Patrick Kavanagh

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I

THERE are certain poets of whom it can be said that they have a unique personal vision — Blake and Yeats for example — and one knows immediately what is meant. They have a new, inimitable, disturbing way of looking at life and, at their best, they communicate this vision successfully. In twentieth-century Ireland, one poet (apart from Yeats) possesses such a vision — Patrick Kavanagh — who, for some unaccountable reason, is one of the most misunderstood and undervalued poets of our time. It is with Blake and Yeats that Kavanagh must be compared, for he is a visionary poet and towards the end of his life he claimed that he had achieved a truly comic vision.

> There is only one muse, the Comic Muse. In Tragedy there is always something of a lie. Great poetry is always comic in the profound sense. Comedy is abundance of life. All true poets are gay, fantastically humorous.[1]

Comedy, then, meant for Kavanagh something very definite and profound, but sometimes what is perfectly clear to a poet is confused to a critic because the poet lives poetry and his discoveries are inevitable and organic. They are one with the beat of his blood. It is the purpose of this essay to clarify what Kavanagh meant by the comic vision; to show how comedy appears in his poetry; and in so doing to trace his development.

Fewer modern poets have undergone such a deep, dynamic development as Kavanagh. The trouble with Thomas Hardy, for example, is that his poetry, at the deepest level, the level of visionary intensity, does not develop. What we get from him is a series of sincere repetitions of a few basic perceptions. At the end of Hardy's career, he is saying, in more or less the same way, exactly what he was saying at the beginning, and his greatness is

1 'Signposts', *Collected Prose*, 1964, p. 25.

that he manages to move us by his repetition. It is his sincerity which prevents his repetition from becoming platitude; but as we witness Hardy's integrity, we also see his shortcomings, chief of which is that his vision does not undergo any vital development or change. So there is little or no growth in his poetry. There is instead a kind of intrepid stasis that commands attention. R. S. Thomas, the Welsh poet, is another who is stuck in this peculiar rut of static honesty. He seems to be writing the same poem always. After reading his poems, I feel as if I had listened to somebody with whom a perception has become an obsession and who is so convinced of its importance he has to repeat it *ad infinitum*. A poet's perception has a quality of brutal stamina that will not permit him to remain at rest with one statement. He must tell it to all the world all the time. However, with Hardy and Thomas, what is told doesn't change very much. In the case of Kavanagh, it changes a great deal. His was one of the most moving, coherent and profound visions in modern poetry.

II

With a great number of poets who undergo this change the beginning is naive, the conclusion wise. In this respect, the majority of contemporary English poets are in the difficult position of having to be extremely accomplished and sophisticated at a very early stage. Otherwise nobody listens to them. They can't afford to make mistakes, and unless a poet has both the capacity and the opportunity to make a fool of himself, he will never become anything. The English have lost a sense of the value of naïveté and most of their poets have substituted a passion for fatal perfection which, around the age of thirty, makes them invulnerable to criticism and usually incapable of development. This perfectionism involves a very prosaic conception of precision and concentration. It's the sort of disease against which Blake and Keats fought. (At the moment, sad traces of it can be detected in Irish writing.) Patrick Kavanagh never suffered from abortive ideas of sophistication. Like all the true visionaries, his aesthetic, scattered carelessly in fragments here and there, is distinguished by its sanity and sheer good sense. It is also blissfully free of all pretentiousness and obscurity. The clarity of all his statements on poetry is a mark of his confidence and clearsightedness.

The poems in Kavanagh's early work, *Ploughman and Other Poems*, are beautifully simple. Yet they contain certain elements which endure into his later work, though in a transfigured way. In the introduction to his *Collected Poems*, Kavanagh tells us that, for him, poetry is 'a mystical thing, and a dangerous thing'. It is mystical because it is concerned with man's dialogue with God, the foundation-stone of *all* Kavanagh's work, the source of his humour and sanity:

> If I happened to meet a poet — and I have met poets — I would expect him to reveal his powers of insight and imagination even if he talked of poultry farming, ground rents or any other commonplace subject. Above all, I would expect to be excited and have my horizons of faith and hope widened by his ideas on the only subject that is of any real importance — Man-in-this-world-and-why.
>
> He would reveal to me the gay, imaginative God who made the grass and the trees and the flowers, a God not terribly to be feared.[1]

Belief in that gay, imaginative, unfeared, creative God vitalizes Kavanagh's early work. It is this spirit of positive belief that makes such simple lyrics as 'To A Blackbird' so authentic and buoyant:

> O pagan poet you
> And I are one
> In this — we lose our god
> At set of sun.
>
> And we are kindred when
> The hill wind shakes
> Sweet song like blossoms on
> The calm green lakes.
>
> We dream while Earth's sad children
> Go slowly by
> Pleading for our conversion
> With the Most High.[2]

