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*Parish and Universe: Patrick Kavanagh's poetics of the local*

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### *Abstract*

This paper concerns the treatment of place attachments in social science through an examination of their expression in literature and poetry. It challenges the notion that place attachments are essentially regressive and are signifiers of insularity and exclusion. The paper discusses the artistic expression of the “local” as the search for insight into the problem of how we dwell in landscapes and communities in the context of larger human settings. These ideas are investigated through an examination of the novels and poetry of Patrick Kavanagh, one of the foremost Irish literary figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, the paper charts the development of Kavanagh’s “parochial imagination”. Kavanagh’s artistic project is situated in an understanding of his local attachments; his Irish Catholic identity; and his place in Irish literary culture. It demonstrates how Kavanagh’s concern was with articulating the local and the universal in ways which cast an illuminating light on the debates about place attachments found in social science.

They said/That I was bounded by the whitehorn hedges  
Of the little farm and did not know the world.  
But I knew that love's doorway to life  
Is the same door everywhere.  
— from “Innocence”<sup>2</sup>

Geographers have much to learn from the novelists and poets (Gilbert, 1957: 347).

1 *The parochial imagination*

The discussion of place attachments is a perennial topic in the history of geography as a discipline, yet one which lies always at the margins of thinking about regions and places. It is difficult to escape the dominant idea that place-based attachments and identities are residuals. To some they look particularly incongruous in an era of globalisation and often are looked upon disparagingly as involving the search for “timeless identities” (Massey, 1991:5) or the “scripting of folk culture” (Amin, 2004: 27). Within literary criticism similar attitudes have been expressed. Specifically, Dainotto has accused the literatures of region and place of exhibiting “a tendency to essentialize regional culture, attributing to [regions] a new sort of organic unity” (1996: 487) seeing the pursuit of place as representing “the hankering for some model of lasting identity” (1996: 494), in which the “the region presents itself as a trope of a ‘purer’ value — immutable and ‘persistent identity’” (Dainotto, 1996: 502).

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<sup>2</sup> The opening epigram and all other quotations from Patrick Kavanagh, except where indicated otherwise, are from his *Collected Poems* (Kavanagh, 2005)

Dainotto develops these ideas in a sustained disagreement with what he sees as the dominant treatment of regionalism and place in literature (and literary criticism), which he claims “attempts to substitute a latently ideological tool of analysis — history — with an allegedly natural one — place” (2000: 2). He rejects the epistemological validity of place as “a category of cultural understanding” (2000: 4). For Dainotto, regions are merely “ephemeral inventions” (2000: 4) which typically are mobilised by conservative political forces. Regionalist literature bequeaths us “only idyllic regions and their perfect communities” (2000: 17) and reflects a desire to posit a homogenous organic unity that abjures the reality of social conflict. Thus, “Whereas Marxism explains difference as a dialectical relation of contrasting forces, regionalism understands difference as a metonymic continuity of places” (Dainotto, 2000: 25). Dainotto goes so far as to suggest that regionalism is part of a continuum with fascism, which seeks to present societies as unproblematically unified with the objective of neutralising communist claims about the centrality of class to politics. As such, he claims to identify “the reactionary trait of the literature of place: it tries to take the question away from the space of politics” (Dainotto, 2000: 33).

Even Marxists, however, acknowledge the danger of politics “abstracted from the material world of experience in particular places”. Such politics, according to David Harvey,

... lost some of its credibility and appeal because the promotion of universal considerations drove out sensitivity to the particularities of environment, milieu, collective memory, community, myth built forms. While it is one thing to articulate a critical line against a politics based only on all of these, it is quite another — as Raymond Williams so effectively argued — to fashion a politics

that treats the politics of place as nothing more than a numbing fantasy (1996: 314).

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Seamus Heaney offers a very similar observation to that of Harvey:

... I hope I am not being sentimental or simply fetishizing - as we have learnt to say - the local. I wish instead to suggest that images and stories of the kind I am invoking here do function as bearers of value. The century has witnessed the defeat of Nazism by force of arms; but the erosion of the Soviet regimes was caused, among other things, by the sheer persistence, beneath the imposed ideological conformity, of cultural values and psychic resistances of a kind that these stories and images enshrine. Even if we have learned to be rightly and deeply fearful of elevating the cultural forms and conservatisms of any nation into normative and exclusivist systems, even if we have terrible proof that pride in an ethnic and religious heritage can quickly degrade into the fascistic, our vigilance on that score should not displace our love and trust in the good of the indigenous per se. On the contrary, a trust in the staying power and travel-worthiness of such good should encourage us to credit the possibility of a world where respect for the validity of every tradition will issue in the creation and maintenance of a salubrious political space (1995: no page given).

