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ANGEL IN CLAY

Patrick Kavanagh. *The Complete Poems*.
Second edition. Ed. Peter Kavanagh.
Kavanagh Hand Press/Goldsmith
Press. 1984.

Twenty years after his death, Patrick Kavanagh has emerged as the dominant influence in contemporary Irish poetry. During his lifetime Kavanagh made his presence felt, both as the author of *The Great Hunger* (1942) and as an outspoken critic, who blasted his fellow writers and left bruised egos wherever he turned. Kavanagh's posthumous presence is no less potent, though it has grown less abrasive. In rural County Monaghan, where Kavanagh grew up, he is remembered as a dreamer and a desultory farmer. In literary Dublin, where he scratched out a living as a film reviewer, columnist, and co-publisher of the ill-fated *Kavanagh's Weekly*, he is remembered as the gentle elegist of Baggot Street, the loser in a celebrated libel suit, the strident habitu  of the Palace Bar. And in the minds of younger Irish poets, Kavanagh looms large as the Catholic, demotic alternative to the mandarin, Anglo-Irish bard of Sligo. Seamus Heaney acknowledges as much in his "Station Island" sequence, where Heaney's pilgrim-persona, doing penance at Lough Derg, meets up with the "slack-shouldered," "clear-eyed" shade of the older poet. "Sure I might have known," says Kavanagh to Heaney, "you'd be after me / sooner or later. Forty-two years on / and you've got no farther!" As if to mock Heaney's spiritual ambitions, Kavanagh adds: "In my own day / the odd one came here on the hunt for women."

Heaney's sketch is caricature, but it also approximates the truth. For Patrick Kavanagh was neither the pure cynic, nor the incurable idealist, nor that more familiar figure, the youthful romantic turned sardonic elder. From first to last he remained the doubting pilgrim, the "half-faithed ploughman" of his early verse. For better or worse, saint and sinner share crowded quarters in Kavanagh's *Complete Poems*,* which gathers more

* This is a revised edition of Kavanagh's 1972 *Complete Poems*. Explanatory notes have been added, along with "four or five pieces accidentally omitted from the first edition."

than two hundred and fifty poems on subjects as diverse as Kavanagh's Monaghan childhood, the Easter Rising, Ulster virtue, Dublin women, film stars, and the latest prizefight. Mean-spirited squibs keep company with tender sonnets. Versified sneers co-exist with meditative lyrics and ambitious narrative poems. And the general impression is one of struggle—the lifelong inner quarrel of a poet who embraced the sacred and the profane, the cheap and the precious in equal measure. In the early poems, an emergent spirituality wars with rural drudgery and insularity; in the middle poems, a dislocated spirit quarrels with its social environment, longing to be free in the “oriental streets of thought”; and at the end, the conflict takes still another turn, as the aging poet adopts an attitude of Olympian detachment, even as he battles with alcohol, illness, and physical decline. Through it all, one hears the antic, rebellious voice of a poet who understood tragedy well enough, but also found the “angelic absurd” in personal distress.

Kavanagh's early poems dwell on his native landscape. Undaunted by the pathetic fallacy, the poet projects his thwarted yearnings into the low drumlins and whin-hedged fields of his impoverished county:

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

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

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

(“Shancoduff”)

Shancoduff, whose name in Irish means Black Hollow, is the townland near Inniskeen where Kavanagh's sixteen-acre farm was located. Published in 1937, two years before Kavanagh left County Monaghan, this poem is a kind of elegy, an ambivalent valediction to a locale and a way of life. Artless though it seems, it deftly balances the mercantile values of the cattle-drovers against the spiritual values represented by the poet's vocations, the poet-farmer's errand of mercy, and the distant, brightening chapel. It sets plain speech against the dissonant, assonantal music of its rhymes (*happy/chapel; calves/Rocksavage*). And, in its allusion to the story of Lot's wife, it moralizes a familiar landscape, wherein the black hills of Kavanagh's youth face away from Sodom and north towards Armagh, seat of ecclesiastical authority and spiritual power.

"To [Patrick] God and poetry were the same thing," writes Peter Kavanagh, the poet's brother, publisher, and biographer, noting that Patrick refrained from blasphemy because it would have been "unthinkable for him to insult the poetic fire, his most sacred possession and the reason for his being" (Peter Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper*, 1984). For Kavanagh, the imagination was a divine power, a gift of God and an expression of His will; and he heaped abuse on works of art that lacked "the passionate grief to express the quintessential mind which is the angel caught in clay . . ." and which produced, in reader or viewer, "no God-crazy emotion." Yet if Kavanagh subscribed to the Romantic concept of Imagination, he seldom allowed his own to wander in a Celtic Twilight or roam far from his native soil. And if he complained, in querulous moments, of his "clay-heavy mind," he understood that his best work rose out of a closeness to daily life, a passion to celebrate the "flower of the common light" and to recreate "the thrill / Of common things raised up to angelhood" ("Pursuit of an Ideal").

