Mr Kavanagh's Progress

by JOHN JORDAN

> ' The people didn't want a poet, but a fool,
> yes they could be doing with one of those.'
> *The Green Fool* (1938)

> ' The story of the heifer that came back is nearly symbolic of my life. I have failed many times to get my cattle to the fair.'
> —Ibid.

IT would be foolish for the present writer to pretend that he is not personally acquainted with Mr Patrick Kavanagh. It would be even more foolish to write about him as if his slight acquaintance gave any right to attempt an authoritative interpretation of a small but very difficult body of work, on the grounds of extraneous assumptions as to character or personality.[1] What follows, it is hoped, is based on nothing other than the evidence of texts, and as far as is humanly possible, the estimate offered will be uninfluenced by that folk-lore which is Dublin's special contribution to the misunderstanding of genius, whether or not the genius be comprehensive (as with Yeats) or fragmentary and erratic (as with Kavanagh).

Patrick Kavanagh's first volume of poems was *Ploughman and Other Poems* (Macmillan, 1936). He was thirty-one and still living in Monaghan, where he practised the craft of cobbler and farmer. *Ploughman* shows evidence of a small but pure talent, remarkably unclogged by the mists (fairy and mental) which, together with stage-winds, property moons and stars, and synthetic twilights, make the going and the visibility so difficult in the bulk of minor Irish verse he might as a neophyte well have imitated. He does, admittedly, in one poem see Thomas Aquinas in the wind-spaces but that in itself is a healthy sign, when he might have been seeing one of the amoral ladies of our Saga literature, or even, under AE's influence, the Earth Mother. (Mother Earth and the Earth Mother embody two vastly different efforts of the imagination.) The chief significance of Mr Kavanagh in 1936—and in 1960 for a good many foolish people—was that he was an autodidact (so far as poetry was concerned) who worked on the land and wrote verses. I hazard, in humility, the guess that for some years Mr Kavanagh was immature enough to play up to a drawing-room conception of the primitive. In *The Green Fool* he tells us of ' a couple of villainous journalists ' :

[1] Such an interpretation, based on faded tales of twenty years ago, has been offered recently (July 24, 1960) by Mr Micheál MacLiammoir in *The Sunday Times*.

> The latter never missed an opportunity of putting a lurid paragraph in the Sunday newspapers about me. I must be an interesting character, I thought. So I decided that in future if I was to be exploited I should do the exploiting myself.

I should not be surprised if Mr Kavanagh flinches at a bare reference to, let alone quotation from, *The Green Fool.* Much of it makes painful reading, especially those pages in which he records his opinions of Irish contemporaries. The Kavanagh of 1960 can scarcely wish to recall that he was once an admirer of F. R. Higgins, ' one of the best of the young Irish poets '.

But *The Green Fool* cannot be written off as a young man's aberration. It is Mr Kavanagh's most successful attempt at sustained prose narrative, to my mind of greater merit than the novel *Tarry Flynn* (The Pilot Press 1948) which covers a deal of the same ground. The latter book has perhaps more cohesion but it is rather more self-regarding, and lacks the bright and clear transfer effects of *The Green Fool.* And in this openly autobiographical book there are laid bare the elements of Kavanagh, the pieties and predispositions which have been the sustenance of his talent and the architecture of its products. In his later verse, Mr Kavanagh has not been afraid of walking naked, as in the beautiful poem ' I Had a Future ', of which more later. The chief value of *The Green Fool* may be the revelation, almost embarrassingly authentic, of a mind at once cunning and naive, suspicious and trusting. I suppose the unsatisfactory term ' peasant ' has to be brought in, sooner or later. *The Green Fool* demonstrates how devious the mind of the peasant can be, and yet how simple when it is released from traditional bondages of land and cattle and family. But it is Mr Kavanagh's mind I am trying to write about, and only quotation and commentary can illustrate that.

Even in this early book there are inklings of his later strengths as a poet. Here he is on the subject of a pig-killing :

> It was a memorable morning ; the blood of dawn was being poured over the hills and of that other blood we only thought how much black-pudding it would make. Our talk had the romantic beauty of reality. We were as close to life and death as we could be.

