

**Patrick Kavanagh:  
The middle years.**

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"My purpose in life was to have no purpose."

Patrick Kavanagh

To divide a man's life and work into stages must of necessity be an arbitrary task. There is bound to be some overlapping and lack of agreement about the dividing line between one stage and the next. In figurative terms, there is a mingling like that of the contiguous bands of light in a spectrum or the fringe along each side of the border between two countries where the people speak the languages of both nations.

In a writer's development there is usually no abrupt change in style or ideas with a jettisoning of the old; this comes gradually, though some move or circumstance in his life can accelerate the process. With some writers the change is more marked than others. Hopkins is a case in point, though there are some echoes in some of the early poems, *Heaven Haven*, for example, of what was to come in *Wreck of the Deutschland* and after. In the case of Joyce, on the other hand, there is a steady development from *Dubliners* through *Portrait* and *Ulysses* to *Finnegans Wake*, and this though the first stories in *Dubliners* were written before he left Ireland. Exile, as it was self sought, had no traumatic effect on him. He seems at each point to know exactly where he was going.

With Patrick Kavanagh we are dealing with someone who allowed the circumstances to move him and his de-

velopment in great part can be seen as a reaction to these circumstances. Consequently, it is legitimate to see some event or set of circumstances as the boundary between one stage and the next. These boundaries, like the fences on hilly farms, are at times irregular and ill-defined but they nevertheless divide fields which to the onlooker may appear similar but which have different soil and produce different crops.

Kavanagh, the farmer, knew this. He would, had he the opportunity to come back and write his definitive autobiography, doubtlessly enumerate as many stages in his development as there are small irregular fields on the hill-clinging farms of his native Monaghan. These stages he called "spiritual rebirth", and he was fond of recounting to those who would listen the circumstances of these regenerations. In one of his poems he wrote (1):

I have known the delight  
of being reborn each morning  
and dying each night.

For the purposes of this article, though, it is convenient to see Kavanagh's development in three stages. The first comprises his early life until he decided to make a break with the land and settle permanently in the city. In this stage he was a "dabbler in words and rhymes" and found that it was his life (2). The third stage corresponds to the period from 1955 until his death. This is marked by the loss of his "messianic compulsion". It is also marked by a betterment of his precarious financial condition, thanks to the university stipend he received, but at the same time

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(1) *Complete Poems*: Published by The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, New York, 1972, p. 63.

(2) Author's Note: *Collected Poems*, Martin Brian & O'Keefe, London, 1964, p. xiii.

a deterioration in his health and general physical condition. In this period his verse is more resigned and richer in imagery and allusion.

The second stage, with which we are concerned here, are those "middle years", between 1939 and 1955, when he lived, subsisted would be a better term in many instances, in Dublin trying to gain the recognition he felt he deserved. It was the great battleground of his life — a battle from which he emerged losing. It is the period of the great long poems, of his newspaper and magazine articles, of *Tarry Flynn*, of many other ventures, tilts at windmills and hopes that were never fulfilled. It is a disheartening period both in the history of his life and in that of his country.

Kavanagh came to settle more or less permanently in Dublin in 1939, shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War. He had already written two books by then: a collection of poems, *Ploughman and Other Poems*, published by Macmillan, 1936, and a premature autobiography, *The Green Fool*, published by Michael Joseph, 1938, but withdrawn after a libel suit. He had also been to London twice for short periods; the first time on spec, the second time invited by two old ladies who had read *The Green Fool* and been impressed by it (3). While there, he tried to get reviewing work for the *Observer* and a writing contract for Macmillan, but both plans came to nought. Kavanagh, the Irish peasant poet, was not for London and London was not for Kavanagh, especially at that period in 1939, when

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(3) *Sacred Keeper: A biography* by Peter Kavanagh: Goldsmith Press, 1979, p. 63.

...the eerie beat  
of madness in Europe trembles the  
wings of butterflies along the canal (4).

