's Literary Renaissance* (1922). Recent studies include Phillip L. Marcus, *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970) and Richard Farris, *The Irish Renaissance* (Syracuse Univ. Press, 1977).

4. "At homes" were held weekly at Yeats's house, AE's and Oliver St. John Gogarty's. Younger writers were particularly welcome at AE's. See Austin Clarke, *A Penny in the Clouds* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 51-55.

Literature had begun to repeat the themes of the Revival, diminishing somewhat the excitement of the gatherings of writers, whose ranks now were swelled by would-be poets and literary tourists.

Thus in the 1930's and 1940's, the golden opportunity had tarnished considerably. A new generation of Irish writers was coming into its own, among them Austin Clarke, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain and Patrick Kavanagh, who found the literary scene stale. The problem for these young writers was not what it had been for their elders and betters, the architects of the Revival, who felt the need for an Irish context and tradition. On the contrary, for this new generation the opposite was true: the tradition was all too vivid, so prominent in fact it was epidemic. The mythic material and folk-lore which in the early Yeats had seemed so strange and unfamiliar, had become commonplace. Ironically, the very tradition which was to give writers identity and to provide them with fresh metaphors began to stifle them, assimilating individual voices into a common chorus echoing the old subjects in the established style. Some of the younger writers, especially Clarke, O'Connor, O'Faolain and Kavanagh, recognized the seductive dangers in the Irish mode and sensed the inevitability of cliché and imitation. As a result they attempted to strike out in new directions, toward social criticism, the psychological and the personal. In each case the motivating force behind such a move involved the individual's attempt to place himself within the Irish literary tradition without being absorbed by it.

Of all these younger writers, none struck back at the tenets of the Revival and the Dublin literary sub-culture as aggressively as Kavanagh. Born in rural Monaghan in the north of Ireland, he lived on a farm for thirty years, squeezing in his avocation—poetry—during the spare time from his farming. He moved to Dublin in 1939, attracted to the city for the literary opportunities it would provide, the libraries, newspapers and most of all the promise of literary conversation and friendships. Living in the city, however, Kavanagh soon became disillusioned. He was struck by the closeness and the pretention of the literary sub-culture, and with the inbred quality of its ideas and conversation. More striking surely for a young poet from the country was the sheer number of poets and writers in Dublin, some of them with established reputations, others struggling like himself, but all of them his competitors. Like the young Yeats nearly fifty years before, Kavanagh sensed that success as a writer depended upon making oneself unique, thereby reducing, if not eliminating, one's competitors.

Kavanagh's dilemma cannot be underestimated, I think, since it typifies the one faced by many Irish writers of his generation. Part of it can be explained by the presence of Yeats, whose achievement and personality were such that he dominated Irish literature for more than fifty years. Following Yeats's death in 1939, the situation did not improve; for as the critics set to work establishing Yeats's reputation, they neces-

sarily neglected younger poets. What little critical attention these young poets did receive centered upon the inevitable comparison with Yeats, which tied their work more emphatically to him and slighted their own individual achievement. As Donald Davie suggests, "for Irish poets . . . Yeats must figure as the great ventriloquist; if they relax their concentration for a second, or become any more familiar than they must with the highly distinctive Yeatsian idiom and cadence, they find themselves sitting on the great ventriloquist's knee, using not their own voice but his."⁵ Austin Clarke, Kavanagh's contemporary and literary rival, describes the situation. "So far as the younger generation of poets are concerned . . . Yeats was rather like an enormous oak-tree which, of course, kept us in the shade . . . we always hoped that in the end we would reach the sun, but the shadow of that great oak-tree is still there."⁶

For Kavanagh the situation was even more complex. He not only faced the formidable challenge of Yeats, but also the closed ranks of the Dublin literary crowd. Most of the established writers resented a new talent since it meant further competition in already crowded circumstances. Thus, to protect themselves they greeted Kavanagh's arrival on the Dublin scene with characteristic reductive humor, seizing upon his raw-boned physique, his unpolished manner, his poverty and most of all his country background.⁷ He was held up as the authentic version of a Revival fiction, the peasant-poet from the bog, capable of stirring poetic utterances yet simple to the core. The identification as the peasant-poet was calculated to be ironical; those who called attention to his rural manner did so not to celebrate his talent and genius, but rather to place him beyond the pale of Irish letters.