Tuan (1977) observes that the poignancy and significance of hearth and home provide inspiration for both poetry and prose in virtually every culture. Or, as Heaney puts it, “We are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers, we make homes and search for histories” (1980: 148-9). Kavanagh’s work provides a testament to this understanding, offering not

just an account of a particular place, Monaghan, but also a meditation on the nature of place itself and our relationship to it and art of belonging (MacKenzie, 2004).

Novelists and poets, then, continue to find inspiration in places. The power of place in art and literature responds to the question of how we dwell as human beings (Harvey, 1996). Dwelling speaks of the “the rich intimate ongoing togetherness of beings and things which make up landscapes and places, and which bind together nature and culture over time” (Clope and Jones, 2001: 651). This dwelling perspective is largely overlooked by the critics of regionality, place and local attachments. Yet as Lucy Lippard has written

The intersections of nature, culture, history, and ideology form the ground on which we stand — our land, our place, the local. The lure of the local is the pull of place that operates on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies (1997: 7)

Despite the condescension to be found in social science, place attachments continue to matter, not least to artists and writers. Societies are necessarily particular because they embody members and memories (Entrikin, 1991; Harvey 1996). In the context of heightened global connections and the emphasis on flows and networks, the importance of locality remains as a focus of “experiences and intensions onto particular settings” (Relph, 1976: 141). For poets, in particular, fidelity toward place is both a source of inspiration and means by which universal values can be placed and made historical. Within the canon of modern English poetry, for instance, we can think of the obvious examples of Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill, Gillian Clarke and Basil Bunting (Kerrigan, 2000; Tomaney, 2007), each of which root their view of the human condition within fictional or poetic landscapes drawn from real, living places, with the intention, in large part, of valorising those places. In this respect, poetry often achieves what contemporary

social science fails to do, that is, a validation and affirmation of the local in an era of (post)modernity.

Unquestionably, one of the most important and best known contemporary voices exploring these themes through poetry is that of Seamus Heaney. The citation for Heaney's Nobel Prize draws attention to the way in which his work is concerned with how "the local can articulate the universal". Heaney, famously, is concerned with describing a "sense of place". But, as the Nobel citation notes, and as Heaney himself has acknowledged, in tackling these themes he is also engaging with the important poetic legacy of his fellow Ulsterman, Patrick Kavanagh.

This paper concerns the poetry and prose of Kavanagh and the treatment of place within it. Kavanagh occupies a somewhat ambiguous position in modern Irish letters. Perhaps the key literary figure linking the era of Yeats and the era of Heaney, he is less well known outside Ireland than the former Nobel laureates. Within Ireland his poetry is studied in schools, is widely popular and has been set to music by, among others, Luke Kelly, Van Morrison and Sinéad O'Connor, all of whom have recorded versions of his best-known poem "On Raglan Road". A controversial figure in his own lifetime and scourge of the Irish artistic establishment, his work was characterised by the development of a "parochial imagination", albeit his parish was at various times his home in Mucker, Co. Monaghan, the southside of Dublin or Islington in north London.

It is not the aim of the paper give a complete account of Kavanagh's life and work, but rather to explore one aspect of this, namely his ongoing concern with the relationship

between parish and universe, local and global<sup>3</sup>. With this parochial outlook in mind, I will try to place Kavanagh in relation to his Ulster milieu and to twentieth century Irish nationalism and to the position of the parish in the Catholic imagination and the peculiar relationship between these three. In exploring the work of Kavanagh I am interested in what light it might shed on debates about locality, regionality and attachment to place in contemporary social science.

Given Kavanagh's origins in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, where the Catholic Church dominated all aspects of life, his advocacy of a parochial mentality was the product of a distinctively Irish-Catholic cultural outlook. The parish occupies an important place in Catholic canon law, although its role and status has received less attention from historians than other institutions such as the papacy or synods. In the Pauline perspective the Church was a communion of communities: the universal church as a collection of parishes. As Fr. Joe Coriden notes,

Local Christian congregations began to be called 'parishes' as early as the second century. The word first used was the Greek noun *parioka*, which meant 'those living near or beside'. It had the sense of those living in the same neighbourhood. The verb, *paroiken*, meant 'to dwell beside'. This was the primary meaning of the Greek word. The Greek term also had a secondary meaning: 'resident aliens, settled foreigners, non-native sojourners' (1997: 19).