In Dublin he had a surer means of support; his younger brother, Peter, who was working as a schoolteacher and who could stretch his salary to keep Patrick housed and fed. Not that Patrick considered this would be necessary for very long. He came somewhat in the plan of the conquering hero; he had two books behind him; a writer in the plenitude of his powers and bursting with ideas, he would take Dublin by storm. But he reckoned without Dublin; he did not yet know it well. Towards the end of his life he wrote:

There I was in a city that was not a city. Scores of cunning rogue writers, drinking and talking about poetry. With no background, no job or prospects of one. I came to Dublin and since then I have never stopped regretting it (5).

Dublin at that time, in 1939, was a more cosmopolitan place than it had ever been; a relatively "safe" and affluent city while armies marched, bombs fell and rationing was imposed elsewhere in Europe. As Peter Kavanagh says in *Sacred Keeper*, Dublin was a lively spot with "crowds of refugees, draft dodgers, spies posing as artists, artists posing as spies, American intelligence people posing as folklorists, German agents, Japanese, Australians, Bulgarians, French and those of every race" (6). It was a place where things could happen and Patrick was not without hopes.

At first it seemed as if his fortune was made. He was given a great welcome by Dublin literary society. Here was

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(4) *I had a Future: Collected Poems*, p. 138.

(5) *Sacred Keeper*, p. 60.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 70.

the authentic Irishman, the "ploughman about town", with the mud yet on his boots. He had published a slim volume of sentimental poems, contributed to A E's *The Irish Statesman* and Seamus O'Sullivan's *The Dublin Magazine*, and written an autobiographical novel in the Celtic Twilight tradition. He was almost at once awarded the A E Memorial Award, worth one hundred pounds. But, as Peter Kavanagh explains (7), Patrick did not play the game. He did not stand the right people drinks or pay court to the right women and he was quickly frozen out. It was considered that he showed a dangerous and arrogant streak of independence.

But being excluded from the literary society did not much worry him. He had a poor opinion of what he called "literary pub-crawlers", who were more interested in gossip and in getting jobs for the boys than in literature. In one of his novels (8), he describes a typical literary get together in a Dublin pub in the 1940's. The editor in question is Smyllie of *The Irish Times*, the venue is the Palace Bar; the reference to the interest in literature is of course ironical.

The editor was a great friend of Patrick as far as praising him in the newspaper went, or of allowing him to say his say in its columns and paying him a small fee. But to take him into the inner ring of his confidence where the gossips plan the commercial future of the state — this he had not done. Remarkable too how interested all these pub writers were in literature or in art. Their chief topic was jobs that were going or that were gone and how to circumvent someone's chances in favour of one of the "boys".

But Patrick had his own way of hitting back. He returned snub for snub and insult for insult, and if he thought

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(7) *Ibid.*, p. 72.

(8) *By Night Unstarred*: Goldsmith Press, 1977, p. 142-43.

he could see one of either coming along, he got his own in first. It was not really arrogance; rather the self-defence mechanism of a sensitive person who cared greatly what public opinion thought of him. As the critic, Darcy O'Brien, says (9): "His public style in Dublin was blunt, gruff, rough-hewn and frequently abusive, 'I've read your book and it's no good' he would greet a fellow writer in a voice like coal sliding down a chute. Or, 'I've not read your book but I know it's no good', the friendlier greeting."

This bluntness was construed as arrogance and while it kept Patrick Kavanagh in the limelight, it won him much hatred and many enemies in Dublin in the 1940's. This hatred took the form of jibes about his personal habits or his appearance, as in the anecdote related by Richard Fallis (10), where a Dublin poet seeing a load of manure go by, quipped, "Ah, I see Paddy Kavanagh's moving lodgings again!" Less bitter but still showing amused disrespect is the word-caricature entitled "Meet Patrick Kavanagh", which appeared in the Dublin literary magazine, *The Bell*, in 1948 (11):

...one notices —though not for the first time— the extraordinary equine head, the scobed nostrils, the great eyes of Man's Second Best Friend. The heavy tortoiseshell spectacles... curiously contribute to the horsey impression. There is too more than a hint of the gargoyle about it. One suddenly has a visión of Charles Méryon's fierce etching of Le Stryge on Notre Dame de Paris.

