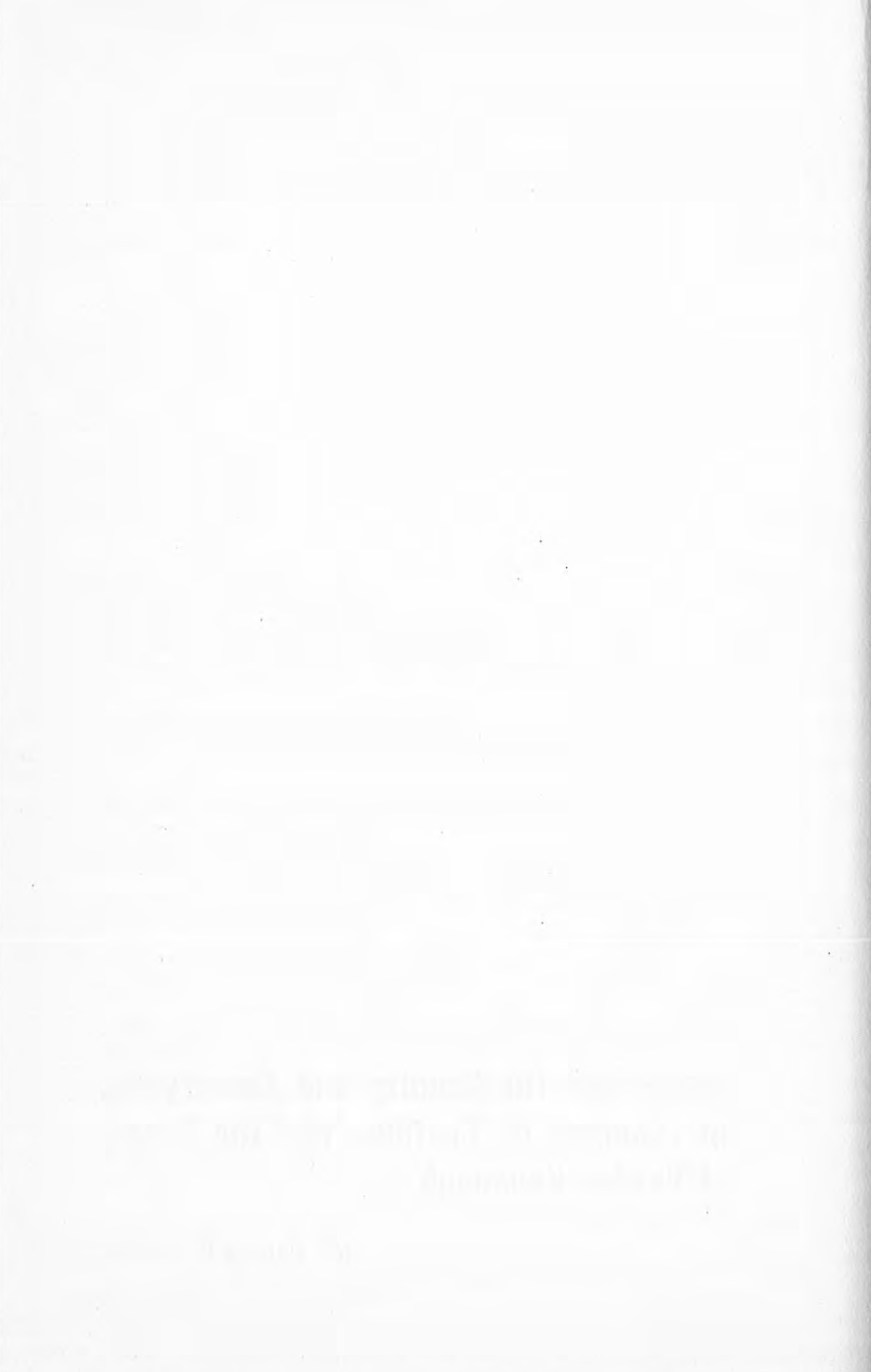


**Stony Soil: The Country and Countryman  
in «Campos de Castilla» and the Poetry  
of Patrick Kavanagh**

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In this article I want to examine briefly, compare and, principally, contrast the vision of the country and the countryman in *Campos de Castilla* and the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh. This examination will be divided into three main parts with their own sub-divisions: the country, recurring themes, the people. First, a few words about my reasons for considering Antonio Machado and Patrick Kavanagh in the same article and a little about their life and work.

The idea of considering the Spanish and Irish poet in the same article may not be so far-fetched as it might seem at first. Though contemporaneous for thirty-four years of their lives, from 1905, when Kavanagh was born, to 1939, when Machado died, it is unlikely that the one knew anything of the other and much less could it be said that they followed the same masters or influenced each other. Yet, they have a bond in common: each is the first great nature poet of his country and each wrote realistically of the land and the people who worked it. Touching on the first point, it is remarkable that one of the principal characteristics of Romanticism, a description of the countryside is lacking in Spanish and Irish romantic poetry. Aurora de Albornoz, in her critical study *La presencia de Miguel de Unamuno en Antonio Machado* (1), draws attention to this singular lack in Spanish poetry:

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(1) Ed. Gredos (Madrid), 1968. p. 135.

El sentimiento del paisaje no es punto fuerte de nuestra literatura. Ni aun en el Romanticismo, una de cuyas características es —en todos los países— el amor a la naturaleza, se destacan nuestros poetas en este aspecto.