In that poem is, in genetic form, another vital aspect of the comic vision achieved by Kavanagh towards the end of his life: his separateness, his detachment, the sense that he can participate but never belong. Kavanagh was to speak many years later of the poet's 'kink of rectitude', that blessing and burden of integrity that makes a lot of people hate the poet. Blake had this 'kink of

[1] Ibid., 'The Irish Tradition', p. 233.
[2] *Collected Poems*, 1964, p. 3.

rectitude'.[1] He had a disturbing habit of slamming whatever he believed to be hypocritical, phoney and mediocre. Kavanagh had this quality in terrifying abundance and his newspaper, *Kavanagh's Weekly*, which was totally honest and therefore short-lived, is immortal for its moral probity, humour and outspokenness. These qualities spring from his detachment which in turn originates in his belief in a gay, imaginative God, which is also the source of his later philosophy of 'not-caring'.[2] Kavanagh quite rightly saw that the sense of importance a number of people suffer from is a form of insanity — they invest the trivial things to which they are committed with what is in fact a ludicrous sense that it all matters a great deal. Co-existing with the sense of man's insignificance, however, is the sense of his grandeur — something that Kavanagh never lost though 'malignant Dublin'[3] disillusioned him considerably, at least for a time:

> There is nothing as dead and damned as an important thing. The things that really matter are casual, insignificant little things, things you would be ashamed to talk of publicly. You are ashamed and then after years someone blabs and you find that you are in the secret majority. Such is fame.[4]

This is another aspect of his vision which needs to be stressed: the significance of the casual and the apparently insignificant. In this attitude is the refusal to be deceived by anything, the determination to accept himself, and by so doing, to forget himself:

> The poet's secret, which is not a secret but a form of high courage, is that he, in a strange way, doesn't care. The poet is not concerned with the effect he is making; he forgets himself.[5]

In the best of his early poems Kavanagh looks into himself, desiring this detachment, the key to not-caring about the 'important'. He is trying, in the poetic sense, to keep his soul pure. He looks out from himself at the natural beauty of Monaghan and sees the black hills that do not care, that are 'incurious'. A certain kind of curiosity not only killed the cat and turned Lot's wife into

[1] 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', *Collected Prose*, p. 230.
[2] Ibid., p. 20.
[3] Ibid., p. 14.
[4] Ibid., p. 19.
[5] Ibid., p. 28.

salt — it could also mar the detachment of the poet, and meddle with the happiness that comes from observation and expression:

> My black hills have never seen the sun rising,
> Eternally they look north towards Armagh.
> Lot's wife would not be salt if she had been
> Incurious as my black hills that are happy
> When dawn whitens Glassdrummond chapel.[1]

Kavanagh said once that a poet's journey is the way 'from simplicity back to simplicity'.[2] The simplicity of Kavanagh's 'Shancoduff' is the simplicity of Blake's 'London', the simplicity that stems from a totally coherent and lucid vision. In an essay called 'Pietism and Poetry', Kavanagh says that 'The odd thing about the best modern poets is their utter simplicity'.[3] I would further add that only the man who sees completely can be completely simple. Kavanagh knew this in his heart, and it can be said of him that he is the only great modern poet who never wrote an obscure poem. He recognized that, in most cases, obscurity is simply a failure of the poet's imagination, the sanctuary of the inadequate. (In a couple of cases, such as Wallace Stevens and some of Yeats, it is a measure of the depth of their enquiry.)

This simplicity, present from the beginning in Kavanagh's work, is characteristic of his achieved comic vision. He saw that his simplicity was a gift from the gay, imaginative God; that it was the most difficult thing in the world to achieve; and that if sophistication has any meaning at all (and no word in the English language is more abused or misunderstood) it means that the poet has the courage to be utterly himself, his *best* self, and that nothing else will do. In 'Shancoduff', Kavanagh is simple in this sense. He obviously thought a great deal about the nature of simplicity and came up with a few sentences that should be stamped on the brow of every modern poet and critic:

> There are two kinds of simplicity, the simplicity of going away and the simplicity of return. The last is the ultimate in sophistication. In the final simplicity we don't care whether we appear foolish or not. We talk of things that earlier would embarrass. We are satisfied with being ourselves, however small.[4]

1 'Shancoduff', *Collected Poems*, p. 30.
2 'Suffering and Literature', *Collected Prose*, p. 278.
3 Ibid., p. 244.
4 Ibid., pp. 20–1.