And the article goes on, caricaturing his appearance, clothing, voice and gesture, but it stops short of libel. This was to come in a "Profile" written in the now defunct

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(9) *Patrick Kavanagh*: Bucknell University Press, 1975, p. 16.

(10) *The Irish Renaissance*: Gill and Macmillan, 1977, p. 256.

(11) Reprinted in *Sacred Keeper*, p. 232.



Dublin weekly, *The Leader*. The article was unsigned, but it was a well-known secret that it was written at least in part by Brendan Behan (12), with whom Kavanagh had a running feud. A libel suit was brought by the brothers Kavanagh against *The Leader* but more of that anon. The point is that Patrick Kavanagh made himself many enemies and suffered many attacks during the 1940's and early 50's, culminating in an attempt on his life by a member of the Dublin underworld whose racket he had exposed (13).

However, Kavanagh had not only his detractors; there were also those who were fiercely partisan. As the writer of the interview "Meet Patrick Kavanagh", mentioned above, stated:

Where Mr. Kavanagh is concerned, indifference is impossible. He shares with Mr. Frank Sinatra, Mr. Dylan Thomas, Picasso and the Marx Brothers the capacity for rousing the emotions to screaming point. You either scream for him or against him (14).

How did Kavanagh achieve such notoriety and arouse feelings for or against him to such a pitch? It was only in part through poems like *The Paddiad*, *Jungle* or *The Defeated*, where he satirized what he considered rotten in Irish life and letters, because verse satires are not taken very seriously nowadays and, besides, this form of poetry was not Kavanagh's forte. Rather it was by being simply and uncompromisingly himself and saying what he thought whoever it hurt, this through the medium of the numerous newspaper and magazine articles he wrote.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Kavanagh's evolution as a writer lies in the essays and reviews he con-

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(12) *The Trial of Patrick Kavanagh: Best of Poetry Year 5, 1978*, p. 151 sqq.

(13) *Sacred Keeper*, p. 320 sqq.

(14) *Idem.*, p. 229.

tributed to the Irish newspapers and magazines as well as the lectures he gave at U. C. D. (where from 1955 he held an annual stipend of 400 pounds for life), and at other centres. An auto—didact who left school at the age of thirteen, he came to write authoritatively and often with great insight on a wide variety of subjects, including literature, politics, pilgrimages, art, the cinema, etc. As is to be expected, quite a lot of what he wrote for the Dublin newspapers in the 40's and 50's does not stand the test of time, though it has been resurrected by his brother, Peter, in the collection, *November Haggard* (15). At times Patrick Kavanagh could be wilfully ignorant or fatuous and the next minute penetrating and enlightened. Not for him the tepid phrase and the vague generalisation, the feeling of the stepping-stones before him. He walked boldly in all kinds of terrain, not caring where he planked his great size eleven boots. He hurled down his statements like challenges; let him take him up who dares.

At times he is given the wildest exaggeration, as, when film critic for the *Standard*, he comments on an Irish-made movie: "...To say this is the worst movie ever made is not enough: it is worse than that." A Hollywood magazine, taking him up on this, comments ironically that here at least was one occasion they could prove he was exaggerating (16). On another occasion he dismisses an art exhibition he was asked to review for the *Irish Times* by stating that the majority of the paintings should be more fittingly consigned to the bottom of the Liffey than to the walls of the exhibition room (17).

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(15) Published by The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1971.

(16) *Sacred Keeper*, p. 138.