She sees the two post-romantics, Bécquer and Rosalía de Castro —whom she calls “los dos grandes románticos españoles”— the former in his prose and the latter in her poetry, as the first who were imbued with a sense and comprehension of the countryside. They are, according to her, the precursors of the writers of the Generation of '98, who were to make the Castilian countryside one of the principal themes of their work.

The lack of the nature element in Anglo-Irish romantic poetry is perhaps more easily explained. At that time of hardship, political unrest and repression, poets sought their themes in Irish history or Gaelic myth. A large number of patriotic ballads were written at that time which are very stirring to read but rate little as regards poetic worth. Other poets of greater merit, such as James Clarence Mangan, (1803-49), turned their hands to translations. Only one poet of the period, Sir Aubrey de Vere (1788-1846), made the Irish landscape a main theme, in a series of stylized but well-constructed sonnets. Before him, we have Oliver Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*, with its Irish-English country descriptions and after him precious little nature poetry until Patrick Kavanagh.

Other points which our two poets have in common are memories of a happy childhood, a long spell of bachelorhood and a protracted bohemian existence — in Kavanagh's case in the later part of his life. Kavanagh, in his early autobiography *The Green Fool* (2) termed the first chapter

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(2) First published in 1939, now available in Penguin.

of the book and of his life "Angelhood" and, like Machado, he bore memories of the inner garden of peace and security that was his childhood. We can compare these lines from *A Christmas Childhood* (3), with the opening lines of *Retrato*, which begins *Campos de Castilla*.

...Now and then  
I can remember something of the gay  
Garden that was childhood's.

Mi infancia son recuerdos de un patio de Sevilla,  
y un huerto claro donde madura el limonero.

Where the two poets differ radically is in their upbringing and their approach to poetry. The Sevillian poet, with his substantial education in the Institución Libre de Enseñanza, his literary apprenticeship in the cafés and "tertulias" of Madrid, his acquaintanceship with other writers of his day and his knowledge of French literature, wrote *Campos de Castilla* with a clear philosophical intent; to describe Castile as he saw it and to catalogue the ills of the country as he understood them. Also, with rare exceptions — some of the poems written in Baeza, for example — he wrote about where he happened to be at the moment. The immediate experience was more important than the remembered. Thus, we find in *A orillas del Duero* a rather detailed description of an actual walk in the hills, and there are various apostrophic poems: *Las encinas*, "¿Eres tú, Guadarrama, viejo amigo...?" and *A un olmo seco*.

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(3) All my quotations from Kavanagh's poems, with the exception of *Lough Derg*, come from the *Collected Poems* ed. Martin Brian & O'Keefe. Those from Machado are from the Austral edition of *Poesías Completas*.

The Irish poet, if we are to go by his above-mentioned autobiography, had a rather haphazard education. His youth was spent working on the farm or helping his father as a cobbler. He developed an interest in poetry and maintained it against incredible odds of ignorance, scorn and prejudice. This is not to say that he was unhappy on his farm, but he made the decision to leave it and kept to that decision, dedicating himself to writing when it would have been easier to pack it all in. His life and experience on the farm is the source of all his best poetry. His inspiration comes from his memories, but it is a memory tempered and made more aware and selective by his years of life in the city. If we compare the early poems which he wrote while still a ploughman with *The Great Hunger*, for example, which he wrote after some years in Dublin, we can see how much he, and we, gained by his exile from his inspiration source.

When *Campos de Castilla* was being written, at the end of the first and the beginning of the second decade of this century, Spain had recently passed through the trauma of the Spanish-American war and the loss of its remaining colonies. It was a time of change, a time of looking for new values. The Ireland of the 1940's, when Kavanagh was writing his best poetry, was a country that shortly before had gained its independence after centuries of struggle, and which moreover had passed through a bloody civil war. It should have been a time of change too in Ireland, an adventurous time for a new country seeking its identity but, alas, it was all the opposite — a time of apathy, conservatism and almost of hibernation. As is to expect, this state of affairs is reflected in some of Kavanagh's poetry, but not in the form of protest or even the most oblique personal commentary. It is reflected in *The Great Hunger*, for instance, because that is the way things were and this poem is true to life. It is remarkable that there is not a

word of protest about the many evils of the time in Kavanagh's poetry, as there is, and very clearly stated too, in *Campos de Castilla*.

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We will come back to this later but now I want to return to the theme of the article by considering what kind of land exactly the two poets were writing about and how they were familiar with it. There are few similarities between Soria and Monaghan: both are stony and hilly: Soria is a "barbacana hacia Aragón" just as Monaghan headtouches the redout of the Six Counties. But there the resemblance ends. The hills of Monaghan are small and mean and monotonous; those of Soria are spectacular and hard and challenging and Mount Moncayo stands above them like a giant. The fields of Monaghan are small, irregular and hill-hanging with crooked fences and haphazard bushes between the boundaries, where people subsisted on dairy farming and the main crop was potatoes. In Soria the fields are bare of trees and fences, shabby as fragments of brown serge (4) or small strips of dark green where the sheep graze (5), and where the principal crops were wheat and rye.

As was stated above, Kavanagh was familiar with his "small irregular fields" from having worked them and when he describes the work done in them, his descriptions are vital and pithy. Sometimes his fields have special names, such as the "Near Field" (6), or they are personified like

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(4) "Retazos de estameñas pardas", *Campos de Soria*, II.

