

Rosemarie Rowley

“The Annihilation of the Flesh-Rotted Word”

- Kavanagh’s real trajectory

Patrick Kavanagh: *Complete Poems* (Ireland: Goldsmith Press, 1972)

In 1939, Patrick Kavanagh left his native Inniskeen for the capital, Dublin, “where arts, music, letters are the real things.” (*Temptation in Harvest*, 156). However, the countryside still had a firm grip on his imagination, and for his first five years in the capital he wrestled with the complexities of his inheritance as a countryman and a Catholic Irishman, as against the harsh reality of the city – the old tussle between Innocence and Experience.

He wrote three long poems in this period, which appeared together for the first time in the volume of *Complete Poems* edited by his brother Peter and published by Goldsmith Press in Kildare, in 1972. *A Wreath for Tom Moore’s Statue*, (148) from which the title of this essay is taken, followed immediately in 1944.

In *Why Sorrow?* (187) he saw the fertility of the spirit, being threatened by ponderous philosophy, *driving joy into a wet weedy onion-row* and this poem was based on the life of a local priest who was tempted to break his vows. In *The Great Hunger*

(79) which according to his brother Peter, he wrote very quickly, Kavanagh dealt with the complexities of body and clay against the history of oppression and the inheritance of the famine; while in *Lough Derg*, (104) a long poem entirely unpublished during his lifetime, there was serious reflection on the Catholic faith, as to how he found himself, as pilgrim and artist, in the new republic of Ireland, of small shop-keepers and wily peasants.

Kavanagh had learned since leaving Inniskeen, that the venal and the material were part of the new Ireland.. He had spent five years unraveling the personae at the heart of his own drama of matter and spirit, encapsulated as the conflict between religious observance and sexual fulfillment, in *The Great Hunger*, whose protagonist, Paddy Maguire leads a life unfulfilled because of the lie believed in by his mother – and mother Church.

She reached five bony crooks under the tick -

Five pounds for Masses - won't you say them quick. (99)

So the Ireland where Christ and Caesar go hand in glove, as James Joyce had observed, was still extant in Kavanagh's time. This is where the tabernacle is seen as fertile, but not the human being, who is eternally hoping for Easter and regeneration, but who dies in the macabre comical graveyard, an echo perhaps of *Finnegan's Wake* or Martin O Cadhain's later *Cre ne Coille* - an Irish language novel written at the same time and whose action all takes place in a graveyard.

In the long unpublished poem *Why Sorrow?* (167) the contradictions at the heart of Christianity seemed to reduce the sacrifice on Calvary to being a waste. After all, Christ had said, “I came not only to bring life, but to bring it more abundantly” what happened in rural Ireland was that the sense of sin surrounding fertility impeded the spirit even more than the flesh, and, imbued with failure, it rotted away through inanition and inertia. There were parishes in Ireland with nine out of every ten households were bereft of a child, according to the *Irish Times* census of 1936 when depopulation became a serious problem. Kavanagh was unable to reconcile during his lifetime the pagan aspects of fertility and the Church’s emphasis on sacrifice, particularly on sacrifice of the body.

Having written these long poems, Kavanagh began his mature work as a public poet and satirist. In *A Wreath for Tom Moore’s Statue* the poet’s anger at the Irish state is uppermost, it is a valediction to the wasted years of his youth, when he was in his physical prime, and he looks morbidly at the fate of poets and poetry. Here the poet speaks of the terrible peace that follows *the annihilation of the flesh-rotted word*. (148) The word flesh has come to us from the Anglo Saxon, and holds closely to its meaning as meat as in German “fleisch”. Hence it is nearly always used as in being of the essence of the material, opposed to the spirit, as in Hamlet’s “the ills that the flesh is heir to”, and Samuel Butler’s the “Way of all Flesh”, in our own day Eithne Strong’s “Flesh, the greatest sin” (published 1980). In Kavanagh’s work, there is an entirely ambiguous meaning built around the word, as it inherits all the prejudices from the Christian religion, the defective Christianity he was brought up with, along with the latent and obvious

ambiguities, as being the only means that fertility is achieved, and therefore was held to be the only route to earthly fulfillment and happiness. All paradises on earth begin with the longing for the flesh to be redeemed from its fallen state, so it is no surprise those philosophies which sought to change the world relied heavily on a materialist construction to bring about wellbeing through the supremacy of the flesh.