(17) Mentioned by Myles na Gopaleen (Flann O'Brien): *The Best of Myles*, Picador, 1977, p. 256. The author continues: "Mr. Kavanagh's *saeva indignatio* seems to be what the promoters of the Exhibition are anxious to propagate. Why then write biting letters to the papers about him?"

Naturally he aroused furores of protest, but this was in part his aim. He often deliberately set out to be provocative. His articles, especially in the *Irish Times*, were followed by streams of indignant letters, as when he reviewed the book *The Hill is Mine*, by the best-forgotten Maurice Walsh. On this occasion the letter-writing controversy continued for six weeks with contributions among others from Flann O'Brien and the editor himself writing under a pseudonym. The letters were divided between the angry and the facetious —Mr. Kavanagh's articles activated the circulation both of newspapers and the blood-stream of the choleric.

At that time (in the 1940's) there were but three national dailies in the Republic of Ireland. At this time (in the 1980's) there are still but three national dailies in the Republic of Ireland. The three papers were (and are) the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Press*. There was also then the *Catholic Standard*, which is now I believe incorporated in the *Catholic Herald*. At one time or another Patrick Kavanagh contributed to all four.

Patrick's first assault was made on the *Irish Times* —a newspaper with Unionist tendencies, which had been outspokenly pro-British during the "Rising", (1916) and the period of the "Troubles", (1919-21), as indeed to a lesser extent had been the *Independent*. The *Times*, in Peter Kavanagh's words (18), had "literary pretensions" and Patrick sought to be admitted to its staff. Its editor was Smyllie, a fat jovial man, who held court and allotted jobs in the Palace bar in Dublin's Fleet Street. The assault was in vain; the editor held him off with fat charm. Smyllie smiled (naturally), listened to him, patted him on the shoulder and invited him to write "specials" for the paper at the payment (nice touch!) of a guinea a time. As Peter says, "Pa-

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(18) *Sacred Keeper*, p. 92.

trick didn't pay for many lunches with what he got from the *Irish Times*" (19).

Examples of the "specials" he wrote for the *Times* are mentioned above—the review of the art exhibition and that of Walsh's book—and they are also these which caused most controversy. The editor knew what he was doing when he offered Kavanagh periodic work. Controversy was all right from time to time when sales were flagging, but a daily dose would be too much for the conservative readers.

There is no doubt that these reviews were awaited with much interest by those being reviewed, as can be seen in the account in *Sacred Keeper* (20) of what happened with *The Capuchin Annual*:

This publication was fat, slick and with pretensions to art and to literature. It was edited by Father Senan who was mighty proud of it. He himself was one of the great sources of power in Dublin. The word got out that Patrick had received the *Annual* from the *Irish Times* for review and Father Senan rushed out to our place to present Patrick with a five-pound note hoping thereby to influence Patrick's judgement. Patrick accepted the gift because, as he explained to me, it is unlucky to refuse money.

Yet the review was far from favourable. The *Annual* and publications akin to it are likened to "new shops in a district (that) attract all the bad pays, the disreputable." Elsewhere there are mentions to "anti-literature", "scribblers" and "illiterate ideas of Catholicism." Patrick in a seemingly wilful fashion put his foot everywhere but on the rungs of the "ladder of success". "No surprise" continues

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(19) *Ibid.*, p. 74.

(20) *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

Peter, "that financially 1942 turned out to be one of the worst periods of his life. Poverty."

At the same time as he was writing for the *Irish Times*, he also did occasional "specials" for the *Independent*. Of this newspaper, Peter Kavanagh says: "At this time it represented the ultra-pious wing of the Catholic Church and was highly smug and capitalistic". The pay seems to have been slightly better here —three pounds for each "special" and ten shillings for book reviews. But again, as with the *Times*, there was to be no full-time job, but neither does there seem to have been much controversy.