According to Fr. Andrew Greeley, locality figures strongly in the "Catholic Imagination" and, especially, in art which has its origins in Catholic culture: "The Catholic can never leave the neighbourhood behind. Besides, some of the time he doesn't want to" (Greeley, 2000: 117; see also Greeley, 1988). Greeley's view is formed by his sociological

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<sup>3</sup> For a brief account of Kavanagh's life see Holliday (1997). For a comprehensive account see Antonette Quinn's (2003) biography.

understanding of the Irish- and Italian-American experiences and the way it is represented in, for instance, Martin Scorsese's New York films, where neighbourhoods are portrayed in terms of their "intense and sometimes limiting relationships" or James T Farrell's novels of Chicago's Southside with their "wondrous feel for the neighbourhood and its people: their hang-ups, their rivalries, their nastiness, their resentments, their long memories, their petty devotions" (Greeley, 2000: 119, 120). James Joyce organised *Ulysses* around a day in the life of his Dublin parish and produced a work of art that had universal ambitions and appeal and in the words of Kavanagh was "a great parishioner". Moreover, the parish represents a key institution in structuring Irish life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Whelan, 1983), along with the county (Gilmore, 2003) and, within Ulster, the townland which has a special significance as the lowest scale of areal delineation (Dallat, 1991)

Kavanagh's parochialism was carefully considered and infuses his poetry and prose. It was concerned with the "universal particular" (O'Brien, 1975). He set out its prospectus in an essay first published in the 1950s:

Parochialism and provincialism are opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own, he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the great metropolis towards which his eyes are ever turned has to say on any subject. This runs through all his activities. The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his own parish. All great civilisations are based on parochialism: Greek, Israelite, English. Parochialism is a universal and deals with fundamentals (Kavanagh, 2003: 237).

In the following sections I examine the evolution of this parochial ethic in Kavanagh's poetry and prose, which was rooted in his idiosyncratic, mystic Catholicism and conclude

this essay by asking what, if anything, this body of work offers to those who think about locality, regionality, place attachments and the meaning of place.

2. *Placing Patrick Kavanagh*

Yeats has crushed every Irish poet except Paddy Kavanagh

— Mary Kenny, “Waiting for Ginsberg”, *The Guardian*, 26<sup>th</sup> August 1965

Patrick Kavanagh was born in the townland of Mucker in the parish of Inniskeen, Co Monaghan in 1904. He died in Dublin in 1967 and is buried in Inniskeen churchyard. His father was a farmer and part-time cobbler. Although life was a struggle the young Paddy attended nearby Kednaminsha National School, but left at the age of twelve. His early life was spent working on the family’s land. Life revolved around rhythms of farm work and the Catholic liturgical calendar. He was an untutored poet and he could never explain the origin of his talent. His earliest influences were Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*, the English poetical canon, leavened with patriotic ballads and Catholic verse and hymns. He became a reader of Æ’s *Irish Statesman*, which he bought on occasional trips to nearby Dundalk. He began to publish poetry from his mid 20s, often mimicking the styles he had read. Kavanagh aspired to a life of intellect and imagination and escape from the drudgery of the farm. He was drawn to Dublin or London as place to be a writer, “the City of the Kings/Where art, music, letters are the real things?” (“Temptation in Harvest”). Indeed, Kavanagh left Inniskeen for Dublin in 1939 (although he returned periodically) and spent time in England, notably in Islington in the 1960s.

By the 1930s Kavanagh was emerging as an important literary figure and, notably, as a “peasant” poet providing insight into rural life which challenged the orthodoxies of the

Irish cultural elite. He announced his arrival on the artistic scene with a collection of poems *The Ploughman and other poems* (1936), the comic novel *The Green Fool* (1938) and, perhaps his masterpiece, the poem “The Great Hunger” (1942), collected in *Soul for Sale* (1947). This early work mixed lyrical description of the apparently unremarkable Monaghan landscape and autobiographical experiences with anthropological insight into the grim reality of rural life; rendered in language rich with the dialect and cadences of south Ulster. Kavanagh survived on the margins of the Dublin literati through journalism and film reviews, cultivating distaste for what he regarded the smug and complacent artistic company he found in places such as the Palace Bar in Fleet Street. His novel *Tarry Flynn* (1948) was a further treatment of his home-world, “an autobiographical fiction full of affection for and impatience with his parish” (Heaney, 1981: 121).