(5) "Trozos de verde oscuro en que el merino pasta", *idem*.

(6) *On Reading a Book on Common Wild Flowers, Collected Poems*, p. 137.

the "triangular hill" in *Innocence*, which encloses the poet in its "briary arms". When he mentions the work done in the fields, his descriptions are not distanced like Machado's but are close up with little telling details and similes and metaphors that draw us into the feelings of the workers. Thus in *The Great Hunger*, the potato sowers put down the seed "blindly with sensuous groping fingers". When the protagonist, Patrick Maguire, pats the final spade-fuls of soil on to the potato pit to protect it against the frost, we are told that he is like "An old man fondling a new piled grave".

Machado, the school teacher, whose formative years were spent in the metropolis, naturally sees the fields and the workers from a different perspective. Eschewing metaphors, as Henry Gifford notes (7), he describes objectively what he observes — observations often gleaned on solitary walks, such as the one mentioned in *A orillas del Duero*. Although he spent, as he tells us in the first stanza of *Retrato*, "veinte años en tierra de Castilla", it was not until his posting to Soria in 1907 that he came face to face with the crudities of the peasant's lot and the vast spaces, emptiness and loneliness of the Castilian plateau. It is out of this first strong impression that he wrote the fine opening poems of *Campos de Castilla: A orillas del Duero, Por tierras de España, El Dios íbero*, etc.

We must not forget that Machado viewed Soria, and by extension Castile, through a lover's eyes. As he says in the prologue to *Campos de Castilla* (8):

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(7) *Juan Ramón Jiménez and Antonio Machado Selected Poems*, Penguin, p. 76.

(8) *Poesías Completas* p. 18.



Cinco años en la tierra de Soria, hoy para mí sagrada  
—allí me casé, allí perdí a mi esposa, a quien adoraba—,  
orientaron mis ojos hacia lo esencial castellano.

Although he catalogues its ills, it is with the hope that these can be rectified — ills such as the mismanagement of the land and the drudgery, brutalism and vices of its workers.

Kavanagh, if we go by *The Green Fool*, had no such happy love affair in Monaghan nor, if we take Tarry Flynn as a representation of the author (9), was he ever likely to get married there. His love therefore is love of the land, qua land, for what it represented to him and the memories it conveys to him later in his city life. As was stated above, only in *The Great Hunger* is there criticism of and protest at the peasant's lot and this is mixed with passages counselling resignation and understanding. This can be shown more succinctly by comparing two quotations from the poem:

- (i) But the peasant in his little acres is tied  
To a mother's womb by the wind-toughened navel-cord  
Like a goat tethered to the stump of a tree —
- (ii) And the grief and defeat of men like these peasants  
Is God's way — maybe — and we must not want  
too much  
To see  
That the twisted thread is stronger than the wind-swept fleece.

The umbilical cord of the first quotation which hinders the peasant's liberty, tethering him to his mother and to his land, becomes in the second a tie to be accepted with

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(9) From the novel *Tarry Flynn*, published by Penguin.

resignation and which imparts some kind of moral solvency.

Where the two poets coincide — Machado in many of the poems in *Campos de Castilla* and Kavanagh in two poems precisely — is in making reference to the past of the country and comparing it with the present. The two poems of Kavanagh, *Lough Derg* and *Why Sorrow*, where the author looks back to the past, are both for some reason absent from the *Collected Poems* edited by Martin Brian & O'Keefe, apart from a fragment of the second, entitled *Father Mat*. Both these poems are apparently "long poems", though *Why Sorrow* seems to be unfinished, and the only reference I have to them comes in the number 60 edition of *The Honest Ulsterman* (10) by the correspondent who signs himself "Jude The Obscure".

In what at times is a very enlightening and at others a very fractious article, where several axes are being ground, the correspondent suggests that by choosing Lough Derg, or St. Patrick's Purgatory, which according to Renan represents "a mystery cult or local cult, anterior to Christianity, and probably based on the physical appearance of the country" (11), Kavanagh turned to an old, pagan, Ireland "that was yet unafraid of life". If this is so, then the present loses heavily in the comparison with the pagan past. The modern pilgrims are depicted as an unlovely and miserable bunch:

From Gavan and Leitrim and Mayo,  
From all the thin-faced parishes where hills.  
Are perished noses running peaty water,  
They come to Lough Derg to fast and pray...

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(10) A good-quality literary quarterly, published by Ulsterman Publications, Belfast.

(11) Quoted in the above-mentioned article.

In the same poem there are several references to what the correspondent believes to be Kavanagh's mistaken belief in the existence of a pre-Christian or, at least, pre-Jansenist "merrie Ireland", comparing it with the stinginess and prudery of the present. For instance, there is the image of the young woman going through the ritual of renouncing the world, but

Her breasts stood high in the pagan sun...

or the girl in the midst of "the loud cold women" who was "something from the unconverted kinkdom". In the other long (unfinished?) poem, *Why Sorrow*, of which a fragment, *Father Mat*, appears in *A Soul For Sale*, we find the same references to a vital pre-Christian Ireland, where the same correspondent considers "Kavanagh examines his own dilemma of a pious man who finds religion at odds with his disposition to sensual ecstasy".

