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Ploughmen Without Land: Flann O'Brien & Patrick Kavanagh

Joseph Brooker

After Brian O'Nolan's death, the poet Patrick Kavanagh would remark that there was no one left to talk to in Dublin. The tribute is surprising, as their relationship was not one of intimate confidences. But it indicates mutual respect. John Ryan records: '[O'Nolan] was one of the few writers in whose company [Kavanagh] was completely at ease; his respect for him was complete; he was his peer; like himself he had chosen the tougher going, the thinner air of Upper Parnassus, Dublin 14'.¹

This essay is a comparative study of O'Nolan and Kavanagh, written in the conviction that O'Nolan can be illuminated by such juxtaposition with his peers: the writers with whom he shared pub tables as well as a historical situation. Insofar as we are pursuing a more intensive, historically informed understanding of O'Nolan, we would still benefit from close studies of him in relation to his university friends Denis Devlin, Brian Coffey, Niall Sheridan, Niall Montgomery, and figures from the press, notably his long-standing editor R.M. Smyllie. If O'Nolan (1911-1966) has a distinct niche in literary history, though, it is as part of a mid-century Dublin scene in which the two other most prominent figures are Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967) and Brendan Behan (1923-1964). This milieu has been documented notably by two men who were also part of it: Anthony Cronin (b.1928) in *Dead as Doornails* (1976) and *No Laughing Matter* (1989), and John Ryan (1925-1992) in *Remembering How We Stood* (1975). Ryan's subtitle, 'Bohemian Dublin at the Mid-Century', summarises the scene, though any Flann O'Brien scholar knows that the author's relation to bohemianism was vexed. Kavanagh and O'Nolan belonged to the generation of writers who quite self-consciously followed Joyce and Yeats, above all, and the Irish Literary Revival more generally. Both were literary heirs to political independence, ambivalent recorders of the Free State. More than any of O'Nolan's Dublin peers, Kavanagh was also a major writer.

I will first outline the facts of their parallel careers. I will then move chronologically through certain points of comparison, exploring significant likenesses and differences. The aim is to illuminate both writers, and to open ground for further research.

Two Northerners

Brian O'Nolan and Patrick Kavanagh were both from Ulster. O'Nolan's Strabane, Co. Tyrone, is on the far western border of what in 1922 became Northern Ireland. Kavanagh's Inniskeen, Co. Monaghan, is also on the border, on the Republic's side.

¹ John Ryan, *Remembering How We Stood: Bohemian Dublin at the Mid-Century* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), 127.

No such border existed till Kavanagh reached adulthood, but he and O’Nolan were both to some degree outsiders to the capital city where they would spend the bulk of their lives and win a measure of fame. O’Nolan was moved to Dublin as a child of 11. Kavanagh came later. He was a small farmer before he was a poet. In 1931, in an episode of literary legend, he walked eighty miles from Monaghan to Dublin to visit George Russell (whose alias was AE), the editor of the *Irish Statesman* who had already published some of Kavanagh’s earlier works. His first collection *Ploughman and other Poems* (1936) and the novel *The Green Fool* (1938) both appeared before he finally settled in Dublin in August 1939. If O’Nolan’s arrival in Dublin roughly coincided with the publication of *Ulysses*, Kavanagh’s Dublin life dates from around the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Indeed, the two were yoked together that year when the AE Memorial Fund prize of £150 was given to Kavanagh – but with a special prize of £30 also given to *At Swim*. This was, not entirely wittingly, the first public recognition of the two writers’ centrality to a literary generation.

Dublin circa 1940 was a small capital. Its literary scene was naturally far smaller still. The city’s insularity was increased, from 1939 to 1945, by the Emergency, though war did bring some new visitors, spying (like Kavanagh’s friend John Betjeman) or hungry for steak. In this context, poets, novelists and critics tended to be at least aware of each other’s existence, across the city or across a pub. Certain public houses were favoured by writers. The Palace Bar on Fleet Street was convenient for the nearby *Irish Times*, and was a focal point of literary Dublin at least until the newspaper’s editor R.M. Smyllie moved his informal court to the Pearl Bar around the corner. The Palace was the setting of Alan Reeve’s cartoon *Dublin Culture*.² The picture shows three dozen Irish men of letters (no women), many of them now little remembered. R.M. Smyllie dominates the centre. O’Nolan and Kavanagh are better known today than anyone else in the picture. They are pictured as adjacent: a standing Kavanagh waves his large hand almost across O’Nolan’s face. In Reeve’s picture, Kavanagh and O’Nolan appear intimately part of the same crowd. From this time they shared a profoundly bibulous literary culture in which paths crossed, rumours spread and insults or jokes could be hurled from one side of a bar to another.

Summer 1940 was the golden hour of the letter-column controversies that O’Nolan and friends cooked up in the *Irish Times*.³ One controversy followed directly from a book review by Kavanagh, who also closed the affair with a final reflection. Here, then, O’Nolan and Kavanagh directly addressed each other – though the directness is vitiated by O’Nolan’s entirely characteristic recourse to verbal disguise. The controversy would be significant for literary history, as it prompted Smyllie to employ O’Nolan as Myles na gCopaleen: an engagement that would last the next quarter-century.

² The picture is reproduced on the centre pages of Ryan, *Remembering How We Stood*.

³ For a discussion of these see Joseph Brooker, *Flann O’Brien* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005), 23-6.

By this time the first and finest two Flann O'Brien novels were written. *An Béal Bocht* (1941; translated as *The Poor Mouth* in 1973) arrived a year into the *Cruiskeen Lawn* years; the following year Kavanagh published *The Great Hunger*. These two texts stand as two of literature's major critical responses to independent Ireland, specifically the sociology and ideology of its rural life. O'Nolan's play *Faustus Kelly* (1943) was another response, which Kavanagh attended at the Abbey Theatre; he would later claim to view as O'Nolan's finest work.⁴ So too was Sean O'Faolain's journal *The Bell*, for which both men wrote. John Ryan edited its sprightly successor *Envoy*. He persuaded Kavanagh to write a monthly diary for the magazine from 1949 to 1951, and the poet also contributed his bitter ditty 'Who Killed James Joyce?' to the special Joyce issue of 1951 which was at least nominally edited by O'Nolan. *Envoy* was based in Grafton Street; the literary scene partly shifted to McDaid's pub nearby. Kavanagh – notionally symbolizing the muse – joined the pioneering Bloomsday cortège which O'Nolan and Ryan organized in 1954. The event signalled the writers' to pay homage to Joyce, and to claim a certