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Poetics and Polemics:
The Politics of Patrick Kavanagh's "Spraying the Potatoes"

by THOMAS B. O'GRADY

In many respects, "Spraying the Potatoes," a relatively early lyric first collected in A Soul for Sale (1947), epitomizes both the thematic vision and the poetic technique of Patrick Kavanagh. Thematically, the poem obviously reflects Kavanagh's preoccupation with rural subject matter throughout his career. Focusing on a crucial (if rarely recorded) aspect of farm husbandry, the poem has a clear affinity with those other verses of Kavanagh's—early and late—which discover an essentially transcendent potential in the familiar seasonal labors of ploughing, harrowing, sowing, and harvesting which the poet had engaged in during his boyhood and young manhood in County Monaghan. Technically, "Spraying the Potatoes" reflects Kavanagh's generally casual attitude toward both prosodic and stylistic concerns which afflicts much of his poetry. Composed in quatrains of loose iambic tetrameter lines occasionally, and arbitrarily, extended to pentameter, the poem is characterized both by memorably vivid imagery—"The axle-roll of a rut-locked cart / Broke the burnt stick of noon in two"—and by artless and irrelevant diction: "We talked and our talk was a theme of kings, / A theme for strings." With similar inconsistency, it is distinguished both by Kavanagh's trademark attention to local detail in his identifying the potatoes as Kerr's Pinks and Arran Banners and by a distractingly abrupt shift in point of view, from the immediacy of the first-person perspective of the first seven stanzas to the detached omniscience of the third-person in the final stanza (Complete Poems 72–73).

Yet, while unto themselves those intrinsic qualities—thematic and technical—of "Spraying the Potatoes" help to locate the poem centrally in Kavanagh's œuvre, their significance is even more resonant in light of the poem's provenance in the midst of one of the many controversies provoked by Kavanagh during his career as commentator and reviewer for various Dublin journals and magazines. Well-known for his cantankerousness in person, the poet proved equally contentious in his critical writings, subjecting to ruthless scrutiny both individuals and institutions in his frequently insightful—but sometimes merely inciting—articles and columns published over several decades in The Irish Times, The Standard, The Bell, Envoy, and many other publications (including, of course, Kavanagh's Weekly, a short-lived tabloid of cultural commentary and criticism founded and written almost
exclusively by the poet and his brother Peter). From F. R. Higgins to Frank O'Connor, from *The Capuchin Annual* to the New Critics, from local Art Councils to continental painters, the targets of Kavanagh's more merciless offensives were themselves usually inoffensive by most reasonable standards, as reflected in several cases in dissenting responses printed in letters to the editor—or indeed as reflected in at least one instance in an editorial disclaimer accompanying Kavanagh's patently questionable diatribe.

Of all of the controversies associated with Kavanagh, however, that initiated by his review of Maurice Walsh's novel *The Hill is Mine* in July of 1940 may reveal most acutely the extent to which the poet, while never truly the "green fool" of his purported autobiography published in 1938, nonetheless continued to find in the rustic simplicity of his life "Ere Dublin taught him to be wise" (*Complete Poems* 20) a consolation—if not quite an antidote—for the pseudo-urbanity of the Irish metropolis that he had adopted as his home in the late 1930s. As Antoinette Quinn has observed of Kavanagh's relocation from Iniskeen to Dublin, "once he was at a physical remove from his home place he experienced a Romantic 'return in Departure' and 1939 to 1942 were four glorious years for his poetry. Now that he had abandoned his few paternal acres he was at last content to breathe his native air and to farm the land imaginatively in poem after poem" (88). In the case of "Spraying the Potatoes"—written, as the poet's brother annotates it, in "response to the controversy" created by Kavanagh's review of Walsh's novel (*Complete Poems* 393), and first published in *The Irish Times* one week after that review, on July 27, 1940—not only the immediacy of the evocation of rural experience but equally the very form and substance of the poem qua poem represent a major statement of Kavanagh's true "aesthetic." Subsequently compromising this aesthetic during the latter half of the 1940s and the first half of the '50s to indulge that antithetical impulse toward inelegant and vitriolic expression in his vindictive exposés of and harangues against the Dublin literary establishment, Kavanagh would muse in 1964: "Curious this, how I had started off with the right simplicity, indifferent to crude reason and then ploughed my way through complexities of anger, hatred and ill-will towards the faults of man, and came back to where I started" (*Self-Portrait* 26).