He fared slightly better with the *Irish Press*, organ of De Valera's Fianna Fail party. Here for about a year and a half, September 1942 to February 1944, he held the job of twice-a-week columnist. He named his column *City Commentary*. Peter says of it (21):

It was an interesting enough column but he was not at his best in it because it forced him to fall between two stools. Were he to lean towards the gossipy side he would feel embarrassed and were he to write out of his own integrity the newspaper wouldn't print it. Even as it was it stank of literature, as Villiers de L'Isle Adam would say, and there were days when his column would not be printed. This killed the quality of inevitability of appearance which gives journalism the suggestion of power.

So, with the possibilities of a bright future in these three Irish dailies behind him, it was to the *Catholic Standard* he turned. Thanks to the influence of the Archbishop of Tuam and the belief in him of the editor, Peter Curry, Patrick was appointed as Editorial and Feature writer for the *Standard*. Later he was also given the additional assignment of Film Critic for the same paper. Patrick was

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(21) *Ibid.*, p. 118.

full of praise for Curry and towards the end of his life paid him the following tribute (22):

He was the only man who ever gave me a regular job. He was the only editor who would and did give me complete freedom to say what I liked without fearing that the remarks of a "genius" would cause scandal, widespread sinfulness and —worst of all— loss of advertising revenue.

The words "complete freedom" are to be taken with a pinch of salt. No newspaperman is free to say exactly what he likes; but it is ironic to reflect that on the face of it the most conservative of the four periodicals for which he wrote gave Kavanagh the greatest measure of liberty. However, there was some kink in his nature, laziness or perverseness, which would not allow him to stay in the one job. This would not matter so much if he were of the adventurous, devil-may-care type. But he was just the opposite. An incurable worrier, some invisible tether seemed to bind him to Dublin to which, though he often lived there in abject misery, he always gravitated back after one of his short sallies abroad.

After about two years as Editorial and Feature writer of the *Standard*, Patrick became restless. In a letter to his brother in America, we find him writing (23):

It is most unlikely that I will remain with the *Standard* much longer. In fact I may scam this week. I can get on without their lousy job. I am promised a fiver a week from two sources.

In another letter, which was probably written about a fortnight later, we learn that he has already left. In yet another letter of about a month later, we read (24)

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(22) *Ibid.*, p. 184.

(23) *Ibid.*, p. 150.

(24) *Ibid.*, p. 151.

I applied in an insulting way for one of the Script Writers jobs on Radio Eireann. 750 pounds per annum and was not even asked for an interview.

These examples go to show that where jobs at least were concerned, he was ingenuous. He seemed to believe all the pub talk of "fixing up" jobs, and clerical contacts and letters to ministers. Then, when these things did not turn out he preferred to believe that there was a conspiracy against him and this discouraged him from trying further. Besides, as he admitted himself many times, he was extremely lazy. As far as the necessity for contacts is concerned he was right; we have already seen how the Archbishop of Tuam landed him the job on the *Standard*.

He had not much luck with John McQuaid, the Archbishop of Dublin. Kavanagh believed, rightly or wrongly, that McQuaid could, through his enormous influence, get him a cushy job where, once established, he could get married and so live happily ever after (25). Apparently, the only job the Archbishop put him in the way of getting was carrying planks for a Dublin bed manufacturer at two pounds, fifteen a week (26). However, McQuaid often succoured him in moments of need with a timely gift of money.

This being offered alms when he considered he had a right to a prestigious job in keeping with his intellectual abilities must have demeaned him, at least in his own eyes. It must also have been grating on him to see people of lesser, or, in his opinion, no ability getting the slice of the cake which he thought should come to him. He also constantly regretted the fact that he was not married. If he were married, he reasoned, he would lead a more regula-

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(25) There is a hilarious description of one of Patrick's visits to the Archbishop in Part II, Chapter 4, of *By Night Unstarred*.