Kavanagh’s account revolutionised artistic perceptions of Irish rural life challenging the romanticisation of the Literary Revival and the standard understandings of the place of the peasant (Hirsch, 1991). He sought to write out of his “Monaghanness” and self-consciously drew on a tradition of Ulster writing concerned with the representation of ordinary life, epitomized by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Gaelic farmer-poet Art MacCooey and William Carleton’s, *Traits and Stories of Irish Peasantry* first published in 1830<sup>4</sup> (Careleton, 1999; O’Grady, 1996). In drawing on and contributing to the artistic representation of Ulster, Kavanagh provided the foundations for the extraordinary late 20<sup>th</sup> century flowering poetry there embodied in, among other others, Montague, Longley, Mahon, McGuckian, Muldoon, and above all Heaney, who maintains, “Kavanagh gave you permission to dwell without cultural anxiety among the usual landmarks of your life” (1988: 9).

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<sup>4</sup> By contrast, he regretted that the First World War poet Francis Ledwidge did not write out of his “Meathness” (Quinn, 1991: 5).

Kavanagh's rise to literary prominence denoted a critique of the dominant ideas in Irish letters in the first part of the twentieth century (Deane, 1975; Davis, 2005; Quinn, 1991). Although, he admired Yeats as a stylist, at the heart of Kavanagh's emerging oeuvre was a desire to provide a more realistic account of Irish rural life than that contained in the work of Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge (Duffy, 1997). The Literary Revival sought a mystic Celticism in literature (Yeats, 1898) and eulogised the purity of rural life in the Irish-speaking areas of the west as basis for the development of anti-colonial identity (Kiberd, 1995). Kavanagh set himself against the dominant Celtic nation-building ethos. According to Heaney, "The 'matter of Ireland', mythic, historical or literary, forms no significant part of his material" (1980: 115). Kavanagh showed little interest in the Irish language, eschewed the sentimentalising of rural life and eulogised the unremarkable drumlin landscape of south Ulster — a place at the margins of the modern national myth. At the same time, in contrast to the Revivalists, Kavanagh emphasised the underpinning Catholicism of Irish culture, especially at the local level, but refused to be mobilised into the politics of nationalism and instead developed his distinctively parochial outlook. In "Self Portrait" he writes, "that so-called Irish Literary Movement which purported to be Irish and racy of the Celtic soil was a thoroughgoing English-bred lie" (2003: 306). Partly reflecting these disputes, and partly reflecting his personality, his relationships with other writers were fraught (see John Montague's, "Patrick Kavanagh: A Speech from the Dock" [1989], for one account). According to Foster, Kavanagh was a "puzzling, exasperating and compelling figure", who "burned all the bridges to group acceptance he could find" (1991: 98, 165).

Experience is not, a priori, more general or more significant because it occurs in London or Paris or New York rather than in Gwynedd or the Carse of Gowrie or Anatolia.

— Raymond Williams (1982: 60)

Kavanagh's first parish was Inniskeen. Although, Inniskeen was a recurring theme in his work, it was perhaps most fully realised as a place in his novel *Tarry Flynn*. The novel is set in the fictional village of Dargan in Co. Cavan, but it bore more than a passing resemblance to Inniskeen, Co. Monaghan, drawing heavily on events, personalities and landscapes that Kavanagh knew first hand like his earlier *The Green Fool*. In addition, to the novel's eponymous anti-hero, the key figure in the book is Fr. Daly, the authoritarian parish priest on permanent guard against the moral turpitude of his flock. In the early scenes, Fr. Daly organises a Redemptorist mission to the parish. The chapel is packed because the Redemptorist brothers are known for their obsession with sex and this presents a rare opportunity for the titillation for the laity. The novel abounds with the imagery of the Catholic parish. Life is marked by Mass, Confession, decades of the Rosary, Stations of the Cross, and desperate prayers to the Sacred Heart. These intersect with the seasonal rhythms of the farming year: feeding of animals; clearing of fields and drains and petty land disputes that escalate into violence. In *Tarry Flynn*, and also in the poetry, the evocation of physical geography and the naming of places and people are central as is the use of dialect. Andrew Greeley (2000) maintains that Irish Catholic spirituality, in particular, encounters the transcendent in ordinary experiences of nature and its complex telling and this is evident in Kavanagh's work: "I find a star-lovely art/In a dark sod" ("The Ploughman"). For Heaney, the early poetry gives an ordinary place

credit for existing, assisting “its real topographical presence” (1988: 9) founded on Kavanagh’s “fidelity to the unpromising, unspectacular countryside of Monaghan and his rendering of the authentic speech of those parts” (1980:137).