I can think of no other writer who could get away with a phrase like ' the romantic beauty of reality '. But in no other writer would so flabby a phrase have the backing of a red sky at morning juxtaposed with the blood of stuck-pigs. It will be seen, I hope, that Mr Kavanagh has adhered, increasingly through the years, to the extreme form of the doctrine of ' meanest flower ' as subject-matter for the imagination. Much of this essay will be given to demonstration of his growing awareness of his own inmost preoccupation, and of his attempts, sometimes successful, to create poems, emblematic or discursive, on the theme of

ripening consciousness. It might be said as a general proposition of any worthwhile poet, that he struggles to establish to his own satisfaction the nature of reality. Mr Kavanagh's peculiar status as a poet depends very largely on the freshness of his rediscovery of an axiom. He is archetypical.

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Mr Kavanagh, I believe, is not favourably disposed to the book by which he is best known, *A Soul for Sale* (Macmillan, 1947). This volume includes the long poem 'The Great Hunger,' originally published by the Cuala Press in 1942, and the occasion of a mild scandal. It may be worthwhile to indicate the virtues and oddities of what must remain an important part of the skimpy contribution, outside Joyce and George Moore, made by Irish Catholics to the literature of the English-speaking world.

Despite its adventures with authority, 'The Great Hunger,' is, in substance as well as in structure, a morality. It is about the perversion of the Catholic teaching on sex and marriage, as portrayed in the life of a small farmer Patrick Maguire. The first line 'Clay is the word and clay is the flesh' announces this perversion in a complex way which I have not seen noted. Mr Kavanagh may dislike the critical method known as explication, but I'm afraid his own work needs a good deal of it. The fact that the Word was, and forever is being made Flesh, is the central truth of the Christian Revelation. It is also the prototype of the act of love. Mr Kavanagh's farming community have substituted for love, marriage and birth (which may be allowed to be divine in so far as they mirror the love of the Trinity) 'the passion that never needs a wife', and their symbol, Patrick Maguire, is 'the man who made a field a bride'.

> He lives that his little fields may stay fertile when his own body
> Is spread in the bottom of a ditch under two coulters crossed in
> Christ's Name.

In short this poem is the analysis of an extended blasphemy against Creation. The analysis is not carried out on a consistently high level of relevance and the verse is too often slack, but perhaps Mr Kavanagh has come closer than any other writer outside Joyce to the problem of religion, when it curdles, in Catholic Ireland, and unlike Joyce he attempts to understand the phenomenon, and to treat it with compassion. I also suspect that, if such a paradox is possible, he is an instinctive theologian :

Once one day in June when he was walking
Among his cattle in the Yellow Meadow
He met a girl carrying a basket—
And he was then a young and heated fellow
Too earnest, too earnest! He rushed beyond the thing
To the unreal. And he saw Sin
Written in letters larger than John Bunyan dreamt of.
For the strangled impulse there is no redemption.

The quasi-theological bent of Mr Kavanagh's mind may be seen in the line 'He rushed beyond the thing/To the unreal'. The sense of sin when over-active, passes easily enough into sin itself. And this over-active sense of sin is part and parcel of the general spiritual condition of Patrick Maguire's community. It might even be concluded that it is almost the sole thing which *is* truly alive, were it not that Mr Kavanagh's peasants are allowed intimations of glory :

Yet sometimes when the sun comes through a gap
These men know God the Father in a tree :
The Holy Spirit is the rising sap,
And Christ will be the green leaves that will come
At Easter from the sealed and guarded tomb.

This is the place to note that Mr Kavanagh's mystique is a little unorthodox : it is difficult to detect at what point a traditional use of analogy shades into an older cult of nature-worship. His Catholic admirers may find it distasteful, but there are indications here and elsewhere in 'The Great Hunger' that the only spiritual illumination these male peasants receive comes not from their devotional practices (which he describes with something closer to tenderness than to irony) but from their Wordsworthian contacts with an imperfectly manifested Nature.