Kavanagh responded by denying the source and demythologizing the very tenets of the Revival, the idealization of rural Ireland and the celebration of the peasant. He exposed the Dublin literary enclave as imitators and not inventors who rely on clichés rather than their own imagination. This single theme was to be at the center of his criticism throughout the 1940's and early 1950's. Again and again he attacked the stagnant lifeless quality of the literature produced by his contemporaries. In a letter to his brother, Kavanagh writes, "Of the Irish movement you know plenty . . . they presented an essentially sentimental Ireland. . . . The Yeats-Syngé phoney Ireland was eminently suited for export to America and it has falsified the picture of this country."⁸ This falseness

5. "Austin Clarke and Padraic Fallon," *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, Douglas Dunn, ed. (Chester Springs, Pennsylvania: Dufour Editions, 1975), p. 42.

6. W. R. Rodgers, *Irish Literary Portraits* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), p. 19.

7. Typical of the humor at Kavanagh's expense is the remark by Seamus O'Sullivan, a minor poet of the Revival, but an important literary personality in 1940 Dublin. It is found in Clarke's *A Penny in the Clouds*, p. 71. "One evening, looking from the drawing-room of his house in Morehampton Road, he (S.O'S.) saw a man pushing a handcart with a small load of manure. 'I see that Paddy Kavanagh is moving. There go his furniture and effects.'"

8. Letter to Peter Kavanagh, August Bank Holiday, 1947, *Lapped Furrows*, Peter Kavanagh, ed. (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1969).

in literature he identified as the "Irish thing," a contrived pastoralism in much of the poetry and the tedious re-working of the folk-tales and legends of ancient Ireland. Writers who were in Kavanagh's opinion minor talents were being published solely because they wrote on Irish themes and used Irish subject matter. He accused these writers of posing as poets and labeled them as inferior to the previous generation since they were imitators. In his poem, "The Paddiad," he portrays the myopic visions and blunted imaginations of the post-Yeatsian Irish poets:

In the corner of a Dublin pub
This party opens—blub-a-blub—
Paddy Whiskey, Rum and Gin
Paddy Three sheets in the wind;
Paddy of the Celtic Mist,
Paddy Connemara West,
Chesteronian Paddy Frog
Croaking nightly in the bog.
All the Paddies having fun
Since Yeats handed in his gun.⁹

The plot advances as the devil, disguised as an Irish writer, offers a prize for the best poem from each Irish county. All the poets eagerly agree to join in, but argue among themselves that the verses must be exclusively on Irish subjects. The satire is too overt and vindictive to be great poetry, but it does allow Kavanagh to make his point. Through a criticism of the Revival, Kavanagh hoped to accomplish negatively what Yeats achieved through the use of Celtic materials, an artistic autonomy through a governing fiction, a chance to set himself apart from other writers and to provide himself with some imaginative space. By attacking individual writers and general literary trends in Ireland Kavanagh creates a void demanding the new poetry which he will write. The strategy allows him to have it both ways: taken as a peasant poet by the Dublin literati, he attacks their provincialism; by characterizing their work as the worn-out baggage of the Revival, he justifies his own poetry.

Kavanagh's main line of attack was to focus on those poets who wished to be called "Irish." Nationalism was too inward looking, he claimed; it became cant, jingoism and propaganda, not art. It was in poetry and fiction what the stage-Irishman had become in theater, a stereotype, thoroughly predictable. He writes in a critical essay, "I object to Nationalism, particularly Irish nationalism in letters, because of the harm it does, the false values it postulates."¹⁰ The minor writers and secondary talents chose nationalism and Irishness because they lacked a conviction over the sustaining powers of their own imaginative

9. *Collected Poems* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968), p. 34. Hereafter *CP*, with all references to poems to be included in the text.