Because Kavanagh passionately believed in his own conception of simplicity, he was impatient, both in his own work and in the work of others, with whatever violated that conception. A poet's critical judgements are always, at bottom, necessary justifications of his own most dearly held aesthetic. Yeats's dismissal of Wilfred Owen is a daft assessment of Owen but an acute justification of Yeats. Blake's contempt for verse with a single meaning is essentially an assertion of the symbolic and therefore an attack on the literal. And this is fair: a poet can't be expected to advocate principles and ideas which he doesn't intend to follow. At the same time, in the interests of objective fair play, poetry should frequently be saved from the judgements of the poet who created it. Passionate belief is certainly the source of whatever achievement lies in the future; it is also the reason why poets are sometimes compelled to distort their accomplishments in the past. Because of his beliefs, Kavanagh was guilty of this distortion in his evaluation of *The Great Hunger*. He somehow failed to see that this splendid though rather uneven work was a vital stage in his journey toward the comic vision. Kavanagh *had* to write *The Great Hunger*, and in his own time, he *had* to dismiss it. At this point, we may say that what is confused to the poet is clear to the critic, and from an objective standpoint, this is right. *The Great Hunger* is a necessary realistic outburst from an essentially transcendental imagination; it is a furious episode in a story that is fundamentally passive, reposed and serene; it is an angry protest from one who really believes in calm statement; it is a fierce hysterical digression in the journey from simplicity to simplicity. Kavanagh dismissed it and from his viewpoint he was right to do so. But he was also wrong. *The Great Hunger* has a proud place in the larger story. Since it is the purpose of this essay to show the unity of Kavanagh's vision, *The Great Hunger* must be treated as a necessary part of that unity.

III

Patrick Kavanagh knew the meaning of poverty, and so he never tried to sentimentalize it. Seán O'Casey was another man who knew what poverty was, and his picture of it in his three great realistic early plays gets the bare, brutal treatment which the man who knows that world of viciousness, deprivation and

squalor at first-hand can give with complete authority. O'Casey rejected that world and created a different drama. It was as though he had purged himself of a consuming intimacy with a deprived world, and then proceeded to create another world distinguished for its fulfilment, vitality and joy. In 'The Great Hunger' Patrick Kavanagh writes out of this sense of consuming intimacy with that crude barbaric world in which

> Clay is the word and clay is the flesh
> Where the potato-gatherers like mechanised scarecrows move
> Along the side-fall of the hill — Maguire and his men.
> If we watch them an hour is there anything we can prove
> Of life as it is broken-backed over the Book
> Of Death? Here crows gabble over worms and frogs
> And the gulls like old newspapers are blown clear of the
> hedges, luckily.
> Is there some light of imagination in these wet clods?
> Or why do we stand here shivering?[1]

The Great Hunger is about a man who can trust nothing: not the gay imaginative God, nor life itself, nor men, nor women, nor his own heart and soul. Patrick Maguire is married to his fields and animals instead of to a woman. Dominated by his mother, servile to his Church, committed to his meadows, his life is a sad farce of slavish work, furtive masturbation, crude pretence, increasing mindlessness, decreasing manhood and the drab inevitable advance towards old age. The bitter irony of his existence is that he is devoted to a shocking self-deception that began in boyhood and can end only with his death.

In portraying the appalling life of this central, solitary figure, Kavanagh presents the two major tensions of the poem. There is first, the tension between Christianity and a fertile, pagan or completely natural world.

> The pull is on the traces, it is March
> And a cold black wind is blowing from Dundalk.
> The twisting sod rolls over on her back —
> The virgin screams before the irresistible sock.
> No worry on Maguire's mind this day
> Except that he forgot to bring his matches.
> 'Hop back there Polly, hoy back, woa, wae,'
> From every second hill a neighbour watches
> With all the sharpened interest of rivalry.

[1] *Collected Poems*, p. 34.

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.[1]

The second tension re-enforces the first. It is between the increasing impotence of Maguire's physical and spiritual being, and the irrepressible rebel bloom of the fields and meadows. The inanimate world is sure of an annual re-birth; Spring's promise is eternal. Nothing but winter faces Maguire:

Another field whitened in the April air
And the harrows rattled over the seed.
He gathered the loose stones off the ridges carefully
And grumbled to his men to hurry. He looked like a man
who could give advice
To foolish young fellows. He was forty-seven,
And there was depth in his jaw and his voice was the voice
of a great cattle-dealer,
A man with whom the fair-green gods break even.
'I think I ploughed that lea the proper depth,
She ought to give a crop if any land gives . . .
Drive slower with the foal-mare, Joe.'
Joe, a young man of imagined wives,
Smiles to himself and answered like a slave:
'You needn't fear or fret.
I'm taking her as easy, as easy as . . .
Easy there Fanny, easy, pet.'