In “The Great Hunger” (79), clay and flesh identified and sometimes at war with each other. Clay is both dead flesh and yet transmitter of life itself. Because flesh is an avenue to love and has been interpreted as heavy and clay-like, it suffers through misuse and misapplication in the same way the depredations of life take their toll on the flesh, making it useless, worn, and at times incapable of regeneration. By the middle stanzas of the poem the word has become associated with the virtually un-sayable: for instance that *flesh is a thought more spiritual than music*.(Section VII, *The Great Hunger*, 79). It is the poet’s assertiveness to turn the centuries-old contradictions around in order to reclaim their original meaning.

The Great Hunger is resonant with memory of the famine and the withholding of nourishment to the flesh. The Famine was also the catalyst that projected awareness of being deprived as a people, and fostered their sense of nationalism in that it focused the blame on the Ascendancy and colonialist classes who had stood idly by while food, in the form of corn, was being shipped out of the country. The famine was a deliberate attempt to starve the people of Ireland into submission – in no way was it caused by God or by natural forces. However the withholding of food and corn by the authorities is

symbolized by the power Mother nature has to wreck us into submission, by materialist concerns. Because of the collusion of the authorities, its meaning becomes conflated with lies and deprivation. So Kavanagh writes of a generation that has come into being mistrustful of love and of Mother Earth, and mistrustful of women in general, while holding them in high esteem..

“Flesh-rotted” gives a picture of a potato rotting with potato blight in the clay, as happened in the Famine. The earth, made of clay, deprived the people of nourishment, just as now they were denied fertility through misinterpretation of the Word of the gospels. The Church robbed the people of fertility, of manhood and fulfilled motherhood, while the people live with the hope of the tabernacle, that at Easter *Christ will come like green leaves from the sealed and guarded tomb.* (Section III *The Great Hunger*, 79)

In the intervening hundred years, the nation had come into being, but the spiritual wound was still manifest in the injured self-confidence of the Irish people, including the poet. As a colonized people they were the first to gain independence from their oppressors, and were the focus of the new nations coming into being, after works such as *Das Kapital* had been written by Marx which gave a voice to the disinherited and abused of the earth. But Marxism was a top-down religion itself written on the proceeds of capital. It projected materialist philosophies such as the determinism of the class concept where solutions are found to industrial problems by organizing society along rational grounds. Therefore the Marxist categories of materialist and scientific elements where

thesis meets antithesis, to make a material reality have no place in Kavanagh's vocabulary, in what he called "the social lie". (BBC Broadcast, 1960). Having found materialism of any kind suspect, he was not about to buy into the idea that he could be saved by any kind of materialism.

"Flesh-rotted" not only described withering fruits of the earth, but also described the word as used in a material sense by these doctrines which came into being in the great new democratic age of progress and socialism, matched also by the cheap use of communication methods to create mass feeling and emotions, identities created and fed by the new popular press. Since the debunking of religion in the Enlightenment, no social reformer waited for utopia in the afterlife, because the doctrines of the day encouraged men to hope for a better world here on earth, being buoyed up by others saying there was a lack of sure proof that there even was such an entity as spirit or soul, since they had not been to any extent demonstrated irrefutably by the history of human life.

So, the history of mankind was not auspicious even in the hope there would be paradise in the next world. Enlightenment also meant that people were distrustful of tradition, and of the worn categories of thought around love, which had been allowed to become contaminated and an unsure vehicle for any kind of emotion – this marked the poet's first rebellion. Kavanagh was to make his own path, an entirely original one, but one which looked upon the commonplace as visionary. He did not have the portentous philosophy of the common man as Wordsworth did, but rather interrogated the idea of the

common man or peasant in the poems he wrote in the 1930s, and which constitute his first volume *Ploughman and Other Poems*, Macmillan, 1936.

The definition of what constituted the common man was the subject of intellectual discourse in the 'thirties when Kavanagh began to publish. For this reason much of his early poetry from *Ploughman* is taken up with what being a peasant means to a person to whom the spiritual and druidic aspects of the poet's vocation are uppermost. To my mind insufficient attention has been paid to these poems, but for the purposes of this paper I will concentrate on how Kavanagh saw the word being made materialistic by social utopians and his choice was to go against their received wisdom. The word made flesh, or Christ, also signified to him that Christ's mission had failed, in view of the infertility of his people and their spiritual inheritance of deprivation. In post-Famine Ireland there seemed to be little evidence of Christ's promise of life abundant.

