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Patrick Kavanagh's 'Potentialities'

The Dublin literary periodical *Envoy* ceased publication in July 1951. On the back pages of its final issue it ran the last of Patrick Kavanagh's regular 'Diary' articles, a version of a talk given earlier that year at University College Dublin, entitled 'Literature in the University.' Though the magazine had been relatively short-lived, it was important to the poet, giving him regular income and the chance to voice developing attitudes to art and society. Kavanagh sometimes claimed his work for *Envoy* played a part in his 1950s poetic renovation, though it preceded by a number of years the serious illness and convalescence which he came to regard as a 'rebirth'.

Envoy cultivated a reputation for distrust of nationalist introspection and cherished Irish institutions. Kavanagh's contributions were irascible even by the standard of a magazine which frequently voiced exasperation with its milieu, and they were relished by many readers more for bracing ill-temper than argument. He was never, as his biographer Antoinette Quinn notes, 'given to consecutive reasoning';[1] 'Literature in the University' is characteristically jumpy and declamatory, its single-sentence paragraphs offering a close parallel to Kavanagh's spoken manner. Like much of Kavanagh's prose it is opinionated to a degree nearly repellent, but when it

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[1] Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Life* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001) 352.

is interesting it is also characteristically so. What seems initially mere provocation, through sometimes tortuous associative development, becomes less easily dismissible.

Kavanagh cheerfully suggests that the university might be of best use to the poet in ensuring a ready supply of supine devotees to his genius (he was fond of opining, and repeats the sentiment in 'Literature in the University', that women serve much the same purpose):

> This willingness to admire the good would be a real function of a university; and out of it good would come, and release for the admirers.
> It maybe said outright what is implicit in my theme – that you cannot learn to be a genius either in a university or out of it.
> It might be that universities open a man's mind to his own potentialities, but if the potentialities are there it is almost certain that they will find a way out; they will burst a road. I scarcely believe in the theory of the 'mute inglorious Milton'. There might well be mute Bowens or Priestleys or Blundens, but hardly a Milton, a Shakespeare, an Auden.[2]

Kavanagh's associated 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard', a poem he learnt as a schoolboy, with anxiety about achievement.[3] Here he seems drawn to its figure for wasted promise (promoted here to a 'theory', of which it is surely something like the reverse, a sentimental notion that retains power despite susceptibility to rational dismantling) through a Miltonic concern with ambition and arrogance. 'Admire' is a favourite verb of Milton's, employed in many different contexts in the poems, though perhaps most

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[2] 'Literature in the University' (1951), *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose,* ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput, 2003) 231-236, 233.

[3] See also a late poem, 'The Poet's Ready Reckoner'. Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn, (London: Penguin, 2004) 251-255, 255

memorably in mock-heroic scenes of diabolic wonderment in *Paradise Lost*.[4] Kavanagh's genius, it may be said, has 'a mind not to be changed by place or time' (*Paradise Lost*, I, l.253); while 'either in a university or out of it' returns us to the articulation of similar ideas by Christopher Marlowe's Mephistophilis,[5] almost invariably invoked as an editorial note to Satan's boasts of eschatological self-sufficiency.

The unwieldy word 'potentialities' extends the mood of mock-pomposity. 'Potentiality', though nearly synonymous with 'potential', seems a more abstract quality still, a sense reflected in the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition: 'an instance of the latent capacity for development a person, thing, etc., in which the quality of having potential is embodied'. It is an older word than we might imagine – *OED* records first usage in 1587 – but it seems always to have surfaced in scholarly discourse: the *OED* citations are taken from works of doctrinal theology, philosophy, psychology, linguistics and reference. The few literary uses recorded are either negative, referring to lost potential, or are exactly synonymous with a now rare sense of 'potential', the state of actually having power. No poetic use is cited.

Kavanagh's ballad 'If Ever You Go to Dublin Town', written at around the same time as 'Literature in the University', uses 'potentiality' to

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4 See *Paradise Lost* I, l.781; II, l.677; VI, l.498.

5 *Dr Faustus*, I, iii, l.76.

suggest both scholarly fustian and squandered talent:

> I saw his name with a hundred others
> In a book in the library;
> It said he had never fully achieved
> His potentiality. (*Collected* 191-193, 193)

The preceding stanza enjoins the reader of a future century to 'Sniff for my personality / Is it vanity's vapour now?', while the next and last asserts, 'He knew that posterity has no use / For anything but the soul'. Here 'potentiality' is intermediary between 'personality' and 'posterity' – it is how the first makes a claim on the second, and how the latter judges the former. In turn, the plosive trio is associated with the insubstantial – both negatively valued 'vanity's vapour' and the 'soul', the lonely and lofty 'spirit' of genius.