(26) *Patrick Kavanagh*, op. cit., p. 43.



ted life and his writing would consequently benefit. But, the problem, as he saw it, was that he could not get married since he did not have money. It was a vicious circle. In a letter to his brother (27) he complains: "A country in which a writer as good as me cannot get a wife is not a civilized country, is it?"

His ideal of woman, at least in the early stages, was a sweet-mannered, convent-educated girl—someone like Mary Reilly of *Tarry Flynn* or Margaret of *By Night Unstarred* (28). Although this idealism was to waver in later years, he never considered a union outside the bonds of marriage. In another letter (29) we find him counselling his brother against the idea of keeping a mistress, and saying optimistically "most marriages are a success!". After 1950—when his emotional and financial predicament became more acute—he muses on the possibility of marrying a rich widow. As his brother says, Patrick was always rather strait-laced and conservative. He did eventually marry—only six months or so before he died. We don't know how happy that brief union proved to be.

As we have seen, Patrick Kavanagh was "reborn" many times, that is, his way of life or his ideas and, consequently, his writing underwent a change. One of these periods of spiritual rebirth occurred around 1947. This coincided with a series of articles he wrote for the Dublin literary magazine, *The Bell*, and a consequent clarification of his ideas about Irish literature in general, his own integrity as a writer and the direction he must take as a poet. It also coincided with the publication by Macmillan of his collec-

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(27) *Sacred Keeper*, p. 160.

(28) In an article in *The Honest Ulsterman*, núm. 60, p. 71, the correspondent amusingly refers to Kavanagh's ideal girls as "daddy's darlings... straights (with) not a warp in one of them, sane to the point of ennui...".

(29) *Sacred Keeper*, p. 150.



tion *Soul For Sale* and his novel *Tarry Flynn*, by the Pilot Press.

In *Soul For Sale*, he allowed a truncated version of *The Great Hunger* to be printed and in it he published his last poem in the Celtic Twilight tradition: *Pegasus*. Never more was he to return to that particular overworked field, which he began to hate and vilify. His novel *Tarry Flynn* he considered the definitive oeuvre of Irish country mores and which captured the rhythms of the speech of the people better than anything since Carleton. It marked the end of an epoch (30).

In the essays he wrote for *The Bell*, three deserve special mention: those on F. R. Higgins (*The Gallivanting Poet*); on Frank O'Connor, and on the Gaelic Language. In the first, he deals the death blow to the Celtic Twilight myth, to the idea of such a thing as the Irishness of poetry. Higgins was a Protestant who in Kavanagh's opinion "most desperately wanted to be what mystically, or poetically, does not exist, an 'Irishman'". Kavanagh saw him as trying to combat this handicap by laying on his Irishness from the outside. Higgins did this by the use of quaint words like "gallivanting", by his belief in the myth of Ireland and the idea of Dublin as a "spiritual entity". Kavanagh reacts by stating:

Who wants to be an Irish writer?

A man is what he is, and if there is some mystical quality in the Nation or race it will ooze through the skin (31).

He goes on to condemn Higgins as a dabbler, someone insincere, who keeps on pretending "that the futile deco-

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(30) "I have closed the door on that type of novel — no one for a generation will attempt to write about the Irish countryside." *Sacred Keeper*, p. 241.

(31)—*Sacred Keeper*, p. 166.

ration on the walls is enough for the day". "A poet", Kavanagh says, "must be going somewhere. He must be vitalizing the spirit of man in some way... The best poets are those who lie prostrate before God". This was at the same time his own personal manifesto and a devastating attack on other poets in the Higgins mould, such as Austin Clarke.

In the article on Frank O'Connor, he examines this writer's "deceptive" realism and puts forward the necessity of writing out of one's own "common experience". It is necessary to have one's feet in the soil—and he gives as examples Blake, Milton, Shelley, Yeats, whose tracks we can follow. "However high they raised their mystical heads", Kavanagh says, they could still feel "the electric shock". O'Connor is deceptive in that he gives the impression of being rooted in the soil but he is "about one inch from the top of the grass". His failure to come down to earth, Kavanagh explains, lies partly in the fact that he was under the influence of Yeats, and adds: "one man's integrity is another man's compromise" (32). Kavanagh's integrity was that from the outset he rejected the influence of Yeats and in doing so liberated Irish poets sooner than would otherwise have happened.