But Mr Kavanagh's vaguely pantheistic (but perhaps Franciscan) approach in this context does not take from the central importance of 'The Great Hunger' as the only major poem of our time by an Irish Catholic (Denis Devlin's 'Lough Derg' might be an exception) to examine the rôle or the subsidence of religion in life. I've harped on this aspect of his poem because what to me seems so obvious has never, to my knowledge, been stated.

The remaining poems of *A Soul for Sale* are of very varying quality. 'Father Mat' is an accomplished exercise in decent religious sentiment, chiefly remarkable for an early statement of the Kavanagh doctrine of common things. A curate is described (as against the old priest Father Mat—Mr Kavanagh has a weakness for old priests) as

One who was not afraid when the sun opened a flower,
Who was never astonished
At a stick carried down a stream
Or at the undying difference in the corner of a field.

'Pegasus', much admired by young men ten years ago, does not wear well. The parable of the soul for sale to Church or State or 'meanest trade' is marred by romantic complacency. The famous 'Stony Grey Soil' will always be of interest as evidence of how far Mr Kavanagh has advanced, from a belated condition of rebellion, to acceptance of at least part of his past—he has not yet learned to look with serenity on the rebellion itself. In the context of his later development, the most relevant poem is 'Spraying the Potatoes' with its tight if weepy final stanza:

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

I call these lines 'weepy' because they pre-suppose unconvincingly a lost paradise. The mature Kavanagh carries the paradise about within him.

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Since 1947 Mr Kavanagh, initially through his Journal in *Envoy*, and later through his own paper *Kavanagh's Weekly*, has become the object of an unhealthy cult, based largely on his wild, uninformed and deliberately provocative generalizations, rather than on a few perceptions of Coleridgian brilliance. He has been vocal also in periodicals such as the *Farmers' Journal* and the *National Observer*, to note only his series of regular contributions.

It is since 1947 also that he has emerged as a considerable verse satirist, with a gift for Byronic rhyme and an equally impressive gift for catching the inflexions of Irish rural and urban speech. The longest of his verse satires are 'The Wake of the Books' (*The Bell*, November 1947) a gay laceration of Censors and Censored, in the form of a semi-expressionistic playlet; 'The Paddiad' (*Horizon*, August 1949), a dissection of Dublin literary cliques, in which the tone is growing more savage, and 'The Christmas Mummers' (*Nimbus*, Winter 1954), another episode in the war of Kavanagh versus the New Bourgeoisie. Of these he has reprinted 'The Paddiad' in his latest book *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling*.[1] Four other satirical pieces may be found in what is practically a small book, the nineteen poems printed in *Nimbus* (Winter, 1956). Somewhat dishonestly, the editors of *Nimbus* failed to point out that these were not new poems, but a gleaning of what the poet had published over the previous eight or nine years. More than half of these nineteen poems appear again in the new book. Of those omitted

[1] Longmans, 10s. 6d.

the most important is 'I Had a Future', which goes back to 1952 and *Kavanagh's Weekly*. Mr Kavanagh, it will be seen, does not waste verse.

'I Had a Future' is symptomatic of Mr Kavanagh's new and imaginatively enriching acceptance of the past and what it has done to him, a fragment of naked autobiography contained in self-knowledge. There can be no more difficult task for the writer than to see himself as he once was, blurred neither by self-pity nor self-abhorrence :

> Show me the stretcher-bed I slept on
> On a room on Drumcondra Road
> Let John Betjeman call for me in a car.

The present writer was a very young man when he first read this poem, and can remember feeling that the reference to Mr Betjeman was over-revelatory. The feeling was of course wrong. The mood of the poem is not one of nostalgia, but of wonder over a former self, a self with ' quarter-seeing eyes ' and ' animal-remembering mind ', and the concrete details about Mr Betjeman and the Drumcondra Road, the stretcher-bed and the car, a hint of luxury against a background of Bohemian frugality, nail down the poet's passionate desire to *understand* that former self. This is Mr Kavanagh's earliest attempt, perhaps, to use verse as an instrument towards the comprehension of his own experience.