The first act of Kavanagh as a poet was to rebel against the materialization of the word. The new disciplines of sociology where his meaning would lie in a social category were rejected by him as the ground which gave way before him as he tried to straddle the Scylla of being defined from the outside and the Charybdis as an undefined spiritual being in the poetic order. Kavanagh's position would indicate a struggle between paganism signifying spirituality, and the words around his situation in society. He does not find nourishment in myth, as Yeats did to great acclaim, and neither did he adopt the mantle of Celtic Twilight which ill-fitted Yeats' successors like F. R. Higgins whom Kavanagh was at pains to deride.

In Kavanagh's eyes, *The Celtic Twilight* came to be seen as hermetic and with no grasp on the real world - also in the 1930s the great ideological movements in full swing battered the poet with sociological summations, some harking back to the glories of the past. For all its aesthetic beauty, the poetry of Yeats was seen by some as lacking in content, leaving no clear poetic inheritance for his successors.

Therefore, the importance of Kavanagh's work, I suggest, lies in him bringing a respite from 20th materialist philosophies, first as a straightforward poet, of the countryside and Nature, or as John Ryan termed him— the last great pastoral poet in Europe, (*Remembering How We Stood*, published 1976) and then as reflector on the questions of the day concerning people, faith and cities.. Pre- industrial society, Ireland's unique situation in the West European complex of developing nations had found a voice.

It is interesting that Kavanagh who seemingly lacked the intellectual equipment of Austin Clarke or the easy fluency of McNeice, has outlasted them in the public mind, particularly in Ireland, and now with the advent of the Penguin edition of his poems, he looks about to enter into his own in England, too. This is surely because the century he lived in, the 20th became a century of demagogues, ideologues, after the industrial revolution and the decadence followed on Yeats and Wilde, people were in search of what is authentic. Kavanagh is one of the few since that time to withstand the mass cultures being promoted, pre-eminently a writer of plain speech, which is a virtue in an age trammled by complex philosophical ideals which impacted on the everyday in the

form of a despotic politics or evangelical and narrow crusading of religious bigots. Many people took an opposite path and ended up as secular humanists. Kavanagh was neither - though coming from an impoverished background as were the majority of Irish people at the time, there is no sign that neither was he tempted.

Through poverty, the poet was linked to innocence and a pre-lapsarian state - an Eden which is still accessible to him growing up and as a poet of rural Ireland. He was, he said, the first person to have written about rural Ireland from the inside, and was therefore participating in its legacy of a living faith. He wrote out of his place as a poet of rural Ireland secure in the emerging Irish identity as they grew towards self realization and education, but independent from the mainstream.

Kavanagh sets himself in opposition therefore to the obsessively materialist and flesh-rotted doctrines, while up-casting against the church its role in promoting infertility of spirit and body. His is a two-pronged attack. First he opposes the socialist doctrines of the day as man, as commentator, beginning his own exile first from Inniskeen, then later, as he gained experience of the city, he returns to his original source in the green of a *rus in urbe*, , but in a more purely visionary way. It is as if the development of his character, his self definition after the laying bare of the *Great Hunger* and his distancing from it found articulation in its complexity, he then went on when he went on to describe what he termed a journey “from simplicity back to simplicity”. (*Self Portrait*, broadcasted RTE 1964). In a broadcast in the BBC in 1960, he stated that in. The *Great*

Hunger he had exaggerated the material, it was, as he said himself “far too strong for honesty”.

It is as if the long poems had shown him the way home. These were all breakthrough poems written at the height of his creative powers. Then, having finished this trilogy of long poems *The Great Hunger* and *Why Sorrow?* “*Lough Derg*” (104) where he had written of an energetic visit to the penitential island, where he finds in the numbing ritual a release for the spirit, he casts off the materialist and sociological concerns with a period of satire. Then follows the return to mysticism. He had endured censorship, and had failed to entirely resolve the contradictions of flesh, so he shelved the two other long poems. The *Great Hunger* had resulted in a visit from the police, and neither *Why Sorrow?* in its entirety, nor *Lough Derg* were published during his lifetime.

A year or so later after the censorship of *The Great Hunger* and his decision not to publish the other long poems, Kavanagh is in a more detached frame of mind writing *A Wreath for Tom Moore’s Statue* which makes him write the extraordinary phrase *the annihilation of the flesh rotted word*. As he says, after 40 years of age the role is to be prophet and saviour, and the time for regretting his own unhappy state is over, partially resolved through the writing of the long poems. There is a cold anger at work in the poem, still struggling with the concept that *a man is what is written on the label*. (*The Great Hunger*, 79). This is a thought he would juggle with for most of his life, resulting in his fine poem *Having Confessed* (256) where he rebukes himself for having viewed his soul from outside, which he describes as the real sin against the Holy Ghost, or spiritual

self. In this way he veered away from the constructions of the social scientist which the age had defined people of his class and temperament. The religious tone of the poem and its supremacy of the spiritual leads him to rejecting the *Great Hunger* as he dismisses it finally because it had a touch of “left-wingery” about it and therefore of so called objective reality. For Kavanagh truth lay in the subjective and personal, his final position as a poet, *to be prophet and saviour*, and to *smelt the commonplaces of life as a god in his own fashion*. (206). He is quite conscious *After 40 Years of Age*(206) that “*part of him is exiled from the P*” and he has a responsibility as a poet to find his wholeness and integrity.