10. "St. Stephen's," Trinity Term, 1962, quoted in *The Journal of Irish Literature*, VI, 1 (January 1977), 28.

visions. Thus Kavanagh describes them not as genuine creative artists, but by-products of the excitement and energy initiated by Yeats and his generation: "The Irish Literary Revival consisted of a few writers of real quality and a large crowd of hangers-on pretending to be drunk on the fumes of the cask. Then—the warm fog lifted, and . . . people began to wonder what had happened to all the young geniuses."¹¹

While Kavanagh's critical attitudes toward the Irish school of literature are consistent in their disdain and censure, his treatment of W. B. Yeats as part of that school is more ambiguous. On the one hand Yeats is blamed for his role in perpetrating the Irish movement and for the limitations which occur in his poetry as a result. In an essay on Yeats Kavanagh remarks: "Yeats took up Ireland and made it his myth and theme. And you can see him today standing in the centre of that myth, uneasy that he doesn't belong."¹² And elsewhere, carrying on his familiar debunking of the Revival, he singles out Yeats's Celtic phase: ". . . the work of Yeats which is deliberately Irish in this way sounds awfully phony. Irishness is a form of anti-art."¹³ These comments are never developed and give the impression, as much of Kavanagh's criticism does, of half-baked, impulsive remarks delivered chiefly for their shock value. There is no attempt to explain or analyze the uneasiness of Yeats's stance in Irish myth, nor to expand the notion of the insincerity of the Irish voice, both of which if developed might provide interesting perspectives.

Not all of the criticism of Yeats is negative, however, despite Kavanagh's penchant for denigrating all other writers whose work might be compared to his own. In fact, the bulk of the remarks on Yeats acknowledges his achievement, poetic genius and, particularly, his prominence in modern poetry. The positive aspect of the remarks, however, does not change Kavanagh's tendency to remain shallow and inconclusive in the treatment of his subject. Analysis of Yeats is replaced by impression or opinion, tossed-off, with little regard for connection or force of argument:

Yeats, until his old age, worked a precious and very narrow vein of ore. It was only towards the end that he saw the potentialities of mass-production. . . . Yeats had the misfortune to come at a bad time; in the wake of Victorianism. His material was a weary parochial thing; Irish nationalism. Yet he has a good deal of the voracious appetite and digestion of a great poet.¹⁴

Furthermore, recognition and praise are uttered *sotto voce*, since the real subject of all Kavanagh criticism is Kavanagh himself, and its aim self-aggrandizement, especially at the expense of rival poets and novelists. It is characteristic, therefore, that the respect shown for Yeats's art

11. *Irish Times*, August 15, 1942.

12. "William Butler Yeats," *Collected Pruse* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), p. 254.

13. "On a Liberal Education," *November Haggard*, Peter Kavanagh, ed. (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1971), p. 80.

14. "Auden and the Creative Mind," *Collected Pruse*, p. 251.

comes often during commentary on other poets' failures or shortcomings:

The poems being written are like perfectly laid-out corpses on a slab. They are perfectly shaped and perfectly dead. . . . One of the qualities I most admired about Yeats was his contempt for death. During the lifetime of Yeats that living poem appeared again and again . . . the imitators of Yeats are to be pitied rather than censured, as are all who walk the barren fields where the master reaped.¹⁵

While this shallowness aggravates the reader eager for an assessment of Yeats by another Irish poet, it points to an interesting tendency on Kavanagh's part to avoid any real consideration of Yeats's poetry, and to focus instead on Yeats the man, Yeats the personality or, even more removed, the Yeats industry. The ambiguity toward Yeats is understandable from a psychological point of view, considering Kavanagh's alienation from the Dublin literary scene and his desire to become a great poet. His unwillingness to confront Yeats's poetry and the vacillation between censure and praise reflect Kavanagh's uneasiness about his own plight as a poet writing in the proximity of a major talent. By refusing to lionize Yeats, by demonstrating subjectivity in the criticism, Kavanagh shows that the need to establish a certain authority is partly necessary to escape the influence of Yeats on his poetry, and it is also useful in his disdain and contempt for the Dublin literary crowd who rejected him.

It is important to recognize that Kavanagh's quarrel with Yeats is confused, inconsistent and forced. First of all, in this aspect of his poetry at least, Kavanagh is a revisionist, and while this may guarantee him a hearing, it will also make clear his debt to the Revival: in this sense, ironically, Yeats makes Kavanagh's poetry possible.¹⁶ In the act of revision there will necessarily be selection and interpretation, so that Kavanagh defines the Yeats against whom he does battle. In so doing, he obscures the point, deliberately ignoring the fact that Yeats, himself, grew weary of the practice of the Revival, especially as it began to spread among so many younger poets. In a poem to AE in 1909 entitled "To a Poet, Who Would Have Me Praise Certain Bad Poets, Imitators of His and Mine," Yeats criticizes the lack of originality and imagination in the new poets.