Almost all the most recent poems of quality in *Kitty Stobling* are further, more complex attempts to attain a kind of passing self-knowledge. In the superbly jazzy ' Auditors In ' he writes,

> From the sour soil of a town where all roots canker
> I turn away to where the Self reposes
> The placeless Heaven that's under all our noses
> Where we're shut from all the barren anger,
> No time for self-pitying melodrama . . .

leading to the wry gravity of the conclusion,

> I am so glad
> To come so accidentally upon
> My Self at the end of a tortuous road
> And have learned with surprise that God
> Unworshipped withers to the Futile One.

Mr Kavanagh's Self is a very different one from that in *A Soul for Sale*, but he stills has links with the man who praised ' the undying difference in the corner of a field '. This is best illustrated from the sonnet ' The Hospital ', appearing here with some, to my mind, dubious revisions. I quote the sestet as it appeared in *Nimbus*.

This is what love does to things : the Rialto Bridge,
The main gate that was bent by a heavy lorry,
The seat at the back of a shed that was a suntrap.
Naming these things is the love-act and its pledge ;
For we must set in words the mystery without claptrap,
Experience so light-hearted appears transitory.

In *Kitty Stobling* the last two lines run,

For we must record love's mystery without claptrap,
Snatch out of time the passionate transitory.

The first emendation is acceptable, the second disastrous. For a rediscovered truth—that experience *appears* transitory to the outgoing heart—is substituted the cliché of art eternizing the moment. But even in its new version the sonnet is not alone masterly in its control of speech-rhythms, but most moving as a declaration of faith in life.

There are others in this book :

Gather the bits of road that were
Not gravel to the traveller
But eternal lanes of joy
On which no man who walks can die.
Bring in the particular trees
That caught you in their mysteries,
And love again the weeds that grew
Somewhere specially for you.
Collect the river and the stream
That flashed upon a pensive theme,
And a positive world make,
A world man's world cannot shake,
And do not lose love's resolution
Though face to face with destitution.
(' Prelude ')

Love is the theme of this book ultimately, love for life as it is, not as it might have been, or ought to be, or might well be in the near future. And how many fruitful statements Mr Kavanagh makes in naming his great discovery :

To look on is enough
In the business of love
(' Is ')

Again,

I will have love, have love
From anything made of
And life with a shapely form
With gaiety and charm
And capable of receiving
With grace the grace of living
And wild moments too
Self when freed from you.
(' The Self-slaved ')

Kitty Stobling contains several botched poems—'In Memory of My Mother' collapses one word from the end—but as a whole it stands out as that rarest of achievements, a book of verse which manifestly indicates an integrated personality, rather than an album of shots from various angles. This is Kavanagh, nor are we out of him.

As against this, there are some suggestions that Mr Kavanagh has not yet expunged from his thinking and his writing certain gritty elements. I am *not* thinking of the enchanting 'House Party to Celebrate the Destruction of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland', a lampoon in the grand style rising to the final searing indictment of pinchbeck liberalism:

> In far off parishes of Cork and Kerry
> Old priests walked homeless in the winter air
> As Seamus poured another pale dry sherry.

What I have called the 'gritty elements' in the poet's thinking are best seen at their clogging process, whenever he writes about his vision of the Eternal Feminine. I'm afraid that Mr Kavanagh collapses irremediably into sentimentality when he proclaims his image of woman as warm, intuitive, uncomplicated, comprehensive of the poet, as distinct from calculating, shallow man. The image is as valid potentially as any other, but he has not as yet succeeded in presenting it satisfactorily. It is seen at its lachrymose worst in a poem not reprinted in the new book, 'God in Woman':

> While men the poet's tragic light resented,
> The spirit that is woman caressed his soul.

It mars an already uneasily poised poem, 'Intimate Parnassus':

> It is not cold on the mountain, human women
> Fall like ripe fruit, while mere men
> Are climbing out on dangerous branches
> Of banking, insurance and shops; . . .

The convenient, over-cosy dichotomy suggests a temperamental fixation, the kind of fixation which makes for bad verse unless chastened by the discipline of self-knowledge. This dichotomy may be seen in a less explicit form in 'If Ever You Go To Dublin Town' an inferior ballad in which Mr Kavanagh refurbishes an old fustian icon of the poet as solitary, eccentric, head-in-the-air, but withal tenderhearted:

> He had the knack of making men feel
> As small as they really were
> Which meant as great as God had made them
> But as males they disliked his air.