Patrick Kavanagh's 'potentiality', the extent to which he achieved or failed it, is the subject of this essay. His background was such as to make deep anxiety about and considerable pride in literary achievement all but inevitable. He was born in Mucker, a townland in the parish of Inniskeen, Co. Monaghan, in October 1904. His father, James Kavanagh, was the illegitimate son of a schoolmaster – the poet refers to the stigma of bastardy in several works, always obliquely – who worked from the family home as a cobbler. His mother Bridget, a former barmaid, managed the household and the livestock which provided its subsidiary income. His parents were frugal and hard-working, ambitious to buy and farm their own land. They bought a five-acre farm in 1910; by the 1920s the Kavanaghs were among the more

prosperous small farmers in their district. Patrick was the third child and eldest son of a family of nine – his only surviving brother, Peter, was twelve years his junior. As heir to business and farm, he was in some ways spoilt, and would all his life demand attention and adulation, particularly from women. His clumsiness and dreamy laziness, meanwhile, attracted ire from his parents and employers. He attended the National (primary) school in nearby Kednaminsha from 1909 to 1918. The education he received there, which was always catechetical in form and usually so in content, did not engage his interest, but he had a good memory, a knack for arithmetic, and enjoyed learning poems by heart. He remembered school anthologies with affection, as an early stimulus to poetic enthusiasm, though he also recognised early the danger of derivativeness for the autodidact poet, registering it in a squib of the 1930s, 'The Weary Horse', in which the nag 'language vitiate' has 'the blank look' of 'a Victorian book / In a modern school' (*Collected* 28). However, he proved not to be academically gifted in a way which might have given him the chance of a scholarship to secondary school, and his formal education finished before he was fourteen years old. Having no particular talent for his father's trade, Kavanagh spent most of the years between the end of his schooling and the beginnings of his literary career in the late 1930s working on the family farms. The monotony of farmwork and the embarrassment of impecunious dependence are conjured in the narrative poem *The Great Hunger* (1942) and *Tarry Flynn* (1948),

Kavanagh's only novel. His 1938 memoir *The Green Fool,* though lighter in tone than the 1940s work, does not gloze the emotional and material privation of rural Irish life to anything like the extent that the author's subsequent repudiations of it might suggest.

Kavanagh found it difficult to remember how a childish pleasure in learning poetry became a desire to write it:

> And that was me in that virginal time before I had ever thought of writing a verse. A strange time, difficult to visualize, for a man who later became so deeply involved in writing verse. How strange a thing like that happens to a man. He dabbles in something and does not realize that it is his life. There is nothing deliberate or conscious about my beginnings. It all happened like an accident. With most other verse writers of whom I have read there was usually a literary background or some roots somewhere.[6]

The assertion seems truthful and likely: moments of literary vocation are convenient for biographical narrative but in reality rare. But it is also strategic, allowing Kavanagh to deny responsibility for his poetic ambition, to forget the humiliations which accompany the pursuit of experience. The potent road-burster has a proudly submissive streak, willing poetry to overwhelm him so he need not humble himself by courting it. He declares himself rootless, in contrast to those with 'a literary background', inverting a notion of peasant autochthony to which he had always a vexed response.

Kavanagh's early productivity was of a scale which might well prompt forgetfulness of his pre-poetic life. He wrote voluminously, but attained publishable quality only occasionally. Success of a sporadic and

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6 'School Book Poetry', *A Poet's Country*, 269-271, 270.

unpredictable kind is to be expected of the poet teaching himself to write; it characterised Kavanagh's career, however, long after his literary apprenticeship concluded. His discovery in 1925 of Æ's *Irish Statesman* introduced him to modern literature; in 1930 the journal published 'Ploughman', which became Kavanagh's *entrée* to writerly circles. In December 1931 Kavanagh walked to Dublin dressed in patched working clothes to meet Æ, affectations which he was to regret as the actions of a 'gobshite'[7], but which demonstrate his early appreciation of the value of iconic gesture. He was yet to strike such memorable poses in verse; 'Ploughman' makes far less impact than an encounter with the ploughman. The four-quatrain poem alternates trimeter and dimeter lines, each presenting a contrast: green lea against brown clay, 'silvery gull' and 'brazen crow', 'tranquillity' and 'ecstasy', earth against sky. The first three stanzas become progressively abstract, the fourth returns in resolution to the soil: 'I find a star-lovely art / In a dark sod'. Kavanagh's uncertain command of verbal music might be gauged by the fact that poem as originally published did not include 'dark', which was Æ's suggestion.