I

Curious, too, that Kavanagh's review of *The Hill is Mine* should have precipitated—or at least anticipated—those twisted furrows (as it were) of his middle years as poet. Not yet the literary and cinematic footnote that he would eventually become after the silver-screen adaptation in 1952 of his 1935 short story "The Quiet Man," Maurice Walsh was nonetheless an innocuously popular writer during his lifetime, and his tenth book is neither more nor less enduring than the twenty-odd other works of fiction that he published between 1926 and 1964. Set in the highlands of Scotland (a native of North Kerry, Walsh worked for several years as a Scottish customs and
excise officer before settling in Stillorgan, Co. Dublin, and maintained a life­
long affection for Scottish settings, for Scottish women—he married one—
and for Scotch whiskey), The Hill is Mine actually bears a coincidental
resemblance to “The Quiet Man” which, as a romantic corrective to the dog­
matic—or dogged—realism of George Moore’s “Home Sickness” (1903),
represents an important variation on the theme of the “returned Yank.”
Recounting in colorful detail the initiation of a young American rancher into
the ways and the wiles of the lords and the ladies—and even more the lad­
dies—who inhabit the countryside around the small “croft” he has inherited
from his grandmother, the novel pretends to little more than wholesome
entertainment. Perhaps not surprisingly, the book was a best-seller in Dublin
throughout July of 1940, and contemporary reviews were almost unanimous­
ly complimentary.

Indeed, Kavanagh’s own review of The Hill is Mine, concluding with the
judgment that the novel “may not appeal to literary readers, but it will delight
all who enjoy a romantic story, told with great skill, and sometimes illum­
inated by a poet’s vision,” is ultimately—if not quite unequivocally—favor­
able.1 Appreciating Walsh’s ability to ground the “fantasy” of his narrative
“upon the crags of reality” and admiring his charming “sense of humour,”
Kavanagh complains only that the novel suffers from an excess of “bonnie,
boring Scotland” and from a lack of engaging moral ambiguity—“a slight
flavour of real sin,” as he puts it (Irish Times, July 20, 1940). As generous as
it is judicious, this reading of The Hill is Mine should have proved exception­
able to none but the most ardent of Maurice Walsh’s loyal readers—had
Kavanagh for once refrained from using the occasion of a review to offer
critical commentary not only on the book at hand but also on other matters of
less immediate relevance. But, as John Nemo has observed, Kavanagh dis­
played even in his earliest published criticism the inclination toward wide­
ranging proclamations that was to characterize his critical writing throughout
his career:

Impulsive, egotistical and perpetually romantic, when he examined either life or literature he
tended to communicate his creative intensity rather than detail his intellectual response. As a
result, when he turned his energies to criticism he often over-reacted, declaring absolutes and
making generalizations which satisfied his artistic passion but confused his critical position.
(“The Green Knight” 283)

Typically enough, then, his review of Walsh’s novel includes if not devastat­
ing broadsides then at least agitating asides directed at more or less innocent

1. Nine years later, however, Kavanagh would show considerably less generosity toward Walsh in casting
him—according to the poet’s brother Peter (Complete Poems 400)—as “the Devil Mediocrity” in his poem
“The Paddiad”:

He has written many Catholic novels,
None of which mention devils:
Daring men, beautiful women,
Nothing about muck or midden,
Wholesome atmosphere—Why must
So-called artists deal with lust? (Complete Poems 213)
bystanders in what would escalate over the years into the poet’s personal war against the forces of literary and cultural philistinism in Ireland.