They loaded the day-scoured implements on the cart
As the shadows of poplars crookened the furrows.
It was the evening, evening. Patrick was forgetting to be
lonely
As he used to be in Aprils long ago.
It was menopause, the misery-pause.[2]

What Kavanagh insists on most of all in this poem is the appalling normality of Maguire's fate. Underlying the two tensions mentioned is the theme to which Kavanagh returns again and again, both by direct statement and by implication. This is Maguire's devouring sexual frustration, the agony he suffers from the 'impotent worm on his thigh'.[3] Maguire is a

[1] Ibid., p. 38.
[2] Ibid., p. 47.
[3] Ibid., p. 37.

tragic figure. He is a man who, sentenced to a horribly lingering death, is compelled to watch the natural world reproduce itself with spendthrift fertility while he shrivels into barren anonymity.

> The cows and horses breed,
> And the potato-seed
> Gives a bud and a root and rots
> In the good mother's way with her sons;
> The fledged bird is thrown
> From the nest — on its own.
> 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 —
> He circles around and around wondering why it should be.
>
> No crash,
> No drama.
> That was how his life happened.
> No mad hooves galloping in the sky,
> But the weak, washy way of true tragedy —
> A sick horse nosing around the meadow for a clean place to die.[1]

The final picture of Maguire emphasizes his sheer emptiness. It is a frightening portrait of a man and his world utterly devoid of hope; and Kavanagh explicitly states that this is not simply a personal tragedy. The darkness and guilt touch everybody on the land:

> He stands in the doorway of his house
> A ragged sculpture of the wind,
> October creaks the rotted mattress,
> The bedposts fall. No hope. No lust.
> The hungry fiend
> Screams the apocalypse of clay
> In every corner of this land.[2]

The Great Hunger is one of the most striking and memorable long poems of this century, and yet its creator totally rejected it on at least two separate occasions. In his *Self-Portrait*, Kavanagh said that 'There are some queer and terrible things in *The Great Hunger*, but it lacks the nobility and repose of poetry'.[3] And in the introduction to his *Collected Poems*, he is even more emphatic in his rejection of the poem punctuation:

[1] Ibid., p. 53.
[2] Ibid., p. 55.
[3] *Collected Prose*, p. 21.

The *Great Hunger* is concerned with the woes of the poor. A poet merely states the position and does not care whether his words change anything or not. *The Great Hunger* is tragedy and tragedy is underdeveloped comedy, not fully born. Had I stuck to the tragic thing in *The Great Hunger*, I would have found many powerful friends.[1]

The most important point here, and one extremely relevant to my argument, is that 'Tragedy is underdeveloped Comedy'. If this is not a totally unique way of seeing tragedy, it is certainly a unique way of putting it. But we must remember that Kavanagh wrote the introduction to his poems in 1964 and that *The Great Hunger* was written in 1942. In the twenty-two years that intervened, Kavanagh's comic vision developed to its full maturity. Personal suffering and physical illness played a vital part in that development. He was now living in Dublin where he had to endure 'the daily spite' of that 'unmannerly town',[2] and, of course, give his share in return. This Kavanagh could do extremely well. The next stage in his development shows him exploring the two strains that arise inevitably out of the early poems and *The Great Hunger* — the satirical and mystical strains that form the essence of *A Soul For Sale*. It is quite natural that the poet who wrote *The Great Hunger* should become a satirist; and the mystical strain in Kavanagh is present from beginning to end.

IV

One of the most attractive things about Kavanagh's comic vision is his sense of the vulgarity of analysis. He disliked the assumption behind the work of many analysts, especially literary analysts, that whatever is analyzed can be totally known. Like Yeats, Kavanagh knew that nothing can be fully known, and the man who assumes it can is committing a crime against wonder, violating that sacred sense of mystery that is at the source of all poetry. We revert to his fundamental belief in a gay, imaginative God and understand why, in 'Pegasus' when he has offered his soul for sale to the Church, the State, 'the crooked shopkeepers'[3] and the rowdy, bargaining tinkers, and nobody will have him,

[1] *Collected Poems*, p. xiv.
[2] W. B. Yeats, 'The People', *Collected Poems*, 1958, p. 169.
[3] *Collected Poems*, p. 59.

he realizes that nothing matters but his own freedom and the integrity of his imagination:

> 'Soul,' I prayed,
> 'I have hawked you through the world
> Of church and State and meanest trade.
> But this evening, halter off,
> Never again will it go on.
> On the south side of ditches
> There is grazing of the sun.
> No more haggling with the world . . .'
>
> As I said these words he grew
> Wings upon his back. Now I may ride him
> Every land my imagination knew.[1]

For Kavanagh, at this stage, the rewards of this liberty are two-fold. First of all, his sense of wonder deepens, and his expression of it — in 'Advent' — becomes more assured:

> We have tested and tasted too much, lover —
> Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder . . .
> Won't we be rich, my love and I, and please
> God we shall not ask for reason's payment,
> The why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges
> Nor analyze God's breath in common statement.
> We have thrown into the dust-bin the clay-minted wages
> Of pleasure, knowledge and the conscious hour —
> And Christ comes with a January flower.[2]

The second reward for the liberated, independent imagination is a kind of savagery which is inextricably involved with the deepened sense of wonder. Both elements are present to some extent in the well-known lyric of accusation, 'Stony Grey Soil'; but they appear in a far more vital way in that very powerful poem, 'A Wreath for Tom Moore's Statue'. Moore is Ireland's so-called National Poet, but in comparison with Kavanagh, he is a poor pop-singer, a facile gaudy entertainer. In one savage line, Kavanagh endows Moore with an immortality of shame: 'The cowardice of Ireland is in his statue . . .'[3] But, towards the end of

[1] Ibid., p. 60.
[2] Ibid., p. 70.
[3] 'A Wreath for Tom Moore's Statue', *Collected Poems*, p. 85.

the poem, there is a note of hope. Salvation lies in expressed wonder:

> But hope! the poet comes again to build
> A new city high above lust and logic,
> The trucks of language overflow and magic
> At every turn of the living road is spilled.[1]

At the end of 'A Soul for Sale' Kavanagh is faced with a choice: satire or celebration? Living in an essentially unsympathetic society, he is understandably attracted towards satire. His natural inclinations as a poet, however, draw him towards celebration. It is not an easy choice, but ultimately a choice will have to be made. Although his evolving comic vision tells him that satire is not enough, before he can consciously formulate its inadequacy, he must exhaust its potential. As a satirist, Kavanagh came to the conclusion that satire was simply 'unfruitful prayer'[2] to the gay, imaginative god of comedy.

V

Kavanagh satirizes those events, people and ideas we would expect him to satirize: Dublin's pretentious poetasters, its bumptious 'intellectuals', its complacent middle-class, its vicious sentimentality and its 'insincere good-nature'.[3] Dublin is the largest village in Europe, a gossipy hive where the bees of slander buzz about busily day and night. Literary quarrels and tensions assume a quite disproportionate magnitude in the minds of people involved, and as Kavanagh said the standing army of poets is never less than ten thousand. The pubs are bursting at the seams with unwritten masterpieces, though the amount of writing actually produced is surprisingly little. (The disparity between declared drunken intention and finished sober achievement *is* usually enormous.) In 'The Paddiad or The Devil as a Patron of Irish Letters' Kavanagh lashes out:

> In the corner of a Dublin pub
> This party opens — blub-a-blub —
> Paddy Whiskey, Rum and Gin,
> Paddy three sheets in the wind;
> Paddy of the Celtic Mist,

[1] Ibid., p. 86.
[2] Ibid., p. 132.
[3] Ibid., p. 115.

Paddy Connemara West,
Chestertonian Paddy Frog
Croaking nightly in the bog.
All the Paddies having fun
Since Yeats handed in his gun.
Every man completely blind
To the truth about his mind.[1]

Kavanagh hits at the sentimental self-congratulation typical of the provincial Dublin mentality that James Joyce had parodied with such wicked accuracy. Kavanagh is no less savage in 'The Defeated':

Drink up, drink up, the troughs in Paris and
London are no better than your own,
Joyce learned that bitterly in a foreign land.
Don't laugh, there is no answer to that one!
Outside this pig-sty life deteriorates,
Civilization dwindles. We are the last preserve
Of Eden in a world of savage states.[2]

Kavanagh satirizes sentimentality not only because it is a fear of real feeling, but also because it would divert the poet from his true responsibility:

The poet's task is not to solve the riddle
Of Man and God but buckleap on a door
And grab his screeching female by her middle
To the music of a melodeon (preferably), roar
Against the Western waves of Connemara
Up lads and thrash the beetles.[3]

The same dishonesty and unreality come under fire in the 'Adventures in the Bohemian Jungle', in which the Countryman, Kavanagh's moral voice, gradually comes to recognize the rottenness and sheer deadness of the world in which he finds himself. In the end, he sounds like a rural Faustus brought face-to-face with the hell of hypocritical mediocrity:

. . . here in this nondescript land
Everything is secondhand
Nothing ardently growing,
Nothing coming, nothing going,
Tepid fevers, nothing hot,

[1] Ibid., p. 90.
[2] Ibid., p. 97.
[3] Ibid., p. 98.