'Ploughman' achieved sufficient currency to be chosen as the title-poem for Kavanagh's first collection, *Ploughman and Other Poems* (1936). It is representative of, and rather more accomplished than most of the volume's poems, but does not suggest the direction of the poet's

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7 Letter to Peter Kavanagh, 19th January 1949, quoted in Quinn 70.

subsequent development. Indeed, only one poem in *Ploughman* does so: 'Inniskeen Road: July Evening'. This sonnet, quite unlike the other pieces in *Ploughman*, specifies the social life, 'the wink-and-elbow language of delight' (*Collected* 15), which the essentially gregarious poet forgoes in the process of developing his own suggestive idiom, his vocabulary of poetic pleasure. 'Inniskeen Road' marks significant achievement because of its self-reflection: the poet excluded from the 'codes' and nudges of revellers on their way to a barn-dance will make of their speech a flexible poetic vernacular. The closing couplet sees him master of, but uncertain how to proceed along his newly-burst road: 'A road, a mile of kingdom, I am king / Of banks and stones and every blooming thing.' Similar oscillations between potency and anxiety mark the decade between the publication of this collection and Kavanagh's next trade collection, *A Soul for Sale* (1947).

'Shancoduff', which might also be considered an early success, though it underwent much revision before finding the form in which it is best known, and long remained uncollected, describes Reynolds' Farm, the smallholding that was Kavanagh's particular responsibility from its purchase in 1925. (It became his property in a formal sense only in 1938, however, when Bridget Kavanagh transferred the deeds in the hope that he would marry and settle there). Its celebration of bleak beauty ends in characteristic anxiety, as the poet overhears cattle-drovers disparage the 'hungry hills', implicitly ascribing their barrenness to the farmer's literary

pursuits. ‘Shancoduff’, like ‘Inniskeen Road’, manipulates literary tropes while conceding little to elevated diction or intertextual reference. ‘The every blooming thing’ of ‘Inniskeen Road’ and the ‘three perishing calves’ of ‘Shancoduff’ are more self-conscious than Kavanagh’s later poetic colloquialisms, but vital compared to the stiff pastoral of his other 1930s work; the allusions in both poems – to Alexander Selkirk and Lot’s wife respectively – are determinedly accessible.

Nonetheless, ‘Shancoduff’ comments coherently and subtly on its own literary-historical moment. The sublime, a source of power for the poet, signifies only poverty for the drover whose pragmatic words dominate the last stanza. In the poem as printed in the *Dublin Magazine* in 1937, the drovers are ‘cattle-smugglers’, making their interest less professional than predatory, and suggesting again the anxiety which always animates and disturbs proprietorial pomp in Kavanagh. ‘I hear,’ responds the poet, ‘and is my heart not badly shaken?’ (*Collected* 21). As with some of Yeats’s rhetorical questions, the reader is tempted to answer impertinently. ‘Shancoduff’ incorporates the drover’s un- or pre-Romantic values to assert an uninterrupted Romanticism, but it does so in terms which require no theorisation or annotation. Attention to the ordinariness of Kavanagh’s language obliges us to acknowledge that in his best poems, it is accompanied by a more than ordinary capacity for self-awareness.

An analogous facility is evident in *The Green Fool*, the fictionalised

autobiography that Kavanagh was later to repudiate. The book was written to commission – Kavanagh's friend Helen Waddell secured a publisher's agreement for him while he was living in London in 1937, and she read chapters as he wrote them. Though the initial publication agreement failed, the autobiography quickly found another publisher, and was reviewed favourably as refreshingly comic-realist relief from solemn Revivalist idealisation of the 'peasant'. Writing to requirement made good use of Kavanagh's talents at this stage in his career: his delight in explication was indulged by the necessity to explain rural customs for urban audiences; the same audience's demand for entertainment checked his propensity to hector. However, even sympathetic accounts of *The Green Fool* find something distasteful in its light-touch impressionism and its marketability to the readership which had enthusiastically consumed translations of Blasket Island autobiography.[8] If Kavanagh was writing primarily for his London patrons, he was doing so with a competence and confidence which militated against servility and moreover, outstripped anything he had managed in verse. The short, anecdotal chapters have the authoritative movement of good poems, the dialogue's liveliness is matched by its likeliness, and the exposition of rural custom unexploitative. His delineation of the mutual invisibility of the popular culture of his experience and Literary Revivalism is valuable in a literary-historical sense, though not reliable in

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[8] See Quinn's chapter 'Towards the Green Fool', 87-105.

autobiographical detail, lightly handled, not yet disfigured by the the misrepresentation and resentment which would come to overwhelm his remarks on the subject. *The Green Fool* is unambitious, but it is remarkably well done.

The book's withdrawal following a vindictive libel action by Oliver St John Gogarty, is to be regretted, as is Kavanagh's subsequent conviction that it was 'dreadful', 'written under the evil aegis of the so-called Irish Literary Revival' and 'stage-Irish' in conception.[9] That conflation of Revivalism with stage-Irishry is characteristic of Kavanagh's fractious attitude to the writers of the generation preceding his own. His prejudices represent something like an inversion of those of the major Revival writers: where they install the claims of cultural nationalism above those of religious difference, Kavanagh is bitterly anti-nationalist and ferociously sectarian. His impatience with the class system which made him an object of interest as a 'farmer-poet' curiously parallels the social privilege which legitimised Revival interventions in folk culture. To call Kavanagh a kind of anarchist, as Anthony Cronin does,[10] is to occlude his conservative and timid aspect, but his inconsistencies are sufficiently numerous and blatant to suggest strategic rejection of coherent thought on the subject of a national literature. On Yeats, in particular, he found it necessary to express an array of mutually incompatible opinions.