You say, as I have often given tongue
In praise of what another's said or sung,
'Twere politic to do the like by these;
But was there ever dog that praised his fleas?
(*Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* [New York, MacMillan, 1968], p. 92)

Yeats's concern was not a momentary regret, but something he held even in old age. In 1932, in a letter to Olivia Shakespear he criticizes indirectly the Irish mode in literature: "An Irish poet, Austin Clarke, has

15. "Poetry in Ireland Today," *The Bell*, April 1948.

16. I am grateful to Robert Ryf of Occidental College for suggesting this point.

just sent me a romance called *The Bright Temptation*. . . . Read it and tell me should I make him an academician. I find it difficult to see, with impartial eyes, these Irish writers who are as it were part of my propaganda."¹⁷ Kavanagh chooses to overlook this aspect of Yeats's poetic development because it would weaken, or at least diffuse, his critical base and lessen his own role as an iconoclast.¹⁸

Furthermore, it is largely Kavanagh's own contemporaries and not Yeats himself whom Kavanagh wishes to displace; Yeatsianism, then, rather than Yeats, is the real target. Thus when it suits him, Kavanagh can ally himself with Yeats—the implication is that they are equals—when he belittles those minor writers who attempt to climb in under Yeats's umbrella. In a letter to his brother in December of 1950 Kavanagh places himself in august company. "There have been, besides myself, only two or possibly three good writers, Joyce, Yeats, O'Casey."¹⁹ Yet at the same time he criticizes his contemporaries for Yeatsianism, for keeping alive the false values of the Revival, and limiting their work to Irish materials and subjects. Thus, Kavanagh's criticism becomes, simultaneously, his own advertisement. He minimizes the achievement of his rivals and contemporaries, and pronounces a waste land condition in Irish letters, caused by beating to death Yeats's tired circus animals. It is a simple matter then for Kavanagh himself to fill the void with a new kind of poetry, unmistakable in its originality, which reflects a hard-wrung knowledge of the land and depicts rural Ireland realistically, beautiful but back-breaking.

Kavanagh's very early poetry, *Ploughman and Other Poems* (1936), started tamely enough with nature poems very much in the Irish mode. These are simple celebrations of the land's beauty, treatment of folktales and the spirit of the land, and even an exploitation—as one can infer from the title of the volume—of the concept of the peasant-poet, walking his fields and composing verse:

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

I dream with silvery gull
And brazen crow.
A thing that is beautiful
I may know. ("Ploughman," *CP*, p. 3)

The treatment of folk material in these early pieces, both in subject mat-

17. Wade, p. 795.

18. The concept of misreading or "misprision" which Harold Bloom discusses in *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973) and elsewhere applies only incidentally in Kavanagh's case, I believe. Kavanagh's neglect of Yeats's views of the younger poets, while clear, is simply one of a number of anomalies one sees throughout Kavanagh's criticism. For this reason, it is impossible to sense a prevailing single direction which resembles the emphatic "swerve" which Bloom identifies as a poet's response to his precursor.

19. Letter to Peter Kavanagh, December 1950, *Lapped Furrows*.

ter and in rhythm and sound, suggests an affinity with the earlier Revival poetry. Furthermore, the presence of Yeats in these early lyrics is apparent:

I shall drink of the white goat's milk,
The old white goat of Slieve Donard,
Slieve Donard where the herbs of wisdom grow,
The herbs of the Secret of Life that the old white goat has nibbled,

And I shall live longer than Methuselah,
Brother to no man. ("The Goat of Slieve Donard," *CP*, p. 5)

In all of these early poems, in fact, we sense the very Irish note, the imitation and repetition of the literature of the Revival, which Kavanagh so bitterly denounces in his criticism. It is precisely this, as we know from the criticism, that the poet fears: to write your own poetry only to remind your reader of another poet or a literary movement. Undoubtedly, Kavanagh saw the inevitable difficulty with these early poems, that they were an artistic dead-end. They were a necessary stage, however, part of the struggle to achieve a personal integrity and an independence. It is a tribute to Kavanagh as a poet that he understood the complexities of influence this early in his career. Within three years he had not only freed himself of the seductive influence of the Revival, he had sounded a truly unique note in Irish poetry, and changed its course away from the pastoral tendencies of his contemporaries.