Nothing alive enough to rot;
Nothing clearly defined . . .
Every head is challenged. Friend,
This is hell you've brought me to.
Where's the gate that we came through?[1]

Other strong satires are 'Irish Stew', 'The Christmas Mummers' and 'Tale of Two Cities'. In 'Who Killed James Joyce' he satirizes the magnates of the Joyce industry. This parody of 'Who Killed Cock Robin?', with its giddy little metre, is a successful demolition of all those pompous, solemn academics whose idea of happiness is the discovery of some trivial allusion in *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*:

Who killed James Joyce?
I, said the commentator,
I killed James Joyce
For my graduation.

What weapon was used
To slay mighty Ulysses?
The Weapon that was used
Was a Harvard thesis . . .[2]

It becomes increasingly clear that Kavanagh is not really at home in satire. In a magnificent poem called 'Prelude' he shows his competence as a satirist and then proceeds to declare his sense of its inadequacy:

. . . satire is unfruitful prayer,
Only wild shoots of pity there,
And you must go inland and be
Lost in compassion's ecstasy,
Where suffering soars in summer air —
The millstone has become a star.[3]

Ultimately, satire is for Kavanagh 'a desert that yields NO'.[4] In a later poem, 'Living in the Country', he repeats his rejection of satire and informs us of his deeper intention:

I protest here and now and forever
On behalf of all my people who believe in Verse
That my intention is not satire but humaneness,

[1] Ibid., p. 108.
[2] Ibid., p. 117.
[3] Ibid., p. 132.
[4] 'Living in the Country', *Collected Poems*, p. 170.

An eagerness to understand more about sad man,
Frightened man, the workers of the world
Without being savaged in the process.
Broadness is my aim, a broad road where the many
Can see life easier — generally.[1]

The choice is finally made. Satire falls away because it is not an enduring part of the comic vision. It is at best a necessary digression. I return to the introduction to the *Collected Poems*:

I have a belief in poetry as a mystical thing, and a dangerous thing.[2]

Tragedy is underdeveloped Comedy, not fully born. Had I stuck to the tragic thing in *The Great Hunger*, I would have found many powerful friends.[3]

But I lost my messianic compulsion. I sat on the bank of the Grand Canal in the summer of 1955 and let the waters lap idly on the shores of my mind. My purpose in life was to have no purpose.[4]

Kavanagh has almost completed the journey from simplicity to simplicity. The angry protest of *The Great Hunger* is over; the sword of satire is blunted in his hand. He has achieved an ideal of vigilant passivity, a belief in poetry as a mystical, dangerous thing, a resolution to be at once humorous and humane. He sees the privileges and responsibilities of observation, has a profound understanding of the nature of love, and recognizes one of the most fascinating and complex subjects for poetry: poetry and the poet. Out of his life, his digressions, failures, sufferings, disappointments and triumphs, he has hammered a superbly lucid and rarefied poetry that is the pure product of the comic vision. I shall now examine these poems.

VI

Speaking of the poet in 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', Kavanagh says that 'All his life's activities are towards the final fusion of all crudeness into a pure flame'.[5] There is indeed 'a pure flame' of inspiration in a number of Kavanagh's later poems. There is also a certain amount of trivial verse which, on first reading, would appear not to have been written by the same man.

1 Ibid., p. 167.
2 Ibid., p. xiii.
3 Ibid., p. xiv.
4 Ibid., p. xiv.
5 *Collected Prose*, p. 225.

Yet if we re-read bad poems such as 'A Summer Morning Walk' and 'Sensational Disclosures — Kavanagh Tells All' (where he tells singularly little, apart from the fact that he knows the names of a few poets and publishers) we shall see that they have a certain lightness of touch and tone, but are completely devoid of any visionary impact. Speaking about an early poem of his which begins

> Child do not go
> Into the dark places of soul
> For there the grey wolves whine,
> The lean grey wolves.[1]

Kavanagh said: 'In that little thing I had become airborne and more; I had achieved weightlessness . . . poetry has to do with the reality of the spirit, of faith and hope and sometimes even charity. It is a point of view . . . A poet is an original who inspires millions of copies.'[2] There are times when Kavanagh writes as if he were somebody else imitating Kavanagh's originality, as though he were indulging in a frivolous parody of his own vision. So when we read lines like

> Out of weakness more than muscle
> Relentlessly men continue to tussle
> With the human-eternal puzzle
>
> There were gulls on the road in St. Stephen's Park
> And many things worth a remark
> I sat on a deck-chair and started to work
>
> On a morning's walk not quite effectual
> A little too unselectual
> But what does it count in the great perpetual?[3]

we seem to be listening to a bad imitation of some of Kavanagh's favourite themes: the 'human-eternal puzzle'; the startling significance and beauty inherent in casual things; the sense of his own dignity and littleness in the face of 'the great perpetual'. But the rhymes are forced, the metre giddy, the diction sloppy, the rhythm ragged. In his attempt to become 'airborne' and to achieve 'weightlessness' he has managed at best a rather frivolous lightness before flopping on all fours to the ground. And this