Plausibly, Kavanagh may have intended to provoke more than mere thought in his readers by his casual dismissal of the “empty virtuosity” of Hopkins and Eliot and the later Yeats and Joyce and his unrestrained discrediting of “stupid, boring books, like Gone With the Wind.” Probably, however, he could not have expected his irrelevant declaration that “The boy scout may be said to represent civilisation at its lowest”—an offhanded follow-up to his observation that Walsh’s characters incline toward “the open-air boy scout type”—to act as the primary catalyst to an unusually prolonged and singularly profuse disputation among readers of The Irish Times. Responding to a letter to the editor signed “F.L.J.” published on July 22nd which took exception to Kavanagh’s “remarkable, and quite unnecessary opinions,” one Oscar Love initiated on July 23rd an epistolary exchange which would continue, under the heading “Literary Criticism,” for more than a fortnight, involving a full fifty letters composed by—ostensibly—almost forty different correspondents (Irish Times, July 22–August 7, 1940). Seemingly perturbed by the arbitrariness of critical pronouncements, Love asserted that Kavanagh “made a slight error” in demeaning the boy scout:

It would have been wiser to omit the word “scout.” The boy represents civilisation at its lowest, and long may he remain so. Only the grown man develops and rejoices in the art of destruction.

Failing to detect the obviously intended irony of Love’s statement in its chastening allusion to literary critics like Kavanagh, not only F. L. J. but also Harold C. Brown and Frank E. Prenton Jones responded on July 24th in righteous defense of the Boy Scout movement. Their letters in turn prompted a rebuttal by Love, followed the next day by counter-rebuttals by both F.L.J. and Jones. “I prithee let this bedlamite orchestra play on,” reader M. C. Ahern exhorted The Irish Times on July 26th, as if any circulation-conscious editor would even consider interrupting a debate of such apparently spontaneous combustibility.

For the next week-and-a-half, in fact, the controversy generated by Kavanagh’s review of The Hill is Mine produced a true polyphony of Dublin opinion: from Ewart Milne’s apologia for his fellow poet in the face of “the gnats’ nest” he had disturbed by his review to anonymous and pseudonymous comparisons of the Boy Scout movement and the Hitler-Jugend; from Dublin wit Niall Montgomery’s expression of incredulity that the traditionally West Briton Irish Times should publish a comment even glancingly critical of Yeats to various correspondents’ musings on the aptness of the sewer as a metaphor for belletristic ambition and accomplishment in Ireland. The remarkably disparate chorus of accents and attitudes notwithstanding, the

2. A representative selection of these letters has been reprinted in John Wyse Jackson, ed., Myles Before Myles (203–26).

3. Indeed, according to Peter Kavanagh (Sacred Keeper 92), the editor himself of The Irish Times, R. M. Smyllie, contributed a letter on July 31st over the pseudonym (The) O’Madan.
cumulative effect of missives ranging in tone from the presumably earnest—a recommendation by R.H.S. on July 30th of Spinoza as “the greatest literary critic of all time”—to the certifiably inane—Judy Clifford’s account on July 27th of her disappointing meeting with some Boy Scouts in Co. Wicklow—was, perhaps inevitably, a decided facetiousness. For in another literary footnote associated with Maurice Walsh, many of the more blusterous (or pretentious) responses to Kavanagh’s review—including letters written backwards (to reflect the direction the discussion seemed to be moving) or in imitation of Joyce’s recently published _Finnegans Wake_—evidently originated with just one writer: the already pseudonymous litterateur Flann O’Brien. Resurrecting the spirit of two lesser controversies that he had enlivened with his friend Niall Montgomery in _The Irish Times_ in 1939 and earlier in 1940, O’Brien—or Brian O’Nolan as he was properly known—would shortly parlay the public interest in these mock debates into the regular column “Cruiskeen Lawn” published under the byline Myles na Gopaleen; on this occasion, however, the adoption by the prodigiously polynomial O’Nolan of monikers as diverse as Oscar Love, Lir O’Connor, Miss (alas) Luna O’Connor, W.R. Lambkin, and Whit Cassidy appears to have had no purpose other than to annoy the burgeoning rustic man of letters Patrick Kavanagh.