As prophet, he is honing his meaning to a finer one than mere decay. It is interesting that the word sterile is not in Kavanagh’s vocabulary, rather he chooses to believe in flesh as potential, which has been wasted. As he wrote, wealth is potential and his own potential was dwindling, his own flesh he saw as wasted fertility

Even then flesh is not without its ambiguities, as in the sonnet *Pygmalion* (26) when he celebrates stoicism and mysticism in the unyielding mystery of clay. The poem *Pygmalion* encapsulates these ambiguities, that they lie outside of him, and tease him with their power just as the woman only smiles at him when he promises her that at dawn she will be “clay-sensuous”.

While wrestling with the antimonies of flesh and the spirit in an age of materialism, such as the 20th century, Kavanagh at times allowed the material to obscure

the spiritual, arriving at a position at one stage where he stands creation on its head, by asserting that life itself, the spiritual life, even the Divinity, God itself or himself, is born out of clay. The fertility of clay brings forth creation, while the spirit struggles with the way it is abused. God is therefore not only the word, but clay itself and it is the fountain-head of Creation having its beginnings in a muddy pool.

the angel while

God was unstirred mud in a shallow pool (Remembered Country, 49)

Kavanagh recognized that matter was the antithesis of spirit, and that the apotheosis of clay was present in the idea of creation. Therefore, whilst he felt that Christ's mission had failed. Kavanagh, chose to write from the point of view of a different spiritual journey, casting himself as a druid priest of Nature while simultaneously, at an existentialist level, proving his own social history to be inadequate for his purposes as a creative thinker and poet. However, his contradictory stance, and his often belligerent attitude towards almost everyone shows just how strong his engagement was with the social doctrines of the time, and how strongly he resisted them.

Therefore by his self definition, by rejecting the common wisdom that he can be defined from outside, he wrote his best poems. However, in not receiving any recognition from his contemporaries after they were written and entering into a period of satire after the mid-forties, he trod a path which at times was vacillating and at times unworthy of him.

Kavanagh, often depicted as an outsider, made those choices earlier on – not to have his own personal destiny and his work as a poet confused and confounded by modernist structures. Neither would he borrow from myth, all were worn before him and he - while standing outside his own local history and his own people - did not want to fall into the trap of being merely decorative and of no consequence in his own day and times. Like Cocteau, he believed that all that was not believed in was decorative and therefore could not be poetry of the first order. (Lectures given in University College, Dublin, 1956)

A Wreath for Tom Moore's Statue is a panegyric to Ireland's great bard, himself a poet who crossed the divide between Ireland and England, but in Kavanagh's eyes, Ireland had demeaned him. The full cost of Yeats's Paudeen dipping into the till is seen or as Kavanagh puts it

No poet is honoured when they wreath this stone

An old shopkeeper who has dealt in the marrow bone

Of his neighbours looks at you.

which indeed is classic materialism and the waste of the spirit.

Faced with the poet's death, Kavanagh writes

Some clay the lice has stirred

Falls now for ever into hell's lousy hollows

The terrible peace is that follows

The annihilation of the flesh rotted word.

That terrible peace just after the war, where quietism took hold nationally and internationally is foreseen by him.

From then on, Kavanagh entered into the phase of his life when writing satire eased the wound, until later he discovers that “satire is unfruitful prayer”. (*Prelude*, 274) Satire was his main *modus vivendi* until his rebirth by the canal in the mid 1950s. But his rebirth though much vaunted is not entirely successful as a poetic achievement, as he is a bit wobbly on the stilts he has to climb on to keep this lofty position of not caring.