The early poetry identifies life in Inniskeen. One of the best known poems is entitled “Inniskeen Road: July Evening”:

The bicycles go by in twos and threes —  
There's a dance in Billy Brennan's barn tonight,  
And there's the half-talk code of mysteries  
And the wink-and-elbow language of delight.  
Half-past eight and there is not a spot  
Upon a mile of road, no shadow thrown  
That might turn out a man or woman, not  
A footfall tapping secrecies of stone.

I have what every poet hates in spite  
Of all the solemn talk of contemplation.  
Oh, Alexander Selkirk knew the plight  
Of being king and government and nation.  
A road, a mile of kingdom. I am king  
Of banks and stones and every blooming thing.

Heaney describes this as “a love poem to a place” (1980: 138). But, he suggests that it also relates “the penalty of consciousness” — the poet can describe village life only because he is more observer than participant. As such it exemplifies the paradox observed by Tuan, that “thought creates distance and destroys the immediacy of direct

experience, yet it is by thoughtful reflection that the elusive moments of the past draw near to us in present reality and gain a measure of permanence” (1977: 148). Kavanagh’s ambiguous relationship to his parish is what gives him his insight.

The intensions generated by landscape and society in Monaghan are noteworthy, because the place itself is unspectacular. Monaghan is Kavanagh’s muse. And in “Shancoduff” he names the landscape in significant ways. The first verse eulogises a land in permanent shadow, but names places with importance to the history of Ulster: Glassdrummond in Co. Down associated with O’Neills and Armagh seat of the northern archdiocese. The second verse dramatises the unprepossessing drumlins of south east Ulster as the backdrop to mundane but demanding farming tasks.

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

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

Kavanagh has a gift for creating poetry from the commonplace. The praising of the ordinary is a strong theme of the Kavanagh’s poetry. The potato figures strongly: he wrote an essay entitled, “H.E. King Spud” (Kavanagh, 2003). “Spraying the Potatoes” is

a paean to the beauty of the tuber: “The Kerr’s Pinks in frivelled blue/The Arran Banners wearing white”.

He invests his parish with a spiritual significance. In “A Christmas Childhood”, the townland of Mucker experiences a kind of transubstantiation: “The light between the ricks of hay and straw/Was a hole in Heaven’s gable.” Later,

Cassiopeia was over

Cassidy’s hanging hill and three whin bushes rode across

The horizon — the Three Wise Kings

In “Christmas Eve Remembered”, Inniskeen becomes the scene of the nativity, but one hedged by domestic concerns:

I see them going to the chapel

To confess their sins. Christmas Eve

In a parish in Monaghan.

Poor parish! And yet memory does weave

For me about those folk

A romantic cloak.

...

‘Did you hear from Tom this Christmas?’

‘These are the dark days.’

‘Maguire’s shop did a great trade,

Turnover double — so Maguire says.’

‘I can’t delay now, Jem

Lest I be late in Bethlehem.’

The intensity of Kavanagh's communion with his home world is the central theme of these poems but, while the love is unconditional, it does not blind him to the limiting aspects of a life lived locally. For Kavanagh, Monaghan and this is resource and fetter.

O stony grey soil of Monaghan  
The laugh from my love you thieved;  
You took the gay child of my passion  
And gave me your clod-conceived.  
...  
You flung a ditch on my vision  
Of beauty, love and truth.  
O stony grey soil of Monaghan  
You burgled my bank of youth!  
(“Stony Grey Soil”).

The reflexive evocation of Monaghan was the central theme of the early poetry. But after Kavanagh's move to Dublin, he began an association with Séan O'Faoláin and Frank O'Connor who shared a disillusion with the development of the Free State in the aftermath of independence, rejected the idealisation of rural life promoted by Éamon de Valera and took issue with the cultural legacy of the Revival. O'Faoláin, in particular, advocated a radical new art that presented a socio-analytical and realist account of Ireland in the 1940s (Bonaccorso, 1987). Kavanagh's work struggled to find a place between these demands and neo-Gael movement represented by Austin Clarke (Gillis, 2005). Yet a poem such as “Art McCooey” spoke to both tendencies. McCooey, like Kavanagh, was a farmer-poet. His best known poem *Ag Úirchill an Chreagáin* (By Creggan Graveyard) was an aisling — a vision poem — in which colonised Ireland is represented as a damsel in distress. Kavanagh's poem cleverly alludes to the poet's everyday life as a farmer. Few of

his contemporaries, however, appeared to grasp the irony hidden in the layers of meaning in a poem which honours “an ancestor from the colonised Catholic rural underclass” (Quinn, 2003: 155).