Kavanagh's aesthetic led him to find light in stones, beauty in potato plants, and radiance in steaming dung. It also elevated his best work above pedestrian naturalism, lending a luminous intensity, reminiscent of Vermeer's, to his scenes of rural Irish life. Such qualities are apparent in his recollections of Christmas in his Monaghan parish, where the faithful go to chapel "talking of turkey markets / Or foreign politics," their "plain, hard country words" becoming "Christ's singing birds" ("Christmas Eve Remembered"). They are also evident in the two elegies he wrote for his mother, Bridget Kavanagh, who died in November, 1945. Grief-stricken

but defiant, these poems maintain a balance of realism and romantic vision, placing memory and imagination on an equal footing with brutal fact. In the first elegy, the power of memory intercedes with the realities of death and burial:

I do not think of you lying in the wet clay
Of a Monaghan graveyard; I see
You walking down a lane among the poplars
On your way to the station, or happily

Going to second Mass on a summer Sunday—
You meet me and you say:
'Don't forget to see about the cattle—'
Among your earliest words the angels stray.

("In Memory of My Mother" [I])

In the second, the pain of loss and the memory of maternal care suffuse ordinary objects and familiar gestures with an uncommon light:

You will have the road gate open, the front door ajar
The kettle boiling and the table set
By the window looking out at the sycamores—
And your loving heart lying in wait

For me coming up among the poplar trees.

("In Memory of My Mother" [II])

Though verging on sentimentality, these images are braced by their unadorned directness and their fidelity to personal experience.

Similar allegiances can be felt in the textures of Kavanagh's lines. His deep distrust of formal elegance, his distaste for Yeats' idealized image of the Irish peasant, his aversion to the New Criticism and the "artificial verbalism of Richard Wilbur and his clan"—all are inscribed in the cultivated ruggedness of his rhythms, the approximations of his rhymes. Kavanagh's often-quoted statement (in "Art McCooey") that "poetry is shaped / Awkwardly but alive in the unmeasured womb" is sometimes belied by his well-turned sonnets, or by his lapses into conventional lyricism

("Coming so early / And gaysome yellow, / Oh coltsfoot blossom / You're a fine young fellow"). But on the whole he stays close to what Seamus Heaney has described as the "patterns of run and stress in the English language as it is spoken in Ireland" (*Preoccupations*, 123). In Kavanagh's comic novel, *Tarry Flynn*, local speech adds color and verve, as when Tarry's mother declares, "Night, noon, and morning, it's me that's sick, sore, and sorry with the lot of you." By contrast, the irregularities in Kavanagh's verse create effects of immediacy and spontaneity:

And sometimes I am sorry when the grass
Is growing over the stones in quiet hollows
And the cocksfoot leans across the rutted cart-pass
That I am not the voice of country fellows
Who now are standing by some headland talking
Of turnips and potatoes or young corn
Or turf banks stripped for victory.

("Peace")

Here, as in many of Hardy's lines, it is an open question whether roughness of texture is the result of accident or conscious design. Yet I see no reason to surmise, as Seamus Heaney does, that Kavanagh's effects are not deliberate. These lines express regret at losing touch with country speech, and they might be seen as an attempt (flawed by the literary "talking / Of") to recover a countryman's voice. It is as if the potter were choosing, out of inner necessity, to work in stoneware rather than porcelain.

"Clay is the word and clay is the flesh," begins *The Great Hunger*, Kavanagh's best-known and most controversial poem. When an excerpt appeared in *Horizon* (January, 1942) its alleged blasphemy brought Dublin detectives to Kavanagh's door. Since that time, critics have not failed to find artistic faults, while acknowledging that *The Great Hunger* may be one of the great long poems of the mid-century. Beyond minor charges of myopia, static narration, and unsteadiness of focus, there is the major complaint, voiced by the poet's brother, that the narrator fails to show much concern for his main character. And there is the poet's own pronouncement, in 1960, that *The Great Hunger* is "too strong for honesty," is "touched by hypocrisy," and "remains a tragedy" because it is "not completely reborn." "I will grant," the author sternly concludes, "that there

are some remarkable things in it, but free it hardly is for there is no laughter in it" (*November Haggard*, 15).

Kavanagh believed that tragedy is "underdeveloped comedy," and that "tragedy fully explored becomes comedy." Nowhere does he entertain a notion of tragic catharsis—or explain why we should not be moved by the plight of his bachelor farmer, Patrick Maguire, whose sexual desires and spiritual longings do battle with inhibitions and crippling beliefs. "Who bent the coin of my destiny," Maguire cries, "That it stuck in the slot?" And in the breadth of this twenty-five-page narrative poem, spanning the seasons of Maguire's adult life, that question is thoroughly and compellingly explored, as one man's dreams of love, family, and prosperity devolve into masturbatory fantasies, vapid pub-talk, and spiritual inanition. In Kavanagh's view the blame lies largely with Maguire himself, a man enslaved to his mother, married to his land, and betrayed by an otherworldly Christianity which fails to recognize that "God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday" and that "God's truth is life—even the grotesque shapes of his foulest fire." But Maguire's destiny is also that of the parish, the region, the Catholic peasantry in general; and the withering power of the Church may be observed within its own demesne:

Like the afterbirth of a cow stretched on a branch in the wind
Life dried in the veins of these women and men:
The grey and grief and unlove,
The bones and backs of their hands,
And the chapel pressing its low ceiling over them.