Between 1944 and 1964 he resisted, taking refuge in drink. But then he realized, that in the modern world, the experience of self as object, or the reification of the self, was made far worse by the person consuming that self identity that had been fabricated from outside. The self is the ultimate consumer in modern society because it is consumed by itself, buying its own artifacts, and ending up buying into market preconceptions and pre-occupations of the ego self. Because he lacked the resources of endless time and suitable companions, he took the position of direct dialogue with God, and at times became a shaman in a society where religion was more observed as a puritanical and iron convention destroying love and sexual desire in people, his own tattered clothes often reducing him to an impoverished and pitiable, often acerbic, clown. However, the comic

spirit finally overtook him, as he wrote, “tragedy is under-developed comedy”. (*Collected Pruse*)

Kavanagh wrote later of being a man without a myth, (*Winter in Leeds*, (335) but unsure of his trappings, he assumed at times the false aggrandizement of being a poet. However, having no secure reputation, the moments when he glimpsed the self are precarious, and for that reason, he appears to be on stilts, the subject of one of his most successful poems, “*Come Dance with Kitty Stobling*” (290) where his very fragility makes him worthy material of what must be one of his finest sonnets. In that poem also there is the sensation of being so precariously balanced he is bound to fall into the lousy hollows of hell, as so many déclassé artists have done, like Baudelaire. Kavanagh does eventually embrace the odd shards of society in a kind of Bohemianism, but again his position is one of opposition rather than embracing its values, rather as in Derek Mahon’s exquisite vignette “The Poets Lie Where They Fell”.

Even when he concurs and for the sake of a venal few quid joins the troupe of fallen poets, it is with a sense that he is lesser as a man and has somehow failed in his mission when he does stoop to their particular mores. But the Lilliputians fail to pin him to the ground like Gulliver. He is still alive and kicking to the end, when he writes living in the country as a form of exile, and *Literary Adventures* ruefully reflects on the changing modern world and mentions John Lennon as the new kind of artist, named oddly enough, The Beatles.

There is a connection in Kavanagh's work between insects and clay which strangely enough is often found in classical myth, such as the Egyptian scarab or beetle rolling his ball of dung, or the conception of Etain from a fly as in the Irish story of Etain and Midhir. It is a spin-off from identifying mud or clay with fertility, but Kavanagh in *Auditors In* (242) has relinquished the possibility of having children and is now a showman and shaman to the public who "may steer by his star as he knocks back whiskies in a smoky bar".(*The Same Again*) (349)

However there is a sharp line between consuming one's own experience and being subject of his own poems about his experiences, and it is this rivulet of inspiration he seeks in his later poems, adopting everyday occurrence, or what could be termed the banal, as a weather vane to his interior processes. It takes two forms, the interiorizing of the inner spiritual love, like in the *The Hospital*"(279)

But nothing whatever is by love debarred,

The common and the banal her heat can know,

and, through love, the contemplation of

the inexhaustible adventure of a graveled yard.

This contemplation becomes with steady acuity his vision of beauty, as in *Common Beauty* which is a wonderfully achieved poem about the beauty of the

commonplace. (205) This is a marvelous poem, when he once again declares his aesthetic lies in the commonplace.

I will forget all that was cultivated, all that was told

How to be beautiful.

.....To me,

God's truth was such a thing you could not mention

Without being ashamed of it's commonness:

Ah, that lane, a short-cut to Clonsilla

Worn in the middle

Where a stream of dirty water ran

Its sloping banks grew broken bottles like glass

My God baptized me there by the hand of John.

There is a cart-pass in Drumnagrella –

I could cry, almost remembering its excitement in July

When moving with an old scythe the rushes that fringed the

rim of the ruts

I learned how not to die.

Here the vision is equal to the word, which are perfectly in tune together, something he had hit upon earlier, at times, in the lyric section *The Garden of the Golden Apples* (170) like a vivid shot of Eden in *Why Sorrow?*

Finally, because he worked on a smaller, local canvas he escapes from the lethargic inertia which gripped the wider industrial western world and gave substance to his faith that the parish was at the centre of culture, and not the capital of a former colonized country, where indeed, all things were provincial. It is this life at the centre of the parish that make him an acute social commentator but also prevented him from being taken up in a serious way by the public in England and in America during his lifetime, where indeed Ireland's privileged position during World War II nurtured the local and personal rather than the vaster secular religions like a socialism based on reason which have as their artistic expression either a soulless comedy or a complex irony, even cynicism. For Kavanagh, those secular religions means that the Word is embedded in the materialism, and has to be threshed to get at their spiritual essence, just as he said in leaving Inniskeen that he was leaving for the capital in 1937 to *thresh the stars of bright truth from the materialist husk*, as Blake did. (The Irish Times, *The Corn Goddess*, Nov. 8 1939) These stars of bright truth are evident in the luminous lines towards the end of the poem. They also capture his true insouciance as a writer of unconventional and spirit-shocking words and as heir to the common speech of his people:

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.