The highly amusing article on the Gaelic revival attacks the idea of language being a badge of nationhood. He sees this futile idea of a revival as the most potent weapon against the writer in Ireland. The Gaelic language is dead, he states, "yet food is being brought to the graveyard":

However much we have loved the creature when it was alive  
we must be realists and accept that it is dead when it is  
dead

Let the frustrated and inarticulate continue to lay food beside  
the corpse (33).

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(32) *Ibid.*, p. 166.

(33) *Ibid.*, p. 168.

An Irish writer who writes in English is not "letting the language down". A creative writer, according to Kavanagh, has a "feminine passivity" which is played upon by the "vital consciousness of the people". He unquestioningly accepts the force of life, so if the subject he writes about or the language he uses be dead or dying, "it will come to pieces in the writer's hands". So, the line of argument continues, it is not surprising that all movements, political as well as literary, which had a vital impact on the people of Ireland used English as their medium. The use of Gaelic, apart from constricting the writer, served to foster the myth of Ireland as a spiritual entity, which Kavanagh had already demolished.

Kavanagh was unpopular before, but audacity such as this raised the proverbial hornets' nest of protest. Powerful names and powerful interests were at stake. Frank O'Connor, who had been his friend and praised Kavanagh as Ireland's greatest poet, ceased speaking to him. Austin Clarke, the great contemporary and rival of Kavanagh, was furious because, as the latter pointed out, the essay on F. R. Higgins devastated his life's work. As far as the essay on the revival of Gaelic was concerned, it attacked the interests of the smug who wished to keep Ireland isolated, away from the influence of and incapable of influencing European thought. Add to this the fact that for a short period after its publication *Tarry Flynn* was on the list of banned books, and we can appreciate how to a noisy minority Mr. Kavanagh must have seemed guilty of un-Catholic and consequently un-Irish activities.

This was a high moment in his life. The next few years saw a steady deterioration in his financial and physical condition. He took up gambling, borrowed money, owed rent to landladies and started drinking heavily. He wrote a number of verse satires, like *The Wake of the Books*, about the censorship board, *The Paddiad*, inspired by

Pope's *Dunciad*, in which he continues his attack on the writers who were trying to capitalize on the Irish "thing", and the verse play *Adventures in a Bohemian Jungle*, in which, in the words of Darcy O'Briren, "he takes on the entire Dublin art world, literature, theatre, painting, music, all tightly bound to commerce" (34).

He began now to find it difficult to get an outlet for his work and into the bargain he was dismissed from the only steady job he had, as film critic for the *Standard*. There seemed to be a conspiracy against him. About this time too, the Irish minister for External Affairs vetoed the decision of the Irish Cultural Committee to send Kavanagh on a lecture tour of America. Even his picture which was to appear on the cover of an Irish magazine, was withdrawn. It was in this ambience of vindictiveness all round that he made the decision to bring out his own newspaper. Darcy O'Brien explains it (35):

On Saturday, April 12, 1952, Patrick and Peter launched the revenge vehicle, *Kavanagh's Weekly, A Journal of Literature and Politics...* Patrick wrote all the editorials, random social comments, theatre, art, book, and film reviews, children's stories and poems. A very few additional articles were written by others, including Myles na g'Copaleen (Flann O'Brien). The paper ran to eight pages, or about 10,000 words, per week, sold for sixpence, and averaged well under one tiny advertisement each issue. It lasted thirteen weeks. The brothers got no outside support and stopped when Peter's money ran out.