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[9] 'Self-Portrait', *A Poet's Country* 305-316, 306.

[10] Anthony Cronin, *Dead As Doornails, A Chronicle of Life* (1976 Oxford: Oxford University Press,1986) p.92

Yeats's unrivalled dominance of twentieth-century Irish poetry created a vacancy – at least as far as literary journalism and publishers' marketing departments are concerned – for his successor, which has yet to be convincingly filled. Kavanagh was the most likely candidate in his generation and made repeated applications for the position by denying Yeats's greatness or his Irishness, or more usually, both. Vulgarised accounts of the theory of poetry proposed by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) have kept the notion of Yeats as disabling precursor current in more scholarly contexts too. Bloomian ideas are of limited use in dealing with an Irish generation which arguably produced no 'strong' poet, while a psychological paradigm runs the risk of mystifying, rather then illuminating Kavanagh's hostile attitude to Yeats, which he attributed frankly to 'spite' (Quinn 430). Such an admission, though it was made for effect at a gathering of academics who had bored him, rather renders superfluous analysis of his simple put-downs, among which we might group 'W.B. Yeats', which was, piquantly enough but wholly coincidentally, the last poem Kavanagh published. When Kavanagh aimed at more than curmudgeonliness, he articulated reservations which are widely shared among general readers if not among scholars: unease at Yeats's doctrines of deliberate artifice, impatience at his prostration before Anglo-Ireland, distrust of his intellectual charlatanism.[11] Kavanagh's sectarian prejudice

[11] See 'William Butler Yeats' and 'George Moore's Yeats', *A Poet's Country* 178-181, 182-185.

and his anti-nationalism collide spectacularly whenever he considers Yeats's Irishness: in a marvellously ambivalent 1962 account, he contrives to chide Yeats both for being a Protestant 'outsider' and for creating a national myth in which Catholics as different in temperament and purpose as Patrick Pearse and Frank O'Connor could invest energy. 'In the end he became a stage Anglo-Irishman,' Kavanagh wrote in his contribution to the *Irish Times* Centenary Supplement (*A Poet's Country* 185). The phrase at once suggests Kavanagh's contempt for Abbey Theatre sentimentalisations of the peasantry and his horror at Yeats's disregard for the authentic.

Theatricality and authenticity are crucial to one very important exception to the remarks above, a poem in which it might be argued Kavanagh displays features (albeit somewhat deflected) of a Bloomian ephebe: *The Great Hunger* (1942). The long poem was written when Kavanagh was in close contact with Frank O'Connor, who co-edited with Sean Ó Faoláin the Dublin literary periodical *The Bell*. O'Connor was centrally important to the publication and reception of *The Great Hunger*, praising it in the issue of *Horizon* in which extracts first appeared under the title of 'The Old Peasant' and using his influence as a member of the editorial board of Cuala Press to have the poem published as a limited-edition chapbook.

The poems that Kavanagh published in *The Bell* in 1940 and 1941 represent an enormous advance in competence on *Ploughman* – the poet's

immense compositional effort of the late 1930s, which produced half a dozen manuscript collections, was at last showing results. 'Stony Grey Soil', 'A Christmas Childhood' and 'Art McCooey', which appeared in the six months between October 1940 and April 1941, form a triad on the subject of potential. The iambs and anapaests of 'Stony Grey Soil' create a lumbering rhythm which, matching the poem's subject of rural gaucheness and emotional impoverishment, is also a riposte to Yeatsian wavering. The metaphor of 'soil' or clay for that which suppresses joy and creativity in the countryman had been part of Kavanagh's poetic stock for some time: here, however, it becomes particular as the poet names 'Mullahinsha, Drummeril, Black Shanco' (*Collected* 38-39) in what might be called, with an apology to the later Kavanagh, a 'hate-act and its pledge'. 'Stony Grey Soil' enumerates the ways in which 'potentialities' are retarded: self-deception, cowardice, a paradoxical worship of ugly pragmatism at the expense of 'beauty, love and truth' (38). Its deliberate clumsiness bears witness to the partial success of that retardation; its audacious play with register ('O stony grey soil of Monaghan / You burgled my bank of youth!' [38]) shows the poet having burst his road towards the territory of self-satire.

'A Christmas Childhood' is a poem of origins, of the conditions instrumental in developing a lyric sense. Poetry requires both the sonic and the semantic, so a passer-by speaks approvingly of the poet's father's skill as a musician: ' "Can't he make it talk – / the melodion" ' (*Collected* 41), and

the child-poet makes primal attempts at signifying – six notches in the doorpost to represent his age – to its accompaniment. Juxtaposing the local and the archetypal is a verbal matter: 'Cassopeia was over / Cassidy's hanging hill' – the poem is psychologically acute in that the similar sound of the names of constellation and farmer is just the sort of coincidence that might strike a six-year-old as mysteriously meaningful.