Indeed, although Kavanagh’s review had obviously invited reaction, the pedal point in the ensuing correspondence shifted gradually but unmistakably from Kavanagh the critic to Kavanagh the artist as more and more voices entered the contrapuntal imbroglio. The first of two especially captious motifs appeared four days after the review when Frank E. Prenton Jones recollected with disgust a “short story” written by Kavanagh “some months ago, which dealt with the lower order of potato-diggers and their vulgar remarks about the serving maids of the village.” Impressively, given that the piece alluded to seems to be neither the anecdote “Planting the Potatoes” which was printed in _The Irish Times_ on May 4, 1940 nor even the pastoral reminiscence published on October 25, 1939 as “A Rural Irish Contrast” to the war in Europe but rather a sketch entitled “Sentimental Ploughman” which appeared on May 30, 1939—almost fourteen months before the Walsh review—Oscar Love confidently patronized it the next day as “a delightful article,” observing that “Mr. Jones should recognise that the lowest orders are more original than university graduates, for they are not moulded in the college sausage machine.” Just as impressively, N. S. Harvey of Co. Tipperary and F.L.J. of Glasnevin confidently corroborated Jones’s very specific recollection of a very minor bit of hack writing on Kavanagh’s part, and other contributors to the debate referred to it with rather unlikely familiarity as well.

With possibly even less provocation, a number of readers—led by “F. O’Brien” on July 29th—responded with similar picayune faultfinding to the publication of Kavanagh’s poem “Spraying the Potatoes” one week into the Walsh controversy. Inspired by the poem’s being printed inside a border that made it look like a five-pound note, O’Brien wrote:
I had naturally enough inferred that our bank notes were being treated periodically with a suitable germicide, a practice which has long been a commonplace of enlightened monetary science in Australia. When I realised that the heading had reference to some verses by Mr. Patrick Kavanagh dealing with the part played by chemistry in modern farming, my chargrin [sic] may be imagined. . . . Perhaps the Irish Times, tireless champion of our peasantry, will oblige us with a series in this strain covering such rural complexities as inflamed goat-udders, warble-pocked shorthorn, contagious abortion, non-ovoid oviducts and nervous disorders among the gentlemen who pay the rent.

The following day, Lir O'Connor, apostrophizing to Kavanagh, declared that the poem would not suffice as “convincing literary proof of your existence,” and Oscar Love feigned sympathy for the poet, wondering: “Is Mr. Kavanagh crazy? He now puts another weapon in his critics’ hands. In ‘Spraying the Potatoes’—which my ten-year-old niece enjoyed reading—Mr. Kavanagh writes of ‘young girls swinging from the sky.’ It is really indecent to write thus of a parachutist in slacks.” More pettily (and less wittily) a reader employing as a pseudonym the chemical formula “Cu SO4”—for the compound sprayed on potatoes—refused to acknowledge a typesetting error in the fourth stanza of the poem: “In one line a wasp is poised on the edge of a barrel; in the next he is afloat on the surface of the liquor. A brimful barrel would explain it, but it is hardly worth explaining.” Several days later, an apparent competitor—“Na 2 Co 3”—complained:

Another appreciative reader of poetry is perturbed by the thought that the blossoms of Arran Banners, described as blue, are in reality white. It is doubtful if poetic licence permits such an inaccuracy as this, and I think Mr. Kavanagh should severely reprimand his Muse for not having consulted the Department of Agriculture’s leaflet on potatoes (sent free on application) before inspiring him.

