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Eamonn Wall

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*"It is midnight in Dublin and
Europe is at war":
Patrick Kavanagh's Poems of
"The Emergency"*

by EAMONN WALL

IN 1939, AS WAR WAS breaking out in Europe and as De Valera was instituting Southern Ireland's policy of neutrality, the poet Patrick Kavanagh left rural Monaghan to settle in Dublin: he hoped to earn a living for himself from his writings and literary journalism and, by his presence in the capital, become a central figure in Ireland's literary life. He later described the move as a mistake:

The Hitler War [has] started. I [have] no job, no real friends. I live by writing articles for the papers, mainly on the pleasures of country life which, fifty miles away, calls me to return. There is a new prosperity owing to the war but I a mad messiah without a mission or a true impulse [who struggles] on in Dublin instead of walking out. ("Writer" 79)

Kavanagh had already published two books by this point, *Ploughman and Other Poems* (1936) and a fictional memoir *The Green Fool* (1938). Antoinette Quinn has argued that the "international acclaim [accorded *The Green Fool*] must have been very heartening and . . . probably influenced his decision to abandon all pretence of farming and cobbling and establish himself as a full-time professional writer" (86). Before 1939 Kavanagh had made forays to London and Dublin, but had always returned to Monaghan. Another factor which facilitated his move to Dublin at that time was the presence there of his younger brother Peter, who had a teaching job, a flat, and a strong desire to support Patrick's vocation as a writer.

Kavanagh's poetry underwent a powerful transformation as a result of his move to Dublin. His major poems written during his early years in Dublin, *The Great Hunger* (1942) and *Lough Derg* (1942), are not only longer, more ambitious, and more complex than anything he had written previously, but they also present a much more critical and ambivalent view of life in rural Ireland than what is to be found in his earlier work. The move to Dublin initiated the middle phase of Kavanagh's career as a poet, what Dillon Johnston has called the "antithetical part," during which he produced a poetry rooted in "experience and radical suffering" and found a poetic voice to match his messianic mood (123-34). The reasons why this change took place are both interesting and complex and best understood through an examination of such works as *The Great Hunger* and *Lough Derg*, the two poems which most closely mirror this change. Although some of the causes which led to the transformation of Kavanagh's poetry are simply peculiar to his own personal

circumstances, a majority of them can be traced to his removal from Monaghan to Dublin and his coming under the influence of some of the prevailing literary, social, and cultural ideologies which were being advocated in the capital during "The Emergency," all of which combined to inspire Kavanagh to attempt his deconstruction of romantic rural Ireland. Although "The Emergency" coincided with one of the most important and productive periods of Kavanagh's career, he rarely referred to either it, or the Second World War, in his poems; however, both influenced what and how Kavanagh wrote during this period and are important, if somewhat silent, presences in his poetry.

Before examining *The Great Hunger* and *Lough Derg*, we should first of all briefly reflect on the Irish scene before and during "The Emergency" to understand better the cultural milieu which Kavanagh entered on his arrival in Dublin. Historians and writers who have commented on the cultural life of Ireland during "The Emergency" have painted a rather gloomy picture. John A. Murphy has written that "life in Ireland during the war years was static and dull" (108) while Terence Brown has observed that "the cultural isolation of the preceding twenty years was perhaps deepened" (180). Sean O'Faolain saw "The Emergency" as "six years of silence" (Brown 211). Clearly, neutrality, if not politically or morally, at least practically and psychologically, presented Ireland's southern intellectuals with major difficulties. This policy appeared to institutionalize the withdrawal from the wider world that Irish-Irelanders had been advocating since the last decades of the previous century, an ideology given plain voice by Thomas Derrig, the Minister for Education in De Valera's government, in a speech at the 1937 Dublin Feis:

That set of values which makes the Irish mind different looks out at us clearly from our old music—its idiom having in some subtle way the idiom of the Irish mind, its rhythms, its intervals, its speeds, its build have not been chosen arbitrarily, but are what they are because they are the musical expression, the musical equivalent of Irish thought and its modes....The Irish idiom expresses deep things that have not been expressed by Beethoven, Bach, Brahms, Elgar or Sibelius—by any of the great composers. (Brown 147)