'Art McCooey' is explicitly a poem of retrospection: from the perspective of 'Donnybrook in Dublin ten years later' the speaker 'recover[s]' an earlier self, the peasant 'empire builder' carting manure to his 'foreign possessions' (*Collected* 41). Kavanagh moved to Dublin permanently in 1939, and excepting some periods of convalescence in later life, stayed in Monaghan only occasionally. A cinematic fade which signals temporal shift anticipates similar effects in *The Great Hunger*: 'The steam rising from the load is still / Warm enough to thaw my frosty fingers.' The title suggests another form of retrospection, rare in Kavanagh's work: an allusion to Ireland's Gaelic traditions. Art McCooey or MacCumhaigh (1738-1773), a labourer and gardener, lived not far from Inniskeen, in Creggan, Co Armagh. Around two dozen of MacCumhaigh's poems survive; all in Irish, many lament the fall of the Gaelic social order, while the best known, 'Ag Úir Chill an Chreagáin' ('In Creggan Churchyard') is an *aisling* notable for its touching, naïve manner and lack of Jacobite-inspired hope. Kavanagh's choice of title has been read as a

'programmatic' rejection of Anglo-Ireland and the Revival and an acknowledgement of MacCumhaigh as a 'literary ancestor'.[12] Given that Kavanagh boasted no proficiency in Irish, scorned attempts to revive the language for everyday and literary purposes and was crudely impatient with nostalgia for Gaelic Ireland, the line of descent is distinctly murky, and the opportunism of the gesture militates against its effectiveness as a snub to Revivalism. In a much later essay, Kavanagh found fault with MacCumhaigh's whimsy and lack of specificity.[13] But the apolitical texture of MacCumhaigh's poems, in which satire and lament resolve into pathos or fantasy, finds a parallel, curiously enough, in both the idea of 'mute inglorious Milton' in which Kavanagh professes not to believe, and his individualistic assertion that 'potentialities' cannot be constrained by social or educational deprivation. Kavanagh, like his eighteenth-century predecessor, situates his protests in the realm of the aesthetic, not within political structures.

'Art McCooey' anticipates in lyric and comic mode concerns which in the *The Great Hunger* are elaborated as tragedy and drama: the emotional, sexual and intellectual privation which characterised the lives of Irish small farmers at mid-century. The social and economic reasons for such extreme constraint of personal freedom, and its role in prolonging the

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[12] Antoinette Quinn, 'Patrick Kavanagh's Parish Myth', Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) 92

[13] 'On Poetry', *A Poet's Country*, 257-9, 258.

depopulation of the Irish countryside, are treated in depth by historians,[14] and with specific reference to Kavanagh, by the chapter on *The Great Hunger* in Quinn's biography. 'Art McCooey' summarises the problem in eight lines. The poet meets a neighbour who has been disappointed in courtship:

> We wove our disappointments and successes
> To patterns of a town-bred logic
> 'She might have been sick...' 'No, never before,
> A mystery, Pat, and they all appear so modest.'
>
> We exchanged our fool advices back and forth:
> 'It could easily be their cow was calving,
> And sure the rain was desperate that night...'
> Somewhere in the mists a light was laughing. (*Collected* 42)

Without for a moment leaving the mode of lyric reminiscence for something more exegetical, these few lines allude to a remarkable number of the conditions which by the 1940s had diminished and demoralised Irish rural communities. A century's social change has destroyed traditional modes of managing sexual behaviour, leaving the poet and his interlocutor at the mercy of 'town-bred logic', garnered presumably from the censored popular press and cinema. The potential excuse of a calving cow, however, reminds the reader that the speakers – tied to their smallholdings – have not even the dubious freedoms of consumer culture as compensation for the loss of established *mores.* A lingering misogyny – 'they all appear so modest' – almost immediately checks a sentimental view of those traditional customs.

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[14] See Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848-1918* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1973) 1-20 for a concise account.

Stranded between modernity and archaism, and suffering the worst of each, the poet and his neighbour become self-defeatingly timid, mocked by an *ignis fatuus* cloaked in Revivalist mist.

However, 'Art McCooey' reaches a conclusion quite different from that of *The Great Hunger* on the artistic consequences of emotional and social retardation:

> Wash out the cart with a bucket of water and a wangel
> Of wheaten straw. Jupiter looks down.
> Unlearnedly and unreasonably poetry is shaped,
> Awkwardly but alive in the unmeasured womb. (*Collected* 43)

Potency is signified openly by the patriarchal presence of Jupiter and anti-intellectual defiance, but also implicitly in the ironic claim of awkward, 'unmeasured' composition. 'Art McCooey', with hardly a misstep in its adaptation of Hiberno-English vernacular to well-turned pastoral lyric, continues Kavanagh's progress along the road first burst on a July evening in Inniskeen.