UNDERSTANDABLY, IN LIGHT of the many abrasive remarks directed toward Kavanagh personally during this two-week riot of epistolography, a commentator writing in The Honest Ulsterman three decades after the fact might imagine Kavanagh’s being utterly bemused by both the extent and the nature of the response elicited by his review of The Hill is Mine:

Poor Kavanagh. God knows he had plenty of real problems to contend with. He must have been bewildered at this sudden eruption of quite causeless, meaningless schoolboy aggression [sic] conducted by such a frighteningly united bunch of juvenile delinquents. The message must have been clear to him—‘You are not one of us. You are not of our class. You have not had our education. You are not a Dubliner. Shut up or get out.’ (Jude the Obscure 29)

Contesting this supposition, Flann O’Brien’s biographer Anthony Cronin claims that “Kavanagh does not seem to have interpreted the correspondence this way; and in later years anyway he had certainly no animus against Brian O’Nolan on the head of it” (121). The poet’s brother Peter actually recalls that “Patrick and I enjoyed it immensely” (Sacred Keeper 97); and, indeed, Kavanagh’s own letter to the editor which finally closed the controversy on August 7th acknowledges that, while “all very adolescent,” the exchange of letters was also “at times faintly amusing.” He took particular satisfaction in
reading the letters in the afterglow of his original review:

In my review of Maurice Walsh’s “The Hill is Mine” I referred to the empty virtuosity of artists who were expert in the art of saying nothing. Ploughmen without land. One of my critics said it was a wistful remark, and, maybe, it was; but if ever a critic was proved right, all round, by his critics it happened this time.

Concluding with uncharacteristic equanimity that “On the serious letters I do not intend to comment here,” Kavanagh seemingly decided in his conventional response to the controversy to defer direct confrontation with the philistine faction he perceived as enjoying majority rule in Dublin’s literary and cultural politics.

As an unconventional “response to the controversy,” however, Kavanagh’s poem “Spraying the Potatoes,” published on The Irish Times book page about halfway through the Walsh debate, represents a subtle—even a subversive—expression of the delicate but desirable equipoise among polemics, poetics and literary politics that would subsequently elude the poet for almost two decades. For as the stone (as it were) in the midst of all, the poem does truly trouble, in terms Kavanagh suggested in 1958 in a lecture series entitled “Studies in the Technique of Poetry,” that stream of condescension—hurtful or playful—which finally engulfed the essential integrity of his review of The Hill is Mine. His mind, the poet asserted in his fourth lecture delivered at University College Dublin, “keeps saying that it is only by realising the full folly and nature of society and the things it will accept in the way of culture that you can understand the necessity for your own polemic, the need to state your own point of view” (“Extracts” 61); of course, beginning with “A Wreath for Tom Moore’s Statue” in 1944 and continuing well into the 1950s with such poems as “The Wake of the Books,” “The Paddiad,” “The Defeated,” and “The Christmas Mummers,” Kavanagh had elected against his own better judgment to follow“The Road to Hate” (Complete Poems 211) as his response to the hostility he experienced on the streets, in the pubs, and in the literary parlors of Dublin. But in “Spraying the Potatoes” he seems clearly to transform the sense of absolute displacement which would determine so much of that later verse into a statement of absolute transcendence of the sort he described in his seventh lecture:

A poet is interested in his own private world; he luxuriates in telling the truth; he never argues or holds a symposium to find out what to think on any given subject. Neither does a poet preach; he makes statements about what is. The statement floats free of common didacticism in a realm of pure logic; you can walk around it and examine it but you can do nothing about it. You can only attack the person of the man who released the statement, and that is the thing generally done. Only a few brave virtuous people are willing to recognize and honour the Logos when they experience it. (“Extracts” 68)

4. As Peter Kavanagh mentions in a note in The Complete Poems (401-02), these lectures were misdated 1956 in November Haggard.
For Kavanagh, then, as for fellow Ulster poet-in-exile (and preeminent
Kavanagh apologist) Seamus Heaney, who muses thirty years later on the
response of some poets of contemporary Northern Ireland to a literary poli­
tics of at least equal volatility, “The only reliable release for the poet was the
appeasement of the achieved poem”:

In that liberated moment, when the lyric discovers its buoyant completion, when the timeless
formal pleasure comes to its fullness and exhaustion, in that moment of self-justification and
self-obliteration the poet makes contact with the plane of consciousness where he is at once
intensified in his being and detached from his predicaments. (“Place and Displacement” 163)

Thus, to the extent that they reflect what Heaney emphasizes as “the pro­
found relation . . . between poetic technique and historical situation” (164),
even the stylistic and prosodic imperfections of “Spraying the Potatoes” rein­
force the subtle and subversive “polemic” of Kavanagh’s poem. For as
Heaney observes in his essay “Feeling into Words,” poetic technique must be
distinguished from the learned “skill of making,” from mere poetic craft:

Technique . . . involves not only a poet’s way with words, his management of metre, rhythm and
verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own
reality. It involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the
inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and
experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art. (47)

Or as Kavanagh asserts more succinctly in the first of his 1958 lectures, “The
question of technique is not simply a matter of grammar and syntax or any­
thing as easy as that. It has to do with the mystical” (“Extracts” 57).

Obviously, the “mystical” dimension of “Spraying the Potatoes” involves
the process by which the poet’s lyrical recollection of the life he had aban­
donned to pursue his muse can sustain him in the face of the inhospitable
reception given him by Dublin’s literary establishment. “So does a poem
bring a world alive in my mind,” he would write more than a quarter-century
later in the second of his “Shancoduff” poems, an impressionistic but unsen­
timental evocation of that same Iniskeen townland he had first extolled in
verse in 1934: immersing himself once more in a world of rushy fields, of
scythes and flails, of knapsack sprayers—“Put on four barrels / Filled with a
porringer tin”—Kavanagh acknowledges in 1966 his completion of clearly
the same sort of “long day’s journey into night and day the same day”
(Complete Poems 346–47) that he had undertaken during the Walsh contro­
versy in 1940. The affectionately reproduced details of the first seven stanzas
of “Spraying the Potatoes” thus affording him a literary transportation truly
beyond the Pale, the unfelicitously transplanted countryman Kavanagh
achieves in the third-person perspective of the final stanza of the poem—

And poet lost to potato-fields,
Remembering the lime and copper smell
Of the spraying barrels he is not lost
Or till blossomed stalks cannot weave a spell—

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a literal transcendence of the kind hinted at in the ninth of his UCD lectures: “The purpose of technique is to enable us to detach our experience from ourselves and see it as a thing apart” (“Extracts” 73).

III

SUBTLY, THEN, BUT SURELY, “Spraying the Potatoes” substantiates Heaney’s insistence that “The idea of poetry as a symbolic resolution of opposing truths, the idea of the poem as having its existence in a realm separate from the discourse of politics, does not absolve it or the poet from political status” (“Place and Displacement” 164). Just as subtly, however, the poem reveals the transience of its own transcendence in validating Heaney’s corollary that the poet can be “stretched between politics and transcendence, and is often displaced from a confidence in a single position by his disposition to be affected by all positions, negatively rather than positively capable” (164). For in acknowledging the intrinsic fickleness of nature at the same time that it presents the possibility for romantic engagement with nature, “Spraying the Potatoes” serves as a poetic milestone—a referential point of both departure and return—not only with regard to Kavanagh’s “Adventures in the Bohemian Jungle” (as he entitled one of his more caustic satires directed against literary and cultural Dublin), but also with regard to his verses of the early 1940s which manifest such seemingly deep-rooted antipathy toward the same world and life that he had celebrated during the first dozen years of his career as poet.