Not only was neutrality an assertion of the independent policy that De Valera had advocated at the League of Nations, but it was also a reflection of Ireland's "destiny," one which called on her to be separate from a wider world she did not need. It indicated that the Irish "mind [was] different" and implied that it was superior. Derrig declared, as Hyde and Corkery had done before him, that the Irish psyche could only be given its full life in Irish modes. Six years later, in his much-quoted St. Patrick's Day speech to the Irish people, De Valera suggested, though this was probably not his intention, what form a literature founded on such orthodoxy might take:

That Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with sounds of industry, the romping of

sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be the forums of the wisdom of serene old age. (Brown 146)

De Valera's use of conditional phrases indicated that his vision was not yet in place when he described it; however, one senses that he believed that Ireland was headed towards the fulfillment of his vision. "The Emergency" and the war, which combined led to a drop in imports, appeared to be factors which helped promote self-sufficiency as both forced Ireland's farmers to grow more wheat, for example, and be generally more reliant on their own resources. Nationalists had always believed that Ireland could support herself and "The Emergency" provided them with an opportunity to prove this. But when narrowly prosecuted, as was usually the case, this ideology presented Ireland's writers with some difficulties. They wished to produce a national literature, but wanted the freedom to produce one of their own devising, one which revealed the essence of Irish life through realist descriptions of it. Although they could not deny that life in Ireland was different from life in other places, they also accepted the universality of human conditions and were prepared to accept, though somewhat grudgingly at times, the pollinating effect of foreign influence.

The writers who lived and worked in Ireland did feel isolated. "The Emergency" brought home to them the reality of Ireland's distance from the center of the world. Also, travel abroad was difficult and at times literary and publishing London, which the Irish writer relied on to have his/her voice heard, punished the Irish writer for neutrality. Nevertheless, despite the feelings of isolation that "The Emergency" engendered, the years 1939-45 were a productive time in Irish letters. Writers such as Sean O'Faolain, Peadar O'Donnell, and Frank O'Connor accepted the inevitable fact of neutrality, but they also accepted the challenge that neutrality threw at them—to focus their energies more intently on Irish life and, in the process, create a more realistic vision of Ireland to place beside the unreal "official" version. Towards this end, O'Faolain founded *The Bell* in 1940 whose social, economic, and political purpose was to undermine the assumptions that underlined the romantic visions of Irish-Ireland. One notion he challenged persistently was that the rural Irish peasant, as personified by the West of Ireland farmer, was the "true" representative of the ideal, free Irishman:

If there once was an old association of the Peasant with Liberty it is all over. The romantic illusion, fostered by the Celtic Twilight, that the West of Ireland, with its red petticoats and bawneens, is for some reason more Irish than Guinness' Brewery or Dwyers' Sunbeam-Wolsey factory, has no longer any basis whatever. (Brown 201)

O'Faolain made it his mission to show the Irish people that many of the notions put forward by Irish-Irelanders were untenable and false. Whereas De Valera espoused an unchanging view of the countryside, O'Faolain believed it to be in the process of disintegration, and asserted that farmers were frequently unhappy with their lot.

O'Faolain, his fellow Corkman, Frank O'Connor, and Peadar O'Donnell,

who was to succeed O'Faolain as editor of *The Bell*, welcomed Patrick Kavanagh to Dublin, befriended him, and opened their journal to his writings. Kavanagh recognized, as a product of rural Ireland, that the Irish-Ireland version of how life was lived there (which often found its way into the poetry of his contemporaries) was a false one and applied himself in his poetry written during "The Emergency" to examining rural life critically and producing a vision of rural Ireland that paralleled the work O'Faolain was producing in his essays, editorials, and histories. Neutrality had isolated Ireland from the world: Kavanagh's charge was to isolate the living rural Ireland from the mythical one which had been prosecuted in the early post-colonial period. Kavanagh was certainly the figure best able to perform this task, having proven himself both a writer of quality and as a man with first-hand knowledge of rural life. *The Bell*, though primarily a literary journal, was one which, as my comments on O'Faolain's role should have made clear, possessed a strong social and cultural conscience where Kavanagh himself discovered his own hitherto latent social conscience.