Father Mat came slowly walking stopping to  
Stare through gaps at ancient Ireland sweeping  
In again with all its unbaptized beauty;

Father Mat, the pantheist, represents the ancient Ireland in love with the "unbaptized" beauty of nature:

The whitethorn blossoms,  
The smells from ditches that were not Christian.

The present is represented in *Lough Derg* by the proud country curate who "stared with a curate leer" and the booted prior who "passes by ignoring all the crowd", as it is in *Why Sorrow* by the haughty curate who "never reads in brook or book" but who is "designed" and "destined" To wear a mitre/To sit on committees".

Machado in *A orillas del Duero* makes a direct com-

parison between the Castile of his time, impoverished, inward looking, desolate land of "palurdos" and "ganapanes", with that of its glorious past; land of warriors and conquistadors, land of great exploits and the generous gesture:

Castilla no es aquella tan generosa un día,  
cuando Myo Cid Rodrigo el de Vivar volvía  
ufano de su nueva fortuna, y su opulencia,  
a regalar a Alfonso los huertos de Valencia;

There are various other references in the poems that follow to Castile and in which the present is contrasted with the past. This is especially noteworthy in *Campos de Soria*, parts VI, VII and VIII, where the "dead" city of Soria, and by extension Castile and Spain, with its memories of a warlike past and its old glories — its ruined castle and the escutcheons of noble houses — make a sad contrast with the present.

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It is now time to look at some of the motifs or elements recurrent in the work of the two poets and some kind of comparison can be made of how they saw and treated them.

### *Climatic Conditions*

For Machado, as Aurora de Albornoz observes (12), spring and autumn seem to be the favourite seasons of the year, though in his poetry there are continual referen-

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(12) Op. cit. p. 154.

ces to extreme heat and extreme cold, that is to say, to summer and winter. Nobody better than Machado to give the idea of these climatic extremes so that as we read him we are almost continually shivering or sweating. In *A orillas del Duero* with its detailed description of a hill climb, we positively feel the heat with the author as he stops to wipe his brow and gaze where

Sobre los agrios campos caía un sol de fuego.

In two poems later, *El hospicio*, the cold is appropriately the predominant sensation. In this poem, the cold is reflected in everything, in the forbidding building facing the north, in the white sickly faces at the window, in the weak January sun, the white sky and the snow falling on the frozen earth. In the first line of *Campes de Soria*, "fría" is one of the two adjectives used, as it is in part VI to describe the city of Soria. Part V of this poem is a description of a winter scene, where the sight of the fire within the mesón is not enough to dispel the chill we feel when we read:

Un viejo acurrucado tiembla y tose  
cerca del fuego;

Cold is presented symbolically in *La tierra de Alvargonzález* to represent the sterility, guilt and iniquity of the two elder sons. In the dream of Alvargonzález they attempt vainly to light a fire to warm and brighten the house and are relegated in their father's Love. Later in the poem, when the punishment of remorse overtakes them, we find them sitting gloomily before a dying hearth.

No tienen leña ni sueño.  
Larga es la noche y el frío  
arrecia.

Spring, as was mentioned before, is apparently one of Machado's favourite seasons. It features in several of the poems in *Campos de Castilla*, from *Orillas del Duero* to *A José María Palacio*. In the first-mentioned poem it is described as "humilde, como el sueño de un bendito". In another poem, *Recuerdos*, the poet thinks:

Primavera como un escalofrío  
irá a cruzar el alto solar del romancero,

and in the poem to José María Palacio, it is described as "beautiful and sweet" and the poet envisages it dressing with greenery the poplars along the river and roadway. When he mentions autumn, it is generally in connection with the golden colour of the poplar leaves or with ploughing scenes either in Soria or Baeza. Rainy days are mentioned twice in *Campos de Castilla*. One, *En abril, las aguas mil*, with the rapid back and forward sway of the rhythm, gives the marvellous sensation of a day of sunshine and squalls, scudding clouds and patches of blue. The other, *Poema de un día*, captures among other things the monotony and boredom of a day of uninterrupted rain.

The cold features also in the poems of Kavanagh, usually accompanied by wind. As a Celt, always ready to bestow a distinguishing colour on colourless things (13), Kavanagh intensifies the idea of cold by describing the wind as "black" or "white".

And a cold black wind was blowing from Dundalk.

OR

The wooden tubs full of water  
Were white in the winds  
That blew through Brannagan's gap on their way from Siberia.

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(13) One thinks of Lynch in *Portrait of the Artist*: "Damn your yellow insolence" and of De Selby's "disquisitions" in *The Third Policeman*.

Winter, however, does not feature so much in Kavanagh's poetry as it does in that of Machado. As with the Spanish poet, the most mentioned seasons are spring and autumn — the times when the seed is put down and the harvest is gathered. The months which seem to be most mentioned in his poems are May and October. May is the time of voluptuousness in nature, of bluebells and whitethorn blossoms and smells "from ditches that were not Christian". October, on the other hand, is the time of harsh reality, a time for thinking on the coming winter which is death. October is personified as no other month is personified in his poetry. In the poem *October*, he says: "It is October over all my life", and in *Memory of my Father*, we have another example of Kavanagh's use of colour in the lines:

Every old man I see  
In October-coloured weather  
Seems to say to me  
"I was once your father".