Except for its excursions into free indirect style, *The Great Hunger* is voiced by a more detached speaker, and its account of the effects of deprivation more pessimistic, more likely, and yet also, perhaps, more amenable to elegiac sentimentality of the 'mute inglorious Milton' variety. 'Standing between the plough handles' the protagonist Patrick Maguire 'sees / At the end of a long furrow his name signed / Among the poets, prostitutes' (*Collected* 68); a little later in the poem's seasonal movement, though the passage belongs earlier in Maguire's life-story, we are told,

‘Nobody will ever know how much tortured poetry the pulled weeds on the ridge wrote / Before they withered in the July sun’ (*Collected* 76). Given the unpatronising care with which Kavanagh elsewhere delineates Maguire’s intellectual capacities and interests, these glimpses of him as *poète maudit* seem out of place if not ridiculous. Maguire is not unreflective, but (as we might expect) lacks the leisure to pursue his thoughts; he is self-aware enough to know the limits of his knowledge, an ‘undergraduate’ in his community’s ‘university’, the pub (*Collected* 77-8). Kavanagh’s characterisation of him as a bohemian *manqué* makes little sense except as part of *The Great Hunger*’s synthetic attitude to forms of creativity, its persistent conflation of potency and potential. The metaphor which follows the image of withered weeds is less remarkable than some commentators have suggested, since it draws on the ancient convention by which the soul (*anima*, a feminine noun in Latin) is personified as a woman, but it is nonetheless a significant inversion of the creative confluence of masculine and feminine power which concludes ‘Art McCooey’: ‘Nobody will ever read the wild, sprawling, scrawling mad woman’s signature, / The hysteria and the boredom of the enclosed nun of his thought.’ (*Collected* 76) The poem’s figuration of the body is unisexual also, returning repeatedly to the image of parted legs, in which the reader might perceive a submerged allusion to King Lear’s ‘unaccommodated man […] poor, bare, fork’d

animal'.[15] Early in the poem Maguire is seen with his head 'hanging between wide-apart / Legs' of his plough-shafts (*Collected* 64), a uxorious gesture from the 'man who made a field his bride' (*Collected* 65), albeit one disrupted by the Cerberean presence of his dog and horse between the same shafts. The girls of the parish sit 'on the grass banks of lanes / Stretch-legged and lingering staring' at menfolk too timid to make a pass at them (*Collected* 76); conversely, Maguire's unmarried sister Mary Anne finds herself 'straddle-legged' across life, 'One leg in hell and the other in heaven / And between the purgatory of middle-aged virginity.' (*Collected* 78) Mrs Maguire's uncomfortable accommodation of sexual 'Nature' to repressive, superstitious Catholicism prompts another recurrence: 'He listened to the lie that is a woman's screen / Around a conscience when soft thighs are spread.' (*Collected* 73) Maguire spreads his own legs to masturbate over the hearth (*Collected* 72, 88), and is metaphorically bisected by his mother's harsh tongue: 'It cut him up the middle till he became more woman than man, / And it cut through to his mind before the end.' (*Collected* 78) The effect is of an obsessive focus on the generative organs, deflected so minutely as to render the evasion pointless, by the demands of cynical 'Respectability' (*Collected* 69).

Lost potential is the master theme of *The Great Hunger*: Kavanagh never fulfilled his own more completely than in writing about his powerless,

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[15] *King Lear*, III.iv.106-108

directionless namesake. Quinn points to the autobiographical content of the poem, and the contemporaneous, unfinished 'Why Sorrow?', which the poet later mined for 'Father Mat' and the lyric 'The Long Garden' (Quinn 164). Maguire, and to a lesser extent, the priest-protagonist of the more fragmented works, is a shadow-self, the countryman that the poet could have become or remained, had he not urbanized and impoverished himself – both Maguire and Father Mat are financial successes compared to their perpetually indigent creator. That Kavanagh should achieve poetic success in writing about a failed *alter ego* has its ironic aspect, which Declan Kiberd seizes upon to link him (somewhat factitiously) with Beckett.[16] The difference between these near-contemporaries is more illuminating than any similarity: Beckettian failure is more total than anything Kavanagh contemplated, discouraging of any notion of 'potentiality'. Even the relatively elaborate and somewhat sentimental world of *Waiting for Godot* could never accommodate 'God the Father in a tree / The Holy Spirit is the rising sap / And Christ [...] the green leaves' (*Collected* 68) *The Great Hunger* never acknowledges that 'potentiality' only exists in its frustration – achieved 'potentiality' cease to be potential and becomes achievement.