Another factor which motivated the change in Kavanagh's attitude to rural Ireland during "The Emergency" was his determination to escape from under the designation of the soft, innocent, rural writer that his early writings had won for him. Kavanagh had written *The Green Fool* with an English audience in mind, as he admitted:

The English literary critics refused until recently in a few cases to have anything to do with the authentic Irish article. If you didn't come as an "Irishman" you didn't come at all. (Quinn 70-71)

In writing *The Green Fool*, while he was living in London, Kavanagh was conscious of the presence of the stage-Irish qualities in his work. Back in Dublin, under the influence of O'Faolain, he set out to produce a vision of rural Ireland which more closely mirrored his own experience. Whereas in *The Green Fool* Kavanagh was conscious of trying to produce what Francis Stuart has called, writing in another context, a "soft-centered" view of Ireland, in both *The Great Hunger* and *Lough Derg* he was aware that he was writing a national poetry, one whose function was to reveal to his countrymen his vision of the place in which they all lived (Stuart 3-4). To quote Francis Stuart again, one finds at the core of *The Great Hunger* a "disruptive and imaginative passion" whose function is a moral one—to show that the romantic view of rural Ireland is false and dehumanizing (*Patrick Kavanagh: Man and Poet* 384).

One of the most noticeable aspects of *The Great Hunger* is the raw effect Kavanagh works so hard to achieve. A fine example of this occurs at the start of section XII:

The fields were bleached white,
 The wooden tubs full of water
 Were white in the winds
 That blew through Brannagan's Gap on their way from /
 Siberia;
 The cows on the grassless heights

Followed the hay that had wings —
 The February fodder that hung itself on the black /
 branches
 Of the hill-top hedge.
 A man stood beside a potato-pit
 And clapped his arms
 And pranced on the crisp roots
 And shouted to warm himself. (98)¹

Patrick Maguire is standing beside a potato pit in February in the presence of a vast, powerful, and painful ("bleached") sense of everything looking the same—of either being white, seeming white, or changed to white. This scene, like many of the others which appear in the poem, is desolate and overpowering. In addition to being visually dull and raw, the landscape is made cold by a raw Siberian wind which forces Maguire to jump about and shout in order "to warm himself." Maguire, of course, is the Irish farmer personified, the man Kavanagh has plucked from the mass of unhappy Irish farmers. The land he works is neither warm nor welcoming: it has no spirit of its own which rubs off on the farmer. On the contrary, it seems dead and the farmer who comes into contact with it is deadened by the experience:

Life dried in the veins of these women and men:
 The grey and grief and unlove,
 The bones in the backs of their hands,
 And the chapel pressing its low ceiling over them. (92)

When Maguire's mother dies we are told that "the knuckle-bones were cutting the skin of her son's backside" which emphasizes the extent to which living on a small farm with his mother and sister, and the poverty which he has endured (financial, educational, sexual, societal), has dehumanized him and left him exposed to the cold reality of the misery and failure of his own life (83). He is beyond the point where he can "warm himself": he has become mere bones. Kavanagh strengthens our sense of the rawness of Maguire's experience by emphasizing his masturbating, spitting, working, and even his "[cleaning] his arse / With perennial grass / On the bank of some summer stream" (83). De Valera's St. Patrick's Day vision of Ireland is full of such generalities as "comely maidens," "frugal comfort" and "the wisdom of serene old age" and exists in stark contrast to Kavanagh's raw vision which so powerfully undermines it.