### *Flora and Fauna*

In the chapter titled *La Tierra de España*, Aurora de Albornoz states (14) when considering the flora, especially the trees, in the poetry of Machado:

En tierras de Castilla, los que más llaman su atención  
—aunque no sean los únicos— son el chopo —o el álamo—,  
el roble... y la encina.

The oak is less frequently mentioned than the other two and when it is, it is for its hardness, resistance, and perhaps its colour, which he sees as a symbol of the heart of Castile and Spain:

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(14) Op. cit. p. 158.

El Duero cruza el corazón de roble  
de Iberia y de Castilla. (A orillas del Duero).

It is, however, the holm oaks (or ilexes) and the poplars which appear most frequently in the poems dealing with Castile. Later, in the poems written at Baeza, appear trees more typical of Andalusia, such as olive, orange and lemon trees. The holm oaks, in his poem of the same title, are symbols of humility and endurance ("tu humildad que es firmeza"). They are also symbols of Castile and the Castilian influence which are yet to be found from the sea-coast of Cantabria to the Moorish province of Cordova. Beeches and beech groves in his poetry are associated with the sinister. It is to a beech grove that the sons of Alvargonzález drag their murdered father, and in the above-mentioned poem, *Las Encinas*, appear the lines:

¿Quién ha visto sin temblar  
un hayedo en un pinar?

Sometimes he uses trees as he does other items, for example, the wheel of the year, to symbolize passing time. *A un olmo seco*, in the opinion of Henry Gifford (15), shows "as complicated an awareness of time, past present and to come, as Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight*". The essential element in the trees of Machado would seem to be, then, not their decorativeness but what they symbolically represent and also their usefulness. For instance, in *A un olmo seco*, the poet speculates on the possible uses of the elm when cut, either as a shaft for a cart or fuel in a labourer's cottage.

Elms and poplars are mentioned also in *The Great Hunger*, but their presence, as that of the trees mentioned

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(15) Op. cit. p. 85.



elsewhere in his poetry, is decorative. It is under the elm trees that the ploughmen rest and talk after their day's work is done and if one of them notices the tree it is to fling a piece of gravel over it on to the railway, but:

It means nothing,  
Not a damn thing.

The poplar, when it is mentioned, is only a shadow falling across and crooking a furrow and which symbolises the shadowy warped decline of Maguire's life. In his first book of poems, *Ploughman and Other Poems*, there are poems *To a Beech Tree* and *To a Late Poplar*, but they do not bear comparison with Machado's magnificent *A un olmo seco* or *Las encinas*. In them the mood is too ecstatic and the images naive: the beech tree being called "My precious baby" and the late poplar being likened to a "tardy bride", late for the wedding feast of spring.

When it comes to flowers both poets coincide at some points, though there is a wider range and, in my opinion, a more evocative use of flowers in Kavanagh's poetry. Where the Irish poet loses by comparison in the description of trees, he gains in the colour and imagery of flowers. When Machado mentions "blancas margaritas" and "violetas perfumadas" one feels that these are no more than ready-made phrases which serve well enough but are not very memorable. Likewise, when in *A orillas del Duero* he mentions the wild herbs he treads underfoot: "romero, tomillo, salvia, espliego", he gives the impression that he is showing off his knowledge but nothing more.

Kavanagh, on the other hand, personifies his flowers. Dandelions on hills show "their unloved hearts to everyone". A ditch (which in Ireland means a dyke as well as a drain) "smiles with violets". In his poem *On Reading a*

*Book of Common Wild Flowers*, the poet instead of wishing to show us his knowledge of botany has the opposite intention — to show us his ignorance of the scientific names of the plants but his intimacy with them as plants:

I knew them all by eyesight long before I knew their names.

We were in love before we were introduced.

The animals that Kavanagh mentions in his poetry are nearly always domestic or farmyard animals and they are always specific ones with which he seems to be acquainted and which he henders life-like or unique with a memorable simile or qualifying expression. The same is true for the description of birds, only in the later poems — in *The Great Hunger*, for example. In his first book, *Ploughman*, the description of birds, “silvery gull” and “brazen crow”, is stereotyped and owes more to Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* than to his own imagination. In the same book a later poem, *Four Birds*, shows a more daring use of imagery, though the metaphors for kestrel; “a stately dancer”; lark, “morning star”, and corncrake “a cry in the wilderness of meadow” are not as striking as the images used in *The Great Hunger*, where the gulls sweeping in the wind are likened to scraps of “old newspapers” and where the crows in the ploughed fields “gabble over worms and frogs”.

All the animals Kavanagh mentions have some special characteristics which make them easily imaginable. In an early poem, *The Goat of Slieve Donard*, the animal, as goats always seem to do, “nibbles daintly” at herb leaves. Kerr’s ass, in the poem of that title, is further identified as a “big ass” and our pity for the borrowed animal is invited when we learn that he was “An exile that night in Mucker”. Our pity is also invited for the three “perishing calves”

in *Shancoduff*, waiting on top of the wintry hill for the author to arrive with a sheaf of hay. But it is the horse, the ploughman's drudge, that Kavanagh most personifies. In *The Great Hunger* they are given girl's names, Kitty, Molly, Fanny. This is explicable: the ploughman, "who is only one remove from the beasts he drives", would, like the cowboy, spend the whole day with no more company than that of his horse. Some affection, not unnaturally, passed between the two: "One talks to the horse as to a brother", and Kavanagh, as well as any ploughman, or cowboy presumably, always distinguishes the sex of the animal:

Drive slower with the foal-mare, Joe (The Great Hunger)  
And the mare goes skew-ways like a blinded hen (Art  
McCooney).