In 1942, with the publication of "The Great Hunger," Kavanagh delivered the death-blow to what he termed the false myth of the Revival, the idyllic portrayal of those close to the soil. Instead of lofty sentiment based on spiritual naturalism Kavanagh presented the grim details of humble, rural life—the rocky hills, potato pits, piles of dung, hard work, long days, monotonous routine. "The Great Hunger" is a long poem—756 lines—describing the life of Patrick Maguire, who farms an unnamed area in the hills of rural Ireland. It presents with painstaking exactness Maguire's attempts to survive physically, psychologically and emotionally. The poem opens with direct reference to the land:

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. (*CP*, p. 34)

Immediately, however, we are in another world, devoid of sentimentality and idealism. We see instead rusty ploughs, broken buckets, ditches, frozen ground and the slow, steady evaporation of Maguire's life-force:

. . . Watch him, that man on a hill whose spirit
Is a wet sack flapping about the knees of time
He lives that his little fields may stay fertile when
his own body
Is spread in the bottom of ditch under two coulters
in Christ's name. (*CP*, p. 35)

The force of this poem comes not simply from the realistic description of potato and turnip farming, though the harshness of that life is vividly portrayed. It comes, rather, from the story of Maguire, himself, whose great hunger is sexual, spiritual and intellectual. He cares for his mother who lives to ninety-one:

She stayed too long,
Wife and mother in one
When she died
The knuckle-bones were cutting the skin of her
son's backside
And he was sixty-five. (*CP*, p. 36)

He takes no wife while he has other cares; he always waits for better luck, a good harvest, another year, the right woman. Always there is the routine, the work, the woman he sins with in his mind, his guilt and, at night before the fire, his dreams. The rigid morality of his church closed around him and guilt-ridden responsibility trapped him. In the end Maguire never marries, lives out his old age in loneliness, beaten down by his narrow existence. A farmer whose livelihood depends on things growing and living, he nevertheless withers:

No crash
No drama
That was how his life happened.
No mad hooves galloping the sky,
But the weak, washy way of true tragedy—
A sick horse nosing around the meadow for a clean place to die.
(*CP*, p. 53)

The portrait of rural life in "The Great Hunger" spares no detail in its attempt to counter what Kavanagh saw as the false view of the land fashioned by Yeats and Lady Gregory. In "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," Yeats celebrates the achievement of the poetic imagination in touch with the essence of rural Ireland.

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
All that we did, all that we said or sang
Must come from contact with the soil, from that
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
(*Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, p. 318)

Sensing the irony that Yeats and others who imitated him were essentially urban writers whose understanding of the land was primarily imaginative, Kavanagh sought to depict a genuine contact with the soil and demonstrate the hostility of rural life to the poetic imagination. We sense in the consistency and depth of the portrait of Maguire's world—the hard work, the poverty of mind and body, and the suffocating closeness of a village community—a bitterness behind the lines, an angry corrective to those poets who would celebrate the beauty and simplicity of rural Ireland. The bitterness extends beyond the human and the socio-

logical levels, although it certainly includes them, to the implication in Yeats's lines that the poetic imagination will grow stronger with closeness to the land. Kavanagh's resentment over such a view is implicit throughout "The Great Hunger," as is obvious from the treatment of the subject matter; it becomes explicit in certain places, however, when Kavanagh refers directly to the problem of the imagination. At these moments in the poem the treatment of Maguire shifts slightly to become more general, a type rather than an individual. In the midst of giving us specific details about Maguire's day, Kavanagh makes some general reference to the peasant who tried to sing but repeated the same melody, "the dragging step of a ploughman going home," or elsewhere the peasant-poet whose poems are pulled weeds, "withered in the July sun." In section XIII the subject of the poetic imagination goes beyond mere mention, however, and is developed at length, as a subject in its own right.