In this context, Kavanagh took up O’Faoláin’s challenge to produce a realist account of rural Ireland. The result was “The Great Hunger”, published in 1942 and regarded by many as a masterpiece, although later Kavanagh disavowed it. O’Brien describes the poem as “an exegesis of the squalor of Irish country life” (1975: 19). It is a poem which recounts “the spiritual, intellectual, and sexual hunger of the Irish countryman” while, “The glib and riotous peasants of Synge, the droll country wits of Lady Gregory, the hard-riding country gentlemen and romantic beggarmen of Yeats — are all absent” (O’Brien, 1977: 22). *The Great Hunger* offers a “scatological parody of pastoral conventions” (Gillis, 2005: 72). Put another way, Inniskeen is not Innisfree (Quinn, 1991). Instead the life of the poem’s principal character Patrick Maguire is weighed down by economic and cultural oppression.

“The Great Hunger” is about the back-breaking existence of the farmer: “Clay is the word and clay is the flesh”. Life is consumed by the relentless misery of making a hard living (“Is there some light of imagination in these wet clods?”). The poem draws attention to the sociological significance of the ageing bachelor farmer supporting an elderly mother, a product of the interplay of post-Famine economics and Catholic culture, which dominated the rural regions of Ireland (Kiberd, 1995):

Maguire was faithful to death:

He stayed with his mother till she died

At the age of ninety-one.

She stayed too long,

Wife and mother in one.

When she died

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

And he was sixty-five.

Maguire's life is dominated by his mother ("tall, hard as a Protestant spire"); the Church with whom his mother colludes ("Now go to Mass and pray and confess your sins/ And you'll have all the luck,' his mother said."); and "his headlands of carrot and cabbage". It is a condition where "life is more lousy than savage". In particular, it is a life marked by sexual frustration and the "purgatory of middle-aged virginity." Although "The Great Hunger" implied no programme — Maguire is victim not hero — it presented an unsettling view of rural life pregnant with political and cultural implications for Catholic Ireland and was troubling to the cultural and political elites as *Ulysses*. Indeed, according to Antoinette Quinn, "Maguire is a country cousin of Joyce's paralysed Dubliners" (2003: 175; or, indeed, according to Kiberd (1995) a "Joycean peasant". According to Heaney, like Carleton before him, Kavanagh divines "a hard buried life that subsisted beyond the feel of middle class novelists and romantic nationalist poets, a life denuded of "folk" and picturesque elements, found its expression" (1980: 116).

Kavanagh's treatment of Catholic Ireland is exemplified in the poem "Lough Derg", in some ways a companion piece to "The Great Hunger". The poem deals with an important site of pilgrimage for Irish, and especially northern Irish, Catholics. Pilgrims perform St Patrick's purgatory, involving a barefoot circuit of Station Island, which contains the ruins of a monastery. Lough Derg has provided material for Ulster poets from William Carleton to Seamus Heaney (O'Brien, 2006) and Heaney's, *Station Island*, is an implicit homage to this tradition (Heaney, 2001). Kavanagh's poem, which parodies

the intercession, “Our Lady of Perpetual Succour”, investigates the antinomies of the Irish Catholic mentality including that of the “smug too-faithful”, that is,

Solicitors praying for cushy jobs,  
To be County Registrar or Coroner;  
Shopkeepers threatened with sharper rivals,  
Than any hook-nosed foreigner  
(“Lough Derg”)

This is not an excoriation because there is also sympathy — “But there were the sincere as well,/The innocent who feared the hell/Of sin” — although sympathy appears to be reserved for the poor not the bourgeoisie. Kavanagh sympathises with spiritual craving that is found at Lough Derg. St. Patrick’s Purgatory localises a human yearning:

No, this is Lough Derg in County Donegal —  
So much alike is our historical  
And spiritual pattern, a heap  
Of stones anywhere is consecrated  
By love’s terrible need.  
(“Lough Derg”)