1 'To a Child', *Collected Poems*, p. 9.
2 *Collected Prose*, p. 22.
3 'A Summer Morning Walk', *Collected Poems*, p. 182.

happens on several occasions in the later poems. At the same time it is well to recognize that these failures are the failures of a great ambition, of a poet who in many other cases has achieved the 'pure flame'. In his famous Canal sonnets for example we find that passionate, pure, weightless expression:

> O unworn world enrapture me, enrapture me in a web
> Of fabulous grass and eternal voices by a beech,
> Feed the gaping need of my senses, give me ad lib
> To pray unselfconsciously with overflowing speech
> For this soul needs to be honoured with a new dress woven
> From green and blue things and arguments that cannot be proven.[1]

And so we come to the full flowering of the comic vision. At the very centre of it is that ideal of disinterest which Kavanagh expresses with perfect lucidity and authority in 'Intimate Parnassus'. This might be considered as Kavanagh's *Defence of Poetry*, a brilliantly compressed statement of poetic belief. Briefly, the poet is god-like in his detachment and is, in the deepest sense, indestructible:

> the poet poor,
> Or pushed around, or to be hanged, retains
> His full reality . . .[2]

Looking at suffering and strife, he must remain detached. Seeing men and women going about their daily business, he must be 'sympathetic'.[3] He must

> Count them the beautiful unbroken
> And then forget them
> As things aside from the main purpose
> Which is to be
> Passive, observing with a steady eye.[4]

In that state of passive, steady observation the poet discovers a strong sufficiency. Here too he appreciates the nature of love and survival because, for the man who has a 'main purpose' and lives up to it, all things fall into sane perspective and acquire an individual meaning. In such a state, for example, the phenomenon

[1] 'Canal Bank Walk', *Collected Poems*, p. 150.
[2] Ibid., p. 146.
[3] Ibid., p. 146.
[4] Ibid., p. 146.

of evil is not seen as hideous or terrifying, it is simply 'sad'; while, at the same time, seen from this divine vantage-point, it retains the capacity to be totally transfigured in the pure flame of comedy:

> I also found some crucial
> Documents of sad evil that may yet
> For all their ugliness and vacuous leers
> Fuel the fires of comedy.[1]

Evil does not subdue or even arrest the comic poet because his is the superb sanity of knowing what really matters. And because he knows, he wishes only the best for struggling humanity:

> the main thing is to continue,
> To walk Parnassus right into the sunset
> Detached in love where pygmies cannot pin you
> To the ground like Gulliver. So good luck and cheers.[2]

Here too is a new sufficiency, the happy sufficiency found in restrained, serene expression.

> Making the statement is enough — there are no answers
> To any real question . . .[3]

and

> To look on is enough
> In the business of love.[4]

Now we must ask, for the comic poet, what precisely is love and what does it do? In 'The Hospital' Kavanagh tells us with all the insight of the poet-saint:

> 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 record love's mystery without claptrap,
> Snatch out of time the passionate transitory.[5]

1 'Dear Folks', *Collected Poems*, p. 151.
2 Ibid., p. 151.
3 'Nineteen Fifty-Four', *Collected Poems*, p. 147.
4 'Is', Ibid., p. 154.
5 Ibid., p. 153.

'Love's mystery' is all around us and the poet must celebrate it. Out of that sufficiency, born of love-observation, comes the only style that matters, the style of praise:

> . . . there is always the passing gift of affection
> Tossed from the windows of high charity
> In the office girl and civil servant section
> And these are no despisable commodity.
> So be reposed and praise, praise praise
> The way it happened and the way it is.[1]

It is not at all surprising that Kavanagh writes about the mind of God. This is the focus of the comic vision. The attempt to understand God's mind, if rewarded with belief, is the truest source of comedy: it leads to detachment, and therefore to sanity, and therefore to the rare ability to see things as they are. That is why Kavanagh said that when he saw somebody 'important' or 'major' he was 'always in danger of bursting out laughing'.[2] To begin with, he finds God in woman:

> Surely my God is feminine, for Heaven
> Is the generous impulse, is contented
> With feeling praise to the good. And all
> Of these that I have known have come from women.
> While men the poet's tragic light resented,
> The spirit that is Woman caressed his soul.[3]

and again in 'Miss Universe', in 'the sensual throb / Of the explosive body, the tumultuous thighs!',[4] he finds evidence of God's sufficiency.