The peasant has no worries;
 In his little lyrical fields
 He ploughs and sows; . . .
 His heart is pure,
 His mind is clear, . . .
 The peasant who is only one remove from the beasts he
 drives.
 The travellers stop their cars to gape over the green
 bank into his fields.
 There is the pool in which the poet dips . . .
 The peasant is the unspoiled child of Prophecy,
 The peasant is all virtues—let us salute him without irony
 The peasant ploughman who is half a vegetable
 Who can react to sun and rain and sometimes even
 Regret that the Maker of Light had not touched him more intensely.
 (CP, pp. 52-53)

With these lines the harsh realities presented in the poem go beyond tragic narrative; in the context of modern Irish poetry, they criticize "the Irish thing" dreamt up by a previous generation of writers and exploited by the present. The balance here, however, is precarious, with the bitterness and preachiness threatening to overturn the poem. Yet, in light of the entire poem, they do not. It is a credit to Kavanagh's poetic control that the focus remains essentially fixed on its true subject. The powerful depiction of rural life, chiefly through the characterization of Maguire, allows the poem to tolerate those rare moments when Kavanagh as critic enters the poem.

In his willingness to turn Yeatsian romanticism into reality, Kavanagh profitted greatly from James Joyce's probing of the Irish Catholic experience, particularly in the various portraits of still-life in *Dubliners*.²⁰

20. Joyce has been significantly important to middle-class Catholic writers in Ireland, among these Clarke, O'Faolain, O'Connor and Thomas Kinsella.

Joyce's determination not to become merely a part of the literary parade begun by Yeats and Lady Gregory caused him to move in a different direction, toward realism and the portrayal of middle class urban life. The depth and complexity of his portraits of spiritual, intellectual and emotional sterility provided for those writers who followed him an alternative to the poetic tradition dominated by Yeats. Thus Paddy Maguire can be seen from a Joycean perspective, as a rural counterpart of the characters in *Dubliners*. Maguire succumbs to the forces which form the Joycean paralysis: a domineering mother, a life-draining church, an intellectually-dulling routine to earn a living. Maguire lacks the imagination to survive such a world; he is dead emotionally and spiritually. Joycean realism makes perfect artistic sense for Kavanagh, providing him with a subject and theme without the accompanying burden of the formal aspects of poetic style and imagery. The simple fact that Joyce accomplished what he did in fiction allowed Kavanagh an opportunity in another genre; thus a Joycean direction in poetry is liberating rather than restricting. Furthermore, what Joyce did with the Irish city, Kavanagh felt he might do with the Irish countryside. Scrutinizing the Catholic experience and depicting realistically the rural Irish scene allowed Kavanagh the benefits of a literary model without stifling him; he could be innovative if not original.

While he perhaps never again achieved the depth and complexity of the effects of rural life on an individual, Kavanagh followed "The Great Hunger" with realistic poetry about the country and the farm he left behind. Like many transplanted countrymen who live in cities, he wrote of the memories of his time on the land. The difference with Kavanagh's poetry, however, is his resistance to nostalgia; his treatment of the country remains essentially non-sentimental. The memories of the land are those about the hard days of labor, the battle with the soil or the weather over a meager crop, the unglamorous task of carting dung, and the firm hold the land has over those who live close to it:

O Stony grey soil of Monaghan
The laugh from my love you thieved . . .
You flung a ditch on my vision
Of beauty and love and truth. (*CP*, p. 92)

After Kavanagh's very dangerous illness in 1955, which resulted in the removal of a cancerous lung, a noticeable shift takes place in his poetry. The illness was looked upon by Kavanagh himself as a turning point, during which he felt he was born as an artist. In "Canal Bank Walk," written during recuperation, new life is announced in baptismal imagery:

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 again as before I grew. (*CP*, p. 150)

The poetry written during this period until his death in 1967 is characterized by a rejection of satire, particularly the steady attack upon his contemporaries which had occupied his attention in the late 1940's and early 1950's. The new mood is best expressed in the short four-line poem appropriately titled "Freedom":

Take me to the top of the high hill
Mount Olympus laughter-roaring unsolemn
Where no one is angry and satired
About a mortal creature on a tall column. (*CP*, p. 155)

The turn from satire toward love, ". . . my intention is not satire but humaneness" (*CP*, p. 167), becomes in these last poems a theme in itself, as well as an attitude. Treatment of life in rural Ireland continues to be an important subject and remains realistic, but there is a noticeable change both in the voice and in the scope of the treatment. The bitterness of the narrative voice, obvious in "The Great Hunter," gives way to a quiet acceptance and a comic vision:

A humble scene in a backward place
. . . A primrose, a violet,
A violent wild iris—but mostly anonymous performers
Yet an important occasion as the Muse at her toilet
Prepared to inform the local farmers
That beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God
Was breathing His love by a cutaway bog. (*CP*, p. 158)