Why male, wherefore base ? This kind of implied dogma is of course one of the varieties of sentimentality and such a disrupter of poetry.

I will just touch on another variety of sentimentality to which Mr Kavanagh is prone, a kind which might be traced to one of his chief strengths, the re-burnishing of the banal.

The sonnet ' Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin ' is a beautifully spikey tribute to his ravishment by the ordinary—until the last two lines :

> O commemorate me with no hero-courageous
> Tomb—just a canal-bank seat for the passer-by.

There is here, I submit, a double failure of language and feeling. That infernal word ' just ' cheapens the poet's wish into a wheedling petition—' just ' a song at twilight or a penny for a poor blind man. But it is the ' passer-by ' that does the real harm. Between the poet and the object-experience falls the shadow of a cliché sentiment, posthumous contact with the undying generations. Yet, apart from the exigencies of rhyme, it is fairly obvious that Mr Kavanagh was aiming at no more than the kind of tentacular simplicity he achieves through ' naming ' objects ; but to adapt from the book's title poem, he is here ceasing to be ' namer ' and becoming ' the beloved '.

Mr Kavanagh's defects are grave. A catalogue of them would include over-reliance on portentous abstractions, the mandarin platitude (see for both, ' The One '), an uneasy acquaintance with Greek mythology (he must never again mention Parnassus, in any form), and a habit of trailing his coat unnecessarily—this mars the sonnet ' Dear Folks ' (' the laughter-smothered courage,/The Poet's '). But for me the defects are often in themselves contributory to the success of individual poems, breaking up the light and refracting it. And he can make high capital out of jagged verbal effects, out of a kind of shrewd and tender clumsiness :

> Leafy-with-love banks and the green waters of the canal
> Pouring redemption for me, that I do
> The Will of God, wallow in the habitual, the banal,
> Grow with nature again as before I grew.

and again :

> The gravel in the yard was pensive annoyed to be crunched
> As people with problems in their faces drove in in cars
> Yet I with such solemnity around me refused to be bunched
> In fact was inclined to give the go-by to bars.

Mr Kavanagh now speaks in a manner that leads us to await, constantly, surprises of language and rhythm, and no-one with an ear for rhyme can fail to be enchanted by his skill in breaking down cliché associations. In fact he is a major craftsman in words. As for his substantive values, it is sufficient for the time being to recognize that he is, first and foremost, a celebrant of life.

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Strictly speaking, a man has to be dead before we can detect a pattern, or pronounce a chaos in his life. Rimbaud stopped writing before he was twenty but he did not, in the context of meaningful pattern, waste the long years in Abyssinia nor, humanly speaking, did he fail to triumph by that squalid death in Marseilles. A poet, or any imaginative writer of quality, is the sum of speech and silence, of fruitfulness and waste, of integrity and cowardice.

But their interim patterns may be established, and with the groping prescience of the natural artist, Mr Kavanagh has so ordered his life that at least one pattern may be detected : not dissimilar, in terms of the imaginative life, from that recorded by Wordsworth in his great Ode on ' Intimations of Immortality '. The pattern is roughly one of departure, disillusion and bewilderment, enrichment and return. So the Green Fool set out, with his faggot of useful memories, burnt them up, wandered in the wilderness, and found them again, marvellously restored. Yet being no longer a Fool, being in fact a Poet, a maker, he saw that they were not necessarily good in themselves, but only in so far as he loved, or might love them with intensity.

Come Dance With Kitty Stobling is the first full report of the illumined return. It remains, of course, to be seen whether the return ends up, finally, in a *cul-de-sac* of reiteration, or whether Mr Kavanagh will employ his dazzling new skills in the wider exploration of his, so far, very moving affair with life. He has many years yet in which to get a prize herd to the affair—one envisages, for instance a long poem in praise of life and love and Creation equivalent in weight to, but denser in texture, than the centre-piece of his early period, The Great Hunger, He might yet be the first poet to come out of Ireland with great love from little room. On the evidence of *Kitty Stobling* he has never before had such an abundance of vitality and purpose. We could be doing with such a poet.