The rites are simultaneously particular and universal. In “Father Mat” Kavanagh evokes the patterns of rural Catholicism with the parish priest as bedrock: “He was part of the place,/Natural as a round stone in a grass field”). Unlike his curate, Father Mat sees the incarnation in the local, the meek and commonplace:

His curate passed on a bicycle —  
*He* had the haughty intellectual look  
Of the man designed

To wear a mitre,  
To sit on committees —  
For will grows strongest in the emptiest mind

The old priest saw him pass  
And, seeing, saw  
Himself a mediaeval ghost.  
Ahead of him went Power,  
One who was not afraid when the sun opened a flower,  
Who was never astonished  
At a stick carried down a stream  
Or the undying difference in the corner of a field.  
(“Lough Derg”)

This is a parish marked by inequities of power, spiritual indifference and conflicts of purpose.

Periodising a poet’s life and work is fraught with difficulty and danger, but it is possible to view Kavanagh’s evocation of life in Inniskeen in his early poetry and in the later socio-realist treatments, as the outcome of his struggle to deal with own position as a farmer-poet, the cultural legacies of the Revival and the search for his place in Irish letters. Although he developed his explication of parochialism during the 1950s, it was present in his work from the beginning.

Kavanagh’s move to Dublin provided him with a new parish, but also perennial insecurity as he clashed with the gatekeepers of literary taste. His intensions shifted to a

zone around Baggot Street Bridge and the Grand Canal. His most widely performed poem, “On Raglan Road”, attracts attention because of the complexity of its internal rhymes and bitter lament for lost love. But as with the Monaghan poems it concerns the naming of places. “If Ever You Go to Dublin Town” also names the parish (Baggot Street, Pembroke Road) but also self deprecatingly satirises his own ambiguous place in the literary Dublin of his day, while “The Paddiad”, after Pope, upbraids barely disguised members of the Palace Bar set:

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,  
Paddy Connemara West,  
Chestertonian Paddy Frog  
Croaking nightly in the bog.  
All the Paddies having fun  
Since Yeats handed in his gun.

By the 1950s, Kavanagh was repudiating his earlier poetry, especially “The Great Hunger” and its implied critique of the contemporary Irish political economy. After treatment for cancer, Kavanagh, ever the Catholic, claimed to have experienced an epiphany, while sitting in the Dublin sunshine. In the “Author’s Note to *Collected Poems*” (1964), he claimed:

But I lost my messianic compulsion. I sat on the bank of the Grand Canal in the summer of 1955 and let the water lap idly on the shore of my mind. My purpose in life was to have no purpose (Kavanagh, 2005: 292).

This sudden realisation liberated Kavanagh to become truly parochial. Kavanagh turns his gaze with greater intensity to his parish, which is invested with even more powerful spiritual and redemptive qualities. Kavanagh determinedly eschews the exotic and is concerned with “the placeless Heaven under all our noses” (“Auditors In”). The Grand Canal and Baggot Street Bridge provide the setting for the final development of the parochial ethic.

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 I before I grew  
 (“Canal Bank Walk”)

In “Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin” Kavanagh entreats, “Brother/Commemorate me thus beautifully/Where by a lock Niagarously roars”. Later: “A barge comes bringing from Athy/And other far-flung towns mythologies”.

These poems reveal a capacity for a deep and intense engagement with place. Moreover, they emphasise that loved places are important places. Inniskeen is neither idyllic nor folksy, but it is significant. In his essay “From Monaghan to the Grand Canal”, Kavanagh claims: “Real roots lie in our capacity for love and its abandon. The material itself has no special value; it is what our imagination and our love do to it” (Kavanagh, 2003: 273).

The poetry is concerned with matter of fact landscapes and ordinary places contemplated with intensity. In Kavanagh’s case he “subdues the place to become an element in his own private mythology” (Heaney, 1980: 148), signalling the unresolved tension between personal and communal identity. This intense emotional relationship with his parish

could be carried with him. Inniskeen represented “The country of my Mind” (“Monaghan Hills”). Like migrants the world over he was able to recall it in loving detail even when elsewhere.

We borrowed the loan of Kerr’s big ass  
To go to Dundalk with butter,  
Brought him home the evening before the market  
An exile that night in Mucker.  
We heeled up the cart before the door,  
We took the harness inside —  
The straw-stuffed straddle, the broken breeching  
With bits of bull-wire tied;

The winkers that had no choke-band,  
The collar and the reins ...  
In Ealing Broadway, London Town,  
I name their several names

Until a world comes to life —  
Morning, the silent bog,  
And the god of imagination waking  
In a Mucker fog.