> I learned, I learned — when one might be inclined
> To think, too late, you cannot recover your losses —
> I learned something of the nature of God's mind,
> Not the abstract Creator but He who caresses
> The daily and nightly earth; He who refuses
> To take failure for an answer . . .[5]

God and the idea of God dominate Kavanagh's poetry. I have heard some people say that Kavanagh as a man was at times extremely arrogant. This may be, for there is a poetic humility

1 'Question To Life', *Collected Poems*, p. 164.
2 'Self-Portrait', *Collected Prose*, p. 17.
3 'God in Woman', *Collected Poems*, p. 147.
4 Ibid., p. 158.
5 Ibid., p. 158.

which manifests itself as social arrogance. In any case, what people call arrogance in a poet is usually a completely natural expression of his conviction. Some people like a poet to be tentative and uncertain; this is their idea of how a fine sensibility shows itself. But most poets with a conviction are neither hesitant nor uncertain. Kavanagh never was (not that it matters whether he was or not) and he was one of the most sensitive men I have known. He brooded constantly on God and in 'Having Confessed' he expresses his own conception of humility, another aspect of his comic vision:

> We must not anticipate
> Or awaken for a moment. God cannot catch us
> Unless we stay in the unconscious room
> Of our hearts. We must be nothing,
> Nothing that God may make us something . . .
> . . . Let us lie down again
> Deep in anonymous humility and God
> May find us worthy material for his hand.[1]

In other words, Kavanagh submits himself completely to the God who 'refuses to take failure for an answer'.[2] At the deepest level of vision, Kavanagh himself refuses to take failure for an answer. And yet, paradoxically, Kavanagh did have a sense of failure, but true to character, he celebrated even that in his own inimitable way. 'If Ever You Go to Dublin Town' is a triumphant celebration of failure. In fact, it is not failure in any accepted sense of the word. It is, more accurately, a sense of not having fully accomplished what it was in him to do. But when one remembers what Kavanagh tried to do (and to a great extent actually did) one recognizes the great dignity of this sense of 'failure':

> I saw his name with a hundred others
> In a book in the library
> It said he had never fully achieved
> His potentiality.
> O he was slothful,
> Fol dol the di do,
> He was slothful
> I tell you.

[1] Ibid., p. 149.
[2] 'Miss Universe', *Collected Poems*, p. 158.

He knew that posterity has no use
For anything but the soul,
The lines that speak the passionate heart,
The spirit that lives alone.
O he was a lone one,
Fol dol the di do
Yet he lived happily
I tell you.[1]

But there are plain, technical reasons for this sense of 'failure'. In a poem published in *Arena* (an excellent Dublin periodical now gone from the scene), not included in his *Collected Poems*, Kavanagh is quite explicit about his dilemma. The poem is called 'A Personal Problem', and it deals with something certainly not confined to Kavanagh but which is relevant to all modern Irish poetry since Yeats, and indeed to poetry throughout the world now. It is the dilemma of a poet who finds himself without a mythology. In the end, the internal world of the self needs the structure of myth to sustain it in poetry. Kavanagh never bothered to create a mythology. Indeed, the very purity of his comic vision means that the number of poems he wrote is fairly limited. He wrote about a dozen great poems. Yeats, on the other hand, sustained by a mythology gleaned from countless sources, wrote great poems in abundance. Like the body, the imagination occasionally flags; myth is a revivifying food. Kavanagh states this need in an excellent poem:

To take something as a subject, indifferent
To personal affection, I have been considering
Some old saga as an instrument
To play upon without the person suffering
From the tiring years. But I can only
Tell of my problem without solving
Anything. If I could rewrite a famous tale
Or perhaps return to a midnight calving,
This cow sacred on a Hindu scale – –
So there it is my friends. What am I to do
With the void growing more awful every hour?
I lacked a classical discipline. I grew
Uncultivated and now the soil turns sour,
Needs to be revived by a power not my own,
Heroes ernormous who do astounding deeds —
Out of this world. Only thus can I attune
To despair an illness like winter alone in Leeds.

[1] Ibid., p. 144.

There is an astonishing similarity between this poem and Yeats's 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'. They are both triumphant expressions of the sense of failure: for Yeats, because he cannot find a theme; for Kavanagh, because he lacks a classical discipline and needs to be revived by a power not his own. But just as evil can fuel the fires of comedy, so can failure. The wonderful thing is that a sensitive reader coming from a study of Kavanagh's poems realizes that here is one of the greatest modern poets whose comic vision brought him through tragedy and suffering, whose passionate sincerity revealed itself in an insatiable hunger for reality, who could say:

> No man need be a mediocrity if he accepts himself as God made him. God only makes geniuses. But many men do not like God's work. The poet teaches that every man has a purpose in life, if he would submit and serve it, that he can sit with his feet to the fire of an eternal passion, a valid moral entity.[1]

[1] *Collected Prose*, p. 28. Quotations from Patrick Kavanagh's verse and prose in in this article have been reproduced by kind permission of Messrs MacGibbon and Kee, London.