There is a much wider range of animals and birds mentioned in *Campos de Castilla* than there is in Kavanagh's poetry and justly so, as Castile is richer in fauna than Ireland. The animals and the birds, however, are always associated with a certain landscape, type of activity or time of the year. The swallows and nightingales are the visible heralds of spring in the poems *Recuerdos* and *A José María Palacio* just as their departure in *La tierra de Alvar González* announces the beginning of a long winter. However, the birds most mentioned by Machado are the stork and the eagle, each a symbol of Castile, the first, which returns every year to the bell towers, of its constancy and endurance and the birds of prey symbolise the majesty and hardness of its landscape. Aurora de Albornoz draws attention to this (16):

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(16) Op. cit. p. 163.

En los campos y ciudades que describe Machado, las aves son un elemento primordial. No hay apenas torre sin cigüeña, o cielo azul sin águila. Águilas y cigüeñas son, a partir de Campos de Castilla, casi inseparable de su poesía.

Yet Machado uses no distinguishing imagery for the birds he mentions. The nightingale in *La tierra de Alvar González* is called "dulce" and the swallows in *Recuerdos* are labelled "viajeros". The vulture in *A orillas del Duero* is described in a little more detail:

Un buitre de anchas alas con majestuoso vuelo.

But there is little that suggests a familiarity with these birds. He merely mentions their most obvious feature, what any literate countryman would describe. And this confirms Henry Gifford's assertion (17):

Machado did not go to the landscape like the townsman... He sought there "the countryman's emotion, essentially Georgic, for the land that is worked".

However, when speaking of the storks, with which he seems to have felt more sympathy Machado ventures into metaphor. Twice he mentions the "garabatos ganchudos de las cigüeñas" and in one of the rare moments of tenderness in *La tierra de Alvar González* we read how the aged parents used to watch in spring the mother stork teaching its nestlings to use their slow wings in flight.

Like Kavanagh, Machado mentions frequently the farmyard animals, the beasts of burden — donkeys, mules and oxen. The donkeys and mules are invariably "pardos"

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(17) Op. cit. p. 82.

and the oxen teams plough slowly on hills in autumn. The dogs, whether "galgos" or "lebreles" are always "flacos y agudos" and they prowl and howl, in the sordid back streets of Soria on moonlit nights. They are of course meant as symbols of poverty and sordidness, just as the wolf, with eyes like burning coals, which makes a sudden appearance in *La tierra de Alvargonzález* is a fitting symbol of the predatory brothers and is one of the elements which prevent their escape from the sinister wood on the night they were to meet their death.

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In his description of the peasants and provincial types, Machado has a far greater range than Kavanagh. We have not much to go on in Kavanagh's poetry apart from Patrick Maguire and his household, but this enough to draw varied conclusions and show the peasant's problem as Kavanagh saw it. Machado, on the other hand, gives us a wide variety of types, most of them to a greater or lesser degree grotesque, and includes madmen, criminals, parricides and bush-browed yokels "without dances or songs".

Some of Machado's portraits are carefully detailed and stunningly precise. In *Un criminal*, the first two stanzas give a physical and psychological description of the falsely-modest parricide which could not be matched for precision and brevity. Long before we hear of his crime we find something repelling in his fake subservience and in the contrast between his beady eyes and child-like face — and how well used the words "repugna" and "máscara" are in the line

que repugna su máscara de niño (I)

The rest of the portrait is equally pitiless and succinct, not only as regards the "young raven" of a criminal but also in the description of the members of the jury with their "dark frowning plebian faces" and the prosecuting counsel indifferently polishing his glasses and the blood-thirsty public sadistically waiting for the verdict of guilty.

The description of the madman in *Un loco* is less detailed. There are four lines to describe the grotesque figure crossing the autumnal moor and show him to be ragged dirty and ill-shaven with fever-bright eyes in a hollow face. Of course, the intention here is that we should feed pity for this mocked, tormented figure and indignation against his tormentors. The poem is also a condemnation of the boredom and tedium of life in the provincial town, which incites people to these acts of cruelty simply because they have nothing else to do.

There are other memorable pieces of description, as in *Fantasia iconográfica*, for example, or in *Por tierras de España*. In the former, the face in the painting, which could be that of an inquisitor, has the conflicting characteristics of the ascetic and the sybarite with the severe pallid brow and the full sensual lips. It is, however, on the eyes that the description most concentrates; shrewd, vigilant eyes which watch while the mouth pretends to smile. In his description of the peasant in *Por tierras de España*, Machado concentrates once more on the eyes: they are "hundidos, recelosos, movibles" — like the eyes of Alvargonzález second son — and they are always clouded with envy or sadness. As G. G. Brown states (18), in spite of the acclaim he has won as a poet of the people, Machado invariably describes the peasantry as an ugly, vivious, graceless population.

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(18) Op. cit. p. 74.

Kavanagh does not go in much for personal description. Unlike the poetry of Machado where it is an important element, description in Kavanagh's poetry is always incidental. A reason for this could be that since so much of his poetry comes from reminiscence, he was really writing about himself and description of oneself is not very interesting for a poet. Anyway, not all that many of his poems have a person for their central theme. The three long poems mentioned above: *The Great Hunger*, *Lough Derg* and *Why Sorrow?* are exceptions, but even in these poems different themes come crowding in and personal description where it is given is a brief brush stroke often serving to depict an attitude or gesture.