(IX)

"For the strangled impulse," the narrator reminds us, "there is no redemption."

Yet there is perhaps more spiritual freedom in *The Great Hunger* than its author was disposed to acknowledge. At points that freedom is more asserted than demonstrated, as when we are told that Maguire's neighbors "sometimes . . . did laugh and see the sunlight, / A narrow slice of divine instruction" (IX). But elsewhere we experience the imaginative freedom of the narrator as he pleads on behalf of the rural poor:

Let us be kind, let us be kind and sympathetic:
Maybe life is not for joking or finding happiness in—
This tiny light in Oriental darkness
Looking out chance windows of poetry or prayer.

And the grief and defeat of men like these peasants
Is God's way—maybe—and we must not want too much
To see.
The twisted thread is stronger than the wind-swept fleece.
And in the end who shall rest in truth's high peace?

(XI)

Here the narrator's precise trope—the twisted thread—and his fluent rhythms evoke a sense of release, however fleeting. And, unlike Maguire's escapist daydreams, the narrator's speech creates a Jacob's ladder, mediating between earthbound poverty and heavenly grace.

The Great Hunger marks the high point of Kavanagh's mid-career. *Lough Derg*, written in the same year, is similarly ambitious but not nearly as good. It contains some fine sonnets in the form of pilgrims' prayers, but on the whole it suffers from the besetting illness of Kavanagh's middle period, namely his tendency to turn editorialist, to decline into journalistic prose:

Beside St. Brigid's Cross—an ancient relic
A fragment of the Middle Ages set
Into the modern masonry of the conventional Basilica . . .

Lough Derg overwhelmed the individual imagination
And the personal tragedy.
Only God thinks of the dying sparrow
In the middle of a war.

In these lines, as in his squibs on Jack Doyle, F. J. McCormick, "Jack Yeats' New Novel," and other ephemeral subjects, Kavanagh settles for slack language ("an ancient relic") and drastically narrowed vision. Often his tone is acerbic, as in "The Paddiad," the best of his satirical verses. But on the whole Kavanagh's satire lacks both the scope and the bite of his

Augustan forbears, and it seldom rises above topical sniping.

Had Kavanagh's career ended with his poems of the forties, it would have presented posterity with a sad and all-too-familiar spectacle. Fortunately, his descent into self-indulgent satire was followed by a resurgence of his talent and a return to the rigors of the sonnet. Kavanagh made much of his "rebirth" in August, 1955, which occurred as he lay on the bank of Dublin's Grand Canal, recuperating from major surgery:

All reports from everywhere are the same reports. I want to report about the Grand Canal last summer. I report on the part of the bank to the west of the Baggot Street Bridge. Most days last summer in the beautiful heat I lay there on the grass with only my shirt and trousers on. I lay on that grass in an ante-natal role with a hand under my head. . . . I learned the pleasures of being passive. The green still water, the light around the gables.

(November Haggard, 85)

What he learned, or gained, was freedom from ambition and egocentric attachments. And if his prose accounts of this experience sometimes protest too much, his late sonnets, written under its influence, offer convincing proof:

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

Given the ease and grace of this sonnet, its generosity and quiet drollery, it may be churlish to complain of its diction — “stilly/greeny” is distracting, “tremendous silence” close to banal — or to detect vestigial vanity in the rejected, heroic memorial. As an expression of beatific receptivity, the poem is fully and movingly achieved.

The other Canal Bank sonnets (especially “Canal Bank Walk” and “Come Dance with Kitty Stobling”) possess similar virtues, and together these poems represent Kavanagh’s last major achievement. More poems followed, but none had the same serenity or power. Kavanagh quoted, with approval, Rilke’s remark that a lifetime’s experience might produce a few enduring lines, and though Kavanagh himself produced more than his share of memorable lyrics, it may be some time before his canon can be established and his stature measured. Seamus Heaney suggests that in *The Great Hunger* Kavanagh sounded “an Irish note that is not dependent on backward looks toward the Irish tradition”; and Dillon Johnston, an American authority on Irish verse, credits Kavanagh with dismantling, once and for all, the romantic myth of the Irish peasant. Those are not small accomplishments, and it is little wonder that Irish poets as diverse as Heaney, John Montague, and Paul Muldoon have expressed admiration for Kavanagh and acknowledged his influence on their development.

Whether the world beyond Ireland will commemorate Kavanagh — or afford him the stature of Yeats or Synge — remains to be seen, but signs are beginning to point in that direction. In January, 1985, the Guggenheim Museum hosted a celebration of Kavanagh’s work, with readings by Galway Kinnell, Louis Simpson, and Peter Kavanagh. And in recent years, poets and scholars from Europe, England, and the United States have descended on the village of Inniskeen, visiting Kavanagh’s grave and tramping up the boreens to see the black hills the poet renounced, the fields he found so stifling. The irony is apt, as is the tribute. For, as Kavanagh tells us in *The Green Fool*, the autobiography he later debunked: “I wasn’t really a writer. I had seen a strange beautiful light on the hills and that was all.”