Kavanagh's rural Ireland is analogous to Famine rural Ireland. In the eighteen forties people died of hunger: in the nineteen forties people were no longer succumbing to physical hunger; instead, they were deprived of all the other pleasures of life—all they had was food. And the rural South of Ireland, to Kavanagh, even though it is neutral in the war, and despite the fact that the farmers treat it as light-hearted subject of pub conversation ("After that they went on to the war, and the generals / On both sides were

1. All quotations from Kavanagh's poetry are from *The Complete Poems* (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press), 1984.

shown to be as stupid as hell. / If he'd taken *that* road, they remarked of a Marshal, / He'd have . . . O they knew their geography well"), is shown in *The Great Hunger* to be as physically, morally, and psychologically ravaged by its own war (93). Maguire and his men are a devastated group in the center of a devastated landscape. Everything is exposed by war and Ireland's war is with herself. Also, whereas De Valera's vision is an optimistic one, Kavanagh's is quite the opposite. In the former's vision, the rural place is thriving and the people content with what they have, with what their labors, the earth, and God have yielded up. However, as Kavanagh points out, when one has concluded that one's toil is dull and useless, one can never be happy. It is not enough for Patrick Maguire to make "a field his bride," but it is what he will have to settle for now that he has grown too old to be attractive as a wedding partner (81). His manhood is a "no-target gun fired and returned to his headland of carrots and cabbage" (83). The farmers' work mocks their lives: each April they put down their seeds on the earth, though few ever get an opportunity to spread their own living seed:

April, and no one able to calculate
How far it is to harvest. They put down
The seeds blindly with sensuous groping fingers,
And sensual sleep dreams subtly underground.
To-morrow is Wednesday—who cares?
'Remember Eileen Farrelly? I was thinking
A man might do a damned sight worse...' That voice is /
blown
Through a hole in the garden wall—
And who was Eileen now cannot be known. (85)

The land, the farmer's bride, produces its riches to mock its husband. And, although the sensual urges remain as parts of Maguire's being, they have become abstracted: he is unable to remember Eileen Farrelly, a woman with whom he associated such desires. Instead his desires are directed towards the ashes in the fireplace. Even religion is unable to offer solace or transcendence: the regularity of the tolling of the Angelus bell confirms for all auditors the bleakness of rural life.

The function of *The Great Hunger* is to describe rural Ireland to an Irish audience: its triumph is that it performs this task so well. Antoinette Quinn has isolated some of the qualities which make the poem both effective and original. She has argued that the poem "is really cinematic, rather than dramatic . . . that the narrator substitutes for both camera and sound recording. . . . The poem, organized as a montage, is extraordinarily flexible, continually altering angle and direction . . ." (130). *The Great Hunger* has a documentary quality and Kavanagh's voice, filtered and objectified through Maguire, carries the integrity which his own experience of farming and writing has brought him. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that this technical aspect of the poem (the use of film techniques) makes it resemble a video newsreel from a war front. Kavanagh is not concerned, however, with

Dunkirk or with the action on the Eastern Front, but with war in the potato fields of Monaghan. The enemy, as Rosa Luxemburg said, and as all of Ireland's writers learned after the Treaty was signed, "is in your own country." Kavanagh denies the veracity of the romantic notion of rural Ireland as Eden in *The Great Hunger* by showing it as being neither thriving nor happy, and he also undermines the primacy of native modes of expression by borrowing techniques from such "foreign" modes as film.

Lough Derg is, like *The Great Hunger*, a documentary poem which utilizes many of the techniques used in the latter. What separates it from its predecessor is scale. Like *The Great Hunger*, *Lough Derg* is located in a particular place (this time an island in County Donegal to which people come to repent their sins) which is closely linked to the people who appear in the poem. But because Lough Derg is a place to which pilgrims come in their thousands, there are more of them present in this poem than in *The Great Hunger*, and they come from a much greater variety of backgrounds. Kavanagh presents us with a panoramic view of his kinsmen and women whom he describes, praises, and condemns when he thinks it necessary. But the regions of rural Ireland to which these people belong are as bleak as Maguire's Monaghan:

From Cavan and from Leitrim and from Mayo,
From all the thin-faced parishes where hills
Are perished noses running peaty water. . . (104)

Many of the pilgrims are dead in spirit. The attitude of many to religion, for example, indicates that they have reduced God to witch-doctor status, and require material more than spiritual assistance. Many come to Lough Derg to pray that they will soon get husbands, wives, or better jobs, or for other reasons:

Solicitors praying for cushy jobs
To be County Registrar or Coroner,
Shopkeepers threatened with sharper rivals
Than any hook-nosed foreigner.
Mothers whose daughters are Final Medicals,
Too heavy-hipped for thinking,
Wives whose husbands have angina pectoris,
Wives whose husbands have taken to drinking. (105)

Although Kavanagh does use the poem to prove his allegiance to Catholicism in its purer forms, he also pillories the lack of faith and the meanspiritedness he finds in how some, though by no means all, of the Irish, both the lay people and their clerics, conduct their lives. Not only do the people mock religion by what they pray for, but they also punish themselves, at the behest of their priests, for sins they have not committed.

Kavanagh's is a pilgrim army: one whose conflict is internal not international. The pilgrims, in common with all armies, form a mass from whom it is difficult to separate individuals:

Now the three of them got out of the story altogether
Almost. Now they were not three egotists
But part of the flood of humanity
Anonymous, never to write or be written.
They vanish among the forests and we see them
Appearing among the trees for seconds. (117)

When a country is involved in a war, or an emergency, De Valera's euphemism for neutrality, economic, social, political, and personal goals become subservient to the national goal of victory, or survival. People are united in hope and/or suffering. Even those who do not wear uniforms are a part of the war effort. "The Emergency," the historians tell us, united the people of the South by healing the wounds opened during the Civil War. In *Lough Derg*, Kavanagh describes this army in motion, but shows that it is not so impressive a moral force as its leaders would have the world believe. Kavanagh asserts that he himself is both a part of this army and simultaneously separate from it. He is a Catholic, but one possessed of a wider vision (because he is a poet) than his fellow pilgrims, and he alone, of all the people gathered on Lough Derg, is capable of plucking individuals from the crowd and revealing their lives to his reader. The poet, Kavanagh believes, is a leader who possesses a moral authority which he must not abuse. He stands beside the priest and must, in a climate where delusion is the norm, speak the truth.

Kavanagh compares the pilgrims to police recruits to show the extent to which they, by involving themselves in the pilgrimage, have surrendered their individuality:

Like young police recruits being measured
Each pilgrim flattened backwards to the wall
And stretched his arms wide. . . (107)

However, the simile also introduces some wider contexts. First, it brings to mind the war being waged on the Continent and by means of the inherent contrast indicates that "The Emergency" is concerned with unchangeable Irish penitential rituals which are certainly remote from, and appear somewhat ridiculous when compared to, what is happening elsewhere. Second, although the pilgrims have stretched out their arms to imitate Jesus on the cross, they, in a curious way, remind us of soldiers facing a firing squad. The Irish death, however, as Patrick Kavanagh reminds us, is more psychological than actual. Instead of losing their lives in combat, the rural Irish lose their souls in life. They live a life in death, and become Patrick Maguire, forever existing in a vacuum, hearing the distant voices from the Dail in Dublin telling them of what wonderful lives they are privileged to lead.

In itself, "The Emergency" did not provide Kavanagh with the messianic voice that was to dominate his middle period. However, it did, luckily and coincidentally, bring him to Dublin and draw him under the influence of those writers who were raising dissenting voices in *The Bell*, and enabled him to produce his stern and angry portraits of his sacred people who live

beyond the Pale. *The Great Hunger* and *Lough Derg* are works whose influence should not be underestimated. They are both masterpieces, and Kavanagh's minute examination of rural life inspired many writers who followed him to perform similar examinations of their own locales. Ironically, perhaps, many of these writers have not been poets, but fiction writers. However, Kavanagh's longer poems, in scale and technique, can be seen as novels in verse. When one reads such works as diverse as John McGahern's *The Barracks* and *The Dark* and Brian Moore's *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* and *The Feast of Lupercal*, one realizes that here are works which are in many respects similar to Kavanagh's long poems. One is tempted, therefore, to agree with Terence Brown when he calls "The Emergency" a watershed in Irish writing.

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