Of the poems I have read, only in *Father Mat* have I seen a description to suggest that any of the personages had a face, and that is confined to two lines:

His eyes were an old man's watery eyes,  
Out of his flat nose grew spiky hairs.

These two lines tell us something about the man's facial appearance, but more important for Kavanagh was to describe his presence and his way of being. We learn a great deal about Patrick Maguire of *The Great Hunger* in the course of the poem but we never know what his face is like — whether he is ugly or handsome, if he has fishy eyes or flap ears, if he wears a cap or if he has a long upper lip and a slanted nose. There are indications throughout the poem to show that before work and ennui got him down he was a person of a certain physical stature; we have phrases like:

And Patrick Maguire bent like a bridge

or

And there was a depth in his jaw and his voice was the voice  
of a great cattle dealer.



When he gets old and worn out, the hints we are given of his physical appearance make him look ridiculous:

His face set like an old judge's pose

and

When she (his mother) died

The knuckle bones were cutting the skin of her son's backside

And he was sixty-five.

When Maguire's mother is described (and she is the person who really dominates the atmosphere) the poet concentrates more on her voice than on her physical aspect. It is described twice as "venomous", once as a "venomous drawl" and another time as a thin "rust-worn knife" that cuts venomously. Hers, of all the faces, is described and that briefly as "wzened... like moth-eaten leatherette". Her physical build is tellingly described in a spare simile: "tall hard as a Protestant spire". Maguire's sister, Mary Ann, the other person of the trio, is barely described but one gets the impression that she is fattish from hearing that she grunts in bed like a sow. With age she too withers away and frizzles up "like the wick of an oil-less lamp".

Both Machado and Kavanagh show us the interior of the peasant houses. In the part of *La tierra de Alvar González* called "La casa", there is a lengthy description of the parent's house which gives the lay-out of the buildings and the rooms, as might be seen by one passing by on the road. "The "estancia", where Miguel dwells, is described in some detail with its spare sturdy furniture. The first thing the poet mentions in this description of the house, as he does with the buildings he describes in other poems, is the fire with the pots of food boiling and bubbling on it. In the "mesón scene" in *Campos de Soria*, where the old couple and young girl are sitting round the fire, what



we feel most is not the cosiness but the cold and the estrangement. It is not a happy household scene, as there is no happy household scene in *Campos de Castilla* apart from the brief glimpse of old Alvargonzález in the "estancia" proudly watching his eldest son in its mother's arms reaching for the fruit in the sun-drenched orchard — but even there the greed and envy of the son are hinted at.

Neither are there any happy home scenes in Kavanagh's poetry. In *The Great Hunger* the home atmosphere was dominated by Maguire's mother. In part III of that poem a morning scene in the house is described. The fire has been lit by the son; he has put the kettle on and is frying bacon for the breakfast. Two black cats are "gloating" on the staircase anticipating the bacon rinds. It could be a cosy scene but the note of discord is sounded by the mother who comes down from bed barefoot to take control and nag her son with shrewish remarks and a venomous voice.

Both poets show familiarity with farmyard implements and the accoutrements of a farmer's work, and mention them frequently in their poetry. The implement most mentioned by both is, naturally, the plough. In Machado's poems it is invariably drawn by teams of slow oxen with heavy lowered heads and the scene is often depicted on an autumn hillside, when the ground would be being ploughed for the winter wheat. In Kavanagh's poems the plough would be drawn by a horse in cold March or April with a "black" wind blowing, when the ground was being got ready for potatoes. Machado occasionally adds snippets of information to give the scene more authenticity, as in part IV of *Campos de Soria*, where he mentions the basket whith the sleeping child hanging from the yoke round the neck of the oxen. When Kavanagh includes incidental pieces of information, as he does in *Kerr's Ass*, it is not

so much to add authenticity as to bring a world to life for him — a world where his poetry was born.

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Machado, like the other writers of the Generation of 98, was profoundly concerned with the men of the country — in his case with the peasants of Castile. We saw before how he described them as a vicious, graceless people. It is in *Por tierras de España* that he examines the species in most detail. After showing how the peasant destroys the land that supports him by burning the pine woods and cutting down the holm oak groves, thus turning the land into a desert, he gives us a description of him: descendent of a tough hardy race of nomadic shepherds, short of stature, agile, with shrewd but evasive eyes, which would be often troubled with sadness or envy. Then in the next verse, he gives us the opinion he was to re-echo in many other poems:

Abunda el hombre malo del campo y de la aldea,  
capaz de insanos vicios y crímenes bestiales,  
que bajo el pardo sayo esconde un alma fea  
esclava de los siete pecados capitales.

The besetting sins of these people as Machado saw them were envy, the sin of Cain, and greed. It was greed fuelled by obsession for a girl that turned the young seminary student of *Un criminal* into a parricide. Greed and envy also drove the two elder Alvargonzález sons onto a like path. It is greed that makes the peasant chop down the holm oak groves and fire the pine woods turning his land into a waste — the quick reward of today overshadows all thoughts of tomorrow.