Implicitly, however, the poem does recognise that potential is necessarily abstract, and it begins to act upon the principles of concretion and particularity which underpin Kavanagh's later work. His statements of

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[16] Declan Kiberd, 'Underdeveloped Comedy: Patrick Kavanagh' Irish Classics (London: Granta, 2000) ##, #

the presence of God ‘in the bits and pieces of Everyday’ (*Collected* 72) can sometimes militate against their explicit intentions – that ‘Everyday’ is itself an abstraction is emphasised by majuscule. More significant are the links he draws between abstraction and lack of courage or potency:

> Once one day in June when he was walking
> Among his cattle in the Yellow Meadow
> He met a girl carrying a basket –
> And he was then a young and heated fellow.
> Too earnest, too earnest! He rushed beyond the thing
> To the unreal. And he saw Sin
> Written in letters larger than John Bunyan dreamt of. (*Collected* 70)

A flight to the conceptual is the intellectual equivalent of premature ejaculation: far from indicating maturity, it reveals a mind stranded in the anxieties and obsessions of adolescence. Addiction to abstraction is, for Kavanagh, not just a peasant’s emotional problem, but a national disease. His prose returns again and again to the damage done to Irish culture by the ‘idea of Ireland as a spiritual entity’ (*A Poet’s Country* 181), the ‘myth’ and ‘illusion’ of ‘ “Ireland” ’ (*A Poet’s Country* 193). He blames Protestant writers in particular for elevating Irishness to an abstraction (the first quotation in the latter sentence is about Yeats, the second about F.R. Higgins.) That this is prejudiced and unfair is beyond doubt, but it explains the otherwise puzzling interpolation of Bunyan – philoprogenitive and not exercised by sexual morality to the exclusion of other principles governing Christian conduct, the seventeenth-century writer seems otherwise anomalous in this context. For Kavanagh, abstraction – moral or national –

is a Protestant malady which Catholics have foolishly adopted and allowed to flourish: the glib cant of *Hiberniores Hibernis ipsis* seems not too distant from Kavanagh's reasoning here. It might also illuminate the puzzling simile by which Mrs Maguire is likened to 'a Protestant spire' (*Collected* 67). She, we learn a little later in the poem, cynically uses the institutionalised abstractions of religious form to conceal her heathenish trust in natural impulse. But her son is duped by the 'screen', as Kavanagh's contemporaries were by cultural nationalism, and 'takes it as the literal truth' (*Collected* 73).

The Great Hunger is not itself free from the contagion – personifications appear even where the poet is at pains to reject the melodrama of an abstract understanding of fulfilment. Maguire watches children picking flowers and reflects that rather than have 'life's truth singly', bloom by bloom, he desires an

> Absolute envased bouquet –
> All or nothing. And it was nothing. For God is not all
> In one place, complete and labelled like a case in a railway store
> Till Hope comes in and takes it on his shoulder – (*Collected* 72)

An adroit use of free indirect style means that the railway porter Hope can both demonstrate the terminal nature of Maguire's enthralment by abstract thought, and the poet's continued struggle to resist it with quotidian figuration.

Kavanagh's trust in particularity as a source of poetic power became near to absolute, and too often, absolutist. The sporadic nature of his

achievement shows the limits of such trust in minutiae and mundanity, though when he allows a political charge to galvanise it, as in his elegy for the socialist activist James Larkin, the result is energetic and refreshing. 'Lough Derg', written in 1942, is more explicitly sociological than *The Great Hunger*, based on Kavanagh's visits, as a features reporter for the *Irish Independent* and the Catholic weekly *The Standard*, to the pilgrimage site in Co. Donegal. The poem contains autobiographical matter of interest: for example, as Quinn notes, Kavanagh 'smuggle[s]' into it the prehistory of his first sexual experience – the 'convent schoolgirl' with whom he lost his virginity had been sexually abused by a priest (Quinn 81). But it is more documentary than poem: its language remains mostly lifeless, Kavanagh's ambivalence about the value of the pilgrimage manifesting itself in confusion rather than fruitful tension. It might seem that the failure of 'Lough Derg' to offer a microcosmic account of mid-century Irish life validates Kavanagh's celebrated confidence in the local and specific, which in his best-known polemic he theorises as the 'parochial':

> Parochialism and provincialism are direct opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis—towards which his eyes are turned—has to say on the subject. This runs through all activities.
> The parochial mentality on the other hand never is in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilisations are based on parochialism—Greek, Israelite, English. […] In Ireland were are inclined to be provincial, not parochial, for it requires a great deal of courage to be parochial. When we do attempt to have the courage of our parish we are inclined to go false and play up to the larger parish on the other side of the Irish sea. In recent times we have had two great Irish parishioners—James Joyce and

George Moore.[17]

Kavanagh's 1948 novel *Tarry Flynn* differs from *The Green Fool* in that it has shed provincial anxiety about comprehensibility to and reception by metropolitan or non-Irish readers. The result is a text secure in idiom and adept in the creation of atmosphere, but underpowered in terms of narrative, and indeed, overall purpose. To employ a Hiberno-English phrase, *Tarry Flynn* is 'country cute': shrewd, alert to nuance, but constrained by received ideas and repetitive focus. It does not play up to those readers from larger parishes across the Irish Sea or Atlantic Ocean, but unlike Joyce and Moore, makes no compelling case for their attention.