It is to Peter that thanks must go for financing the venture and organizing the technical aspects of printing and distribution as well as for quite a bit of the polemic that appeared on its pages. He mostly limited himself to writ-

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(34) *Patrick Kavanagh*, p. 46.

(35) *Idem.*, p. 49.

ing about the doings of the Irish in America, and this, as John Lucas says in his review of the paper's republication in book form, seems "marginal to what surely ought to have been the paper's main concern: to provide detailed information about political and cultural affairs in Dublin" (36).

There is plenty of comment, if not detailed information, in the articles dealing with Irish art, literature and politics in *Kavanagh's Weekly*. In these articles Patrick attacks the persons, groups, systems and ideas with which he found himself most at variance. However, this is mostly a rehashing of old ideas, a saying of things he had already said before. There are no "sensational disclosures", no naming of names (probably from a fear of libel action or of problems with the distribution monopolists, Easons), which would seem to be the *raison d'être* of such a paper.

According to John Lucas, in the review mentioned above, *Kavanagh's Weekly* is mostly a matter of tone. In Darcy O'Brien's view that tone is "one of ridicule with a reforming impulse behind it. "The same writer goes on to say: "For Kavanagh, the political, literary and everyday follies of Ireland were targets of fun, but he imagined that his criticism might enlighten, might reduce the number of asses. Partly because of the failure of his paper, he gave up such hopes eventually" (37).

Shortly after the failure of his paper, two blows were to affect Patrick Kavanagh and bring to an end the phase of his life we are concerned with here. The first was the libel suit, which is mentioned above, and which came about as the result of the *Profile* in the *Leader*. This article, which appeared three months after the folding of *Kavanagh's Weekly*, portrayed Patrick.

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(36) *Times Literary Supplement*, July 31, 1981, p. 886.

(37) *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

hunkering on a bar stool, defining alcohol as the worst enemy of the Imagination... the Master orders a further measure, and, cocking an eye at the pub clock, downs the mait in a gulp.

It goes on to show him insulting the "acolytes" who surround him and who love the snubs: "Yous have no merit, no merit at all"; leaving the pub to put a bet on a horse, but, we are warned, "he'll be back" (38).

On the face of it this does not seem very libellous, but the Kavanaghs sued on the grounds that the article "held Patrick up to odium, hatred, ridicule and contempt", and that it "portrayed him as of limited literary abilities, of intemperate habits, vicious and dissolute" (39). The case was heard in the High Court Dublin and the counsel for the defence was the former Taoiseach; John Costello. The case made legal history in Ireland and is particularly famous for the witty "sparring match" between Costello and the plaintiff, Kavanagh.

Costello's strategy was to keep Kavanagh in the witness box, subjected to a continual barrage of questions and accusations, rather as if he were the accused, not the accuser. It was, as Peter Kavanagh remarks, the strategy used by Carson against Oscar Wilde in the libel action the latter brought against the Marquis of Queensberry. In the course of the proceedings Kavanagh gave as good as he got, but physically he was in no condition to endure the pressure brought on by the long sessions of interrogation. He feigned a breakdown in the witness box and the case came to an end. The jury found for the defendants: Costello's strategy and the anti-Kavanagh feeling among the Dublin middle classes won the day.

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(38) *Scred Keeper*, 262-63; *Patrick Kavanagh*, 52-53.

(39) *Sacred Keeper*, p. 269.

There was a repeal against the decision which went in favour of the plaintiffs, but there was to be no rejoicing. The *Leader* was in no position to pay the costs and it ceased publication. Kavanagh did not get the sum of money he had hoped when he brought the action; what he did get was more notoriety and the commiseration, real or pretended, of cronies and acquaintances.

Almost immediately, he suffered the second of the blows mentioned above. He entered hospital, where a cancer of the lung was diagnosed. He was operated on and the lung was removed, but thanks to his strong physique and the will to live, he survived, and was to live for another thirteen years. This last phase, however, marks another period in his life and his development as a poet and is not the subject of the present article.