(“Kerr’s Ass”)

“Epic”, presents Kavanagh’s final word on the place of the local. It locates a petty farming dispute in global context, but asks us to think again about the relationship between parish and universe:

I have lived in important places, times  
When great events were decided: who owned  
That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land  
Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.  
I heard the Duffys shouting "Damn your soul"  
And old McCabe stripped to the waist, seen  
Step the plot defying blue cast-steel -  
"Here is the march along these iron stones."  
That was the year of the Munich bother. Which  
Was most important? I inclined  
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin  
Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind.  
He said: I made the *Iliad* from such  
A local row. Gods make their own importance.

In part a reflection the poet's craft, the poem is also reflects the exigency to make "poetry out of the prosaic" (O'Brien, 1975: 68). "Epic" can be seen as a coda to Kavanagh's cultural commitment to parochialism, "In this case, the local idiom extends beyond the locale itself. Munich, the European theatre, is translated into the local speech to become bother, and at once it is bother, it has become knowable, and no more splendid than the bother at home" (Heaney, 1980: 139). Kavanagh points first to the parochial setting in preference to the wider world. He insists on the particular as seedbed of the universal (Stack, 2002). In this respect, also, "Epic", despite its ironic brevity, belongs in the same folio as the local epics which have been marked feature of modern British and Irish poetry (Kerrigan, 2000; Tomaney, 2007).

4. *Gods make their own importance*

The history of the parish has not yet been written

— Fr. Joe Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Thought*

Monaghan hills,

You have made me the sort of man I am,

A fellow who can never care a damn

For Everestic thrills.

(“Monaghan Hills”)

Kavanagh’s work is concerned with his parish and how we relate to the parish in general. His parish formed him for better or worse and, within the Irish context, he is concerned with valorising his Ulster home world in the face of metropolitan condescension. But he does this with insouciance and comedy. According to another Ulster poet, he draws simultaneously on his Ulster identity and his global sense of culture (Durcan, 1988).

Kavanagh took a realistic view of his home world and leaving it was important to his development as a poet. He was often viewing from afar: sacerdotally, he was more mendicant than parish priest (Heaney, 1980). The valorisation of his parish can be seen as Kavanagh’s contribution to the devolution of Irish culture. Implicit in Kavanagh's approach is an endorsement of T.S. Eliot's claim that, “For a national culture, if it is to flourish, should be a constellation of cultures, the constituents of which, benefiting each

other, benefit the whole” (1948: 58). In his essay, “Paris in Aran”, Kavanagh wrote that “the metropolis has never anything but contempt for its subservient provinces” (2003: 191). He largely shunned politics, but others take inspiration from his work in thinking about what a more plural Irish culture and polity might look like (Kiberd, 1995; Whelan, 1993) in the context of the “rediscovery” of Ireland’s regions (McCafferty, 2003) .

More broadly, Kavanagh’s engagement with his parish compels us to address how we think about the local. He is concerned with the “specific ironic vantage-points which may seem to illuminate, but are in fact illuminated by the ‘parochial’ material” (Allen, 1975: 36). Homer fashioned *The Illiad* from a local row. The implication here is that a preoccupation with the parochial can be intellectually and culturally fruitful as well as debilitating, as far as it is concerned with, according to Fr. Tom Stack, “transforming apparently insignificant places and events into symbols resonant of larger truths” (2002: 18). On this point, Thomas Hardy, a writer who shares much in common with Kavanagh observed,

A certain provincialism of feeling is invaluable. It is the essence of individuality and is largely made up of that crude enthusiasm without which no great thoughts are thought, no great deeds done (Hardy, 1928: 189)

Kavanagh’s parochialism (what Hardy calls provincialism) provides evidence for Tuan’s claim that, “human places become vividly real through dramatization. Identity of place is achieved by dramatizing the aspirations, needs and functional rhythms of personal and group life” (1977: 178). Moreover, in the formation of attachments, “quality and intensity of experiences matters more than simple duration” (1977: 198). After all, as Fr. Coriden notes, the original meaning of the parish acknowledges the place of resident aliens, settled foreigners and non-native sojourners. It is worth noting that in English the term

“parochialism” — except in the lexicon of the Church — carries a pejorative meaning of small mindedness and insularity. But the intensity of Kavanagh’s concern for his parish does not reflect insularity: his range of reference and his appeal is universal. However, Kavanagh asks us to think deeply about how we live locally and care for our parish. This remains a profoundly important task.

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