Critics have, in any case, tended to place unwarranted faith in Kavanagh's formula, which read in context leads to the suspicion that it was concocted for that gleefully anglophile provocation: 'Greek, Israelite, English'. Not only did he keep an eye turned towards various metropoli in the interests of income and self-promotion; he was sensitive of his standing among the artistic urban bourgeoisie, a touchiness demonstrated by his libel action against the journal *The Leader* in 1954. It is perhaps telling of more than Kavanagh's ambiguous relationship to the establishment – telling of something in Irish poetry's relation to power – that this libel case ultimately led to the Taoiseach, John Costello, acting as Kavanagh's sponsor and employment agent.[18]

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[17] 'Parochialism and Provincialism', *A Poet's Country,* 237.

[18] Costello, out of office at the time of the trial, acted for *The Leader.* His efficient and somewhat brutal cross-examination of Kavanagh won the case for the defendant, but he

Similarly, it is possible to overstate the importance of Kavanagh's long convalescence after a successful treatment for lung cancer, to which he attributed a personal renaissance. 1955 and 1956 were undoubtedly creative years for the poet, but the deliberate casualness which he presented as a new development is anticipated in *The Great Hunger*. His memorable metaphor for productive carelessness, playing 'a true note on a dead slack string', is present, albeit not yet positively valued, in the 1942 poem as 'October playing a symphony on a slack wire paling' (*Collected* 64). Nor does the doctrine of slackness represent any real diminution of anxiety about 'potentiality', though in the later work its expression is less overt.

The strongest single lyric of Kavanagh's later career is, however, directly related to his illness and recovery. 'The Hospital' is doctrinaire in its insistence on the poet's duty as Adamic namer, but it contrives to unite colloquial diction with a certain altitude: 'Naming these things is the love-act and its pledge / For we must record love's mystery without claptrap, / Snatch out of time the passionate transitory.' (*Collected* 217) The generative metaphor registers Kavanagh's perennial concern with potency, while the emphasis on names and records as a bulwark against time's depredations recalls the retreat from abstraction which signifies achieved potential. The paradox of 'snatching' and preserving the 'transitory' articulates the elusiveness of potential: fulfil it, and it disappears.

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felt remorse when the poet became seriously ill shortly afterwards, and used his influence to secure him an extra-mural lectureship in University College Dublin. A full account is given by Quinn 325-341.

Occasionally, Kavanagh's later work explores the dangers of 'not-caring'. 'Living in the Country', written about a prolonged stay in Monaghan in 1959, contains this notably proleptic reflection:

> Oddly enough I begin to think of St Francis
> […]
> Was he an old fraud, a non-poet
> Who is loved for his non-ness
> Like any performer? (*Collected* 234)

'Living in the Country', of mostly indifferent quality, works through bitter self-pity to a phrase of gorgeous pastoral lyricism: 'Except that it was August evening under whitethorn / And early blackberries' (*Collected* 235), asserting, in the self-reflexive manner familiar since 'Inniskeen Road: July Evening' that he is not yet quite null.

But it is impossible to deny that Kavanagh has been loved for his 'non-ness', and for what he is not. He has been claimed for Irish nationalism, and for the sentimental 'spirituality' that has inflected some parts of the practice of the post-Vatican II Catholic Church. The latter is at least explicable by glutinous exercises such as 'Advent' (*Collected* 110-11), the former is a triumph of wish-fulfilment over all available evidence. Irish critics have persistently overvalued him, taking at face value his truculent belief that he 'was never much considered by the English critics' (*A Poet's Country* 302). Such penetrating critical accounts as Seamus Heaney's, which detail generously Kavanagh's enabling effects on a greater talent, have been adduced to inflate the older poet's achievement. Kavanagh did

Irish poetry a great service in freeing it from the pieties of cultural nationalism and Yeatsian high-talk, but he proved unable – oddly enough for this 'self-slaved' and often self-indulgent poet – to serve his own 'potentiality'. His reputation rests on a tiny proportion of his poems – one reason for his late underperformance is that his alcoholism made impossible the voluminous production which produced occasional success. 'I would not object if some critic said I was not a poet at all,' Kavanagh wrote in the preface to his *Collected Poems* (1964). There are perhaps two dozen lyrics – not all of them in that poorly edited and thankfully superseded *Collected*, which defy any critic to give their author the posthumous satisfaction of not objecting. There is the high achievement of *The Great Hunger*. But Kavanagh's anxiety about 'potentiality' is not in the end misplaced: he is a poet who is all too often potential rather than actual.