The difference here is that the emphasis falls upon the contemplation, rather than simply the representation of life. A way of seeing detail and objects, or what Kavanagh calls in a number of poems "naming," takes precedence over the realistic world which is being seen:

This is what love does to things: the Rialto Bridge,
The main gate that was bent by a heavy lorry
The seat at the back of the shed that was a suntrap.
Naming these things is the love-act and the pledge. (*CP*, p. 153)

With contemplation and the process of observation emerging here as subject matter, the later poetry expands its perspective to contain the poet himself as subject, sometimes as a youth, or in middle age struggling with materials and themes which form the basis of art; more often, however, as the established writer, reflecting on the art of poetry and the role of the poet. References to writing and rewriting, to the source of his poetry, and to the loss of inspiration, when "Old Cunning Silence might not be a better bet than poetry" (*CP*, p. 131), appear throughout these poems; in some poems, such as "Come Dance with Kitty Stobling," or the following lines from "Intimate Parnassus," the poet as hero is the subject of the poem:

. . . mere men
Are climbing out on dangerous branches

Of Banking, insurance, and shops; . . .
 Poet, you have reason to be sympathetic—
 Count them the beautiful unbroken
 And then forget them
 As things aside from the main purpose (*CP*, p. 146)

Kavanagh's focus on the character of the poet and the writing of poetry suggests a further comparison with Yeats, who wrote often in his last poems about poetry and poets. In "The Circus Animals' Desertion" Yeats describes losing his themes and metaphors and being forced to look back into his heart for the source of poetic subject matter. His famous advice to future Irish poets in "Under Ben Bulbin" is predicated on tradition, a sense of the heroic, and a feeling for the greatness of the past; young poets should cast their minds on other days of heroic Irish heritage. Kavanagh has his own thoughts on Ireland's heroic past, and his reaction to Yeats's ideas provide a contrasting view. Rather than the glamorous portrait of the hard-riding country gentleman and the lords and ladies gay, Kavanagh shows a decadent, corrupted side:

I came to a great house on the edge of the park
 Thinking of Yeats's dream Great House where all
 Nobility was protected by ritual
 Though all lay drunk on the floor and in the dark
 Tough louts and menial minds in the shrubberies lurk
 And negative eunuchs hate in an outer hall. (*CP*, p. 185)

The criticism fits with the early references to the fabricated sentimental version of nationalistic literature, but unlike the earlier practice, ridicule and reproof are not the essence of the poetic statement. In their place, Kavanagh offers an affirmation of life and a celebration of the simple and the ordinary. He denies Yeats's continued interest in seeking higher realities through myth, history and visionary schemes, "No system, no Plan / Yeatsian Invention / No all-over / Organisational prover" (*CP*, p. 173), and, instead, offers a different kind of advice to younger poets, one which insists upon the particulars of life as it is lived, and on the simple poetic act of naming of things:

Name for the future
 The everydays of nature
 And without being analytic
 Create a great epic.
 Girls in red blouses,
 Steps up to houses,
 Sunlight round gables,
 Gossip's young fables,
 The life of a street. (*CP*, p. 154)

Kavanagh's assertion of his artistry is founded on rejection and negation of the literary conventions of his day. Sensing in his early poetry that the material of the Revival would mean imaginative death and creative stultification, that he would be merely an imitator rather than an

artist, Kavanagh attempts to establish his authenticity by striking out—both in theory and in practice—at the existing tenets of the nationalist movement in Irish literature. The heart of his struggle is the inevitable conflict with Yeats, the chief architect of the literary Revival and the greatest poet of the twentieth century. For Kavanagh the struggle is inescapable: Yeats represents the rootless force creating its own base and context, idealizing and conceiving of a literary nationalism which looks toward the land, yet remains essentially urban. Kavanagh on the other hand represents rooted experience which knows too well the realities of rural life, and looks toward art as an escape. The fact that Yeats is the dominant presence in Irish poetry makes Kavanagh's difficulty more pronounced. He must walk the thin line between admiration and recognition of genius on the one side, and imitation and assimilation on the other. In the process of that balance, Kavanagh has oversimplified his critical perspective, misread and misjudged many writers including Yeats, spoken outrageously about his own abilities, and posed as a Dublin crank and character. He has also given us five or six great poems, a number of other very memorable ones, and provided an important new direction in modern Irish poetry.

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