There are tortured people but few criminals in Kavanagh's poetry. Possible criminals might be in the poem *Lough Derg* the "ex-monk from Dublin and Aggie Meegan, in whose respective cases rape and infanticide are hinted at, but as I have not the complete poem to hand I cannot speculate further on that. Certainly in *The Great Hunger* there is no "actionable" offence committed, though the protagonist indulges in bouts of self abuse and speculates on the pros and cons of child molestation. He eventually decides against it, not for moral reasons but for very believable reasons of fear "of the danger of talk". In any case, tradition and an intrinsic dread of the blackthorn-wielding priest helped Kavanagh's peasants to keep their more violent emotions within bounds, but these restraints held no sway among the peasants of Machado's poetry. Greed there is and plenty in the people Kavanagh describes, from the mean land grabbers of *The Green Fool* and *Tarry Flynn* and of the unfinished novel *By Night Unstarred* (19) to *The Great Hunger*, whose title suggests not only hunger for sexual fulfilment but also hunger for land.

The priest was a very potent figure among Kavanagh's peasantry. It behoved one to keep well in with him for a condemnation by him from the altar on Sunday made one's name blacker than mud. A sure way of incurring his displeasure was by not turning up for Mass, so Patrick Maguire goes dutifully with the throng, but he prefers to kneel behind a pillar where he can "spit without being seen" and while he goes through the routine of the responses, his thoughts are with his land. Kavanagh chose, and in my opinion erroneously, to imagine the peasant as some kind of pantheist who saw God in nature. We have an example in the beautiful lines of *The Great Hunger* (20)

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(19) Recently published by The Goldsmith Press.

(20) Brendan Kennelly in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse* sees this image in the tradition of old Irish poetry.

where the land workers see the reawakening trees in spring as a living metaphor of the Trinity. There are various other examples in Kavanagh's poetry of this identification of God with nature. The last line of his poem *Advent* is:

And Christ comes with a January flower

or this, in *Primrose*, where the poet imagining a flowering primrose, says:

I looked at Christ transfigured without fear.

The peasant in *Campos de Castilla* is too level-headed to give way to such reveries. With the extremities of temperature which he suffers and the vast, desolate land around him, he tends to see his God as a force, benign or harsh as the mood takes Him. As Aurora de Albornoz states (21):

Ve al Señor como una fuerza terrible y hostil casi siempre, y su máximo deseo sería, si pudiese, vengarse de ese Dios a quien ve como una fuerza enemiga.

In *El Dios ibero* the attitude of the peasant to his God is clearly explained. When the harvest is bad or stormy weather flattens the wheat, he would like to revenge himself on the God he considers responsible for this, but when the harvest is abounding there is a "gloria a ti" on his lips to the same God. As the poet explains, this is the same kind of man who in the glorious past of Castile fought wars in the name of this God and later when Reformation and Counter Reformation were swaying Europe watched impassively the burning of heretics in God's name.

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(21) Op. cit. p. 195.

There only remains to be said that while the Spanish and Irish poet coincide at some points in their view of their country and countrymen, the differences are greater than the coincidences but their opinions are valid always in their context. The Irish countryside is not the Spanish although in both Monaghan and Soria there is "stony grey soil", heart-breaking monotonous work and a paradoxical greed for more land, which would naturally mean more work and more heart-break. Neither is the Irish peasant the same as his Spanish counterpart; conditions, historical, geographical and climatic have made them different. The Irish peasant was more tramelled by tradition and subservience to landlord or clergy and bounded by shorter vistas and clud-locked skies.

The peasant of Castile, descendent of those who were warriors and conquistadores, is a prouder species. The extremes of temperature made him tough and the open vistas of the high tablelands, the cloudless skies and the vast lonelinesses made him more solitary and inward looking. Not for him the conviviality of evening talks by the crossroads or late-night card games in neighbour's houses. It is this same solitariness and introspection that either produce mystics or give rise to emotions which if untamed lead to dreadful crimes. This is not to say that the peasant of one country was better or worse than the peasant of the other. Stony soil in any part will breed its crop of the warped and of misfits and people untouched by education and unhelped by the rest of the community cannot be held responsible always for their failings. Both poets knew what these failings were and they set them down in the hope that by doing so change would come.

And change has come. Life is continually in flux. New ideas come, new needs are formed and man is extremely adaptable. The mechanization of farm work, the disappearance of the small holding and the emigration of the land

worker to the city or abroad has meant a change in the face of the country. This does not mean that problems do not exist, that there are now no mind-tormented failures like Patrick Maguire or people whom envy will not move to terrible crimes like the sons of Alvargonzález. Like the ideas and the face of the country, the problems have changed too and a poet today if he chose the same themes would have to consider them from a different point of view.

I have not attempted here to compare the merits of the two poets because I think it must be evident to anyone who knows about poetry that Machado is the greater figure. His range is far wider and his stature more towering as an international poet than Kavanagh's will ever be. For the purposes of this article I have considered only *Campos de Castilla* which is his best-known book, but some would argue that *Soledades* is as good if not better. Kavanagh's range was limited; he was on sure ground only when he was writing about his lived experiences in his small "irregular fields" and his own reaction to it. He is popular now but if this popularity wanes it will be because of the amount of second or third-class poetry he allowed to be published and re-printed. His really good poems are few, perhaps no more than twelve or fifteen, but what makes them and their author, at least for me, great is that each time you read them they seem to be fresher and better. As long as poetry is read these poems will be read.