Of course, “Spraying the Potatoes” does not approach the fullest articulation of that antipathy, found in the jaundiced perspective of The Great Hunger, first published in 1942 and subsequently reprinted with “Spraying the Potatoes” in A Soul for Sale five years later. Yet, introducing in the fourth stanza of the poem, through his dispassionate description of the lethal potency of the lime and copper compound used to combat potato blight—“A wasp was floating / Dead on a sunken briar leaf / Over a copper-poisoned ocean”—a counter to his more typically whimsical personification of the wild roses, the potato-stalks and the dandelions as “young girls” with unloved hearts” which had constituted the first three stanzas, Kavanagh seems truly to anticipate the spirit of dis-ease with rural living which would occasionally find expression in his verse in the next decade-and-a-half. Indeed, by employing the conventionally romantic mode of the lyric to depict and reflect upon a farming chore of a decidedly unromantic and truly consequential sort,5 Kavanagh ultimately (albeit without apparent conscious design) locates the poem in conspicuous apposition to “Stony Grey Soil,” the

5. In a note to “Spraying the Potatoes” Peter Kavanagh explains: “To prevent ‘the blight’ potatoes had to be sprayed at least twice—in June and July, using a mixture of copper-sulphate and washing soda melted in a forty-gallon barrel of water. The barrel was placed conveniently on the headland. A two-gallon capacity back-carried sprayer was rented in the Village. Patrick sprayed the potatoes by walking up and down each furrow, the sprayer on his back. Around forty pounds weight or more. You came home tired after that day’s work” (The Complete Poems 392).
poem printed immediately after it in the chronologically arranged Complete Poems and the earliest expression of his temperamental—if temporary—rejection of the hills and the fields of Iniskeen and environs which had so inspired him from his earliest poetic efforts:

O stony grey soil of Monaghan
The laugh from my love you thieved;
You took the gay child of my passion
And gave me your clod-conceived. (Complete Poems 73)

First printed in The Bell in October of 1940, this poem, seemingly presenting through its emphasis on the dark underside of Irish country life a pronounced contrast to the prevailing transcendence of “Spraying the Potatoes,” actually brings into high relief the equivocation which quietly but insistently infiltrates the earlier poem. Even Kavanagh’s redirecting his attention in the penultimate stanza to the plants and the flowers to dismiss the old man who interrupts his reverie—“O roses / The old man dies in the young girl’s frown”—may be read as a willful (as opposed to a more characteristically wistful) repression of the sobering threat of blight inevitably suggested by the preventive measure of spraying and vaguely yet ominously mused upon by the old man’s echoing “an ancient farming prayer.”

As Antoinette Quinn has remarked, Kavanagh had allowed “worldly doubt to trouble poetic faith” (45) as early as the mid-1930s, taking literally to heart the negative evaluation of his black-hilled holding by insensitive cattle-drovers: “I hear and is my heart not badly shaken?” (Complete Poems 13). In 1951, beginning to disentangle himself from the “complexities of anger, hatred and ill-will towards the faults of man” which so possessed him during the 1940s, he recalled the aftereffect of that first “Shancoduff” poem in verses appropriately entitled “Innocence”: “Ashamed of what I loved,” he admits, “I flung her from me and called her a ditch / Although she was smiling at me with violets.” Briefly revisiting those familiar fields, however, he realizes that “I cannot die / Unless I walk outside these white-thorn hedges” (Complete Poems 241—42). In this respect, while straddling the boundary (as it were) between affection for and disaffection with the life of the Irish countryman—presumably the hedges in “Innocence” are the same ones that “the gulls like old newspapers are blown clear of . . . luckily” in The Great Hunger (Complete Poems 80)—“Spraying the Potatoes” may ultimately affirm its transcendent and transporting lyricism and function as a poetic landmark warranting Patrick Kavanagh’s eventual willing and willful return, in the last half-dozen years of his life and career, to a Monaghan both actual and imaginary: to that “right simplicity” he had so abruptly abandoned in the aftermath of the Walsh controversy in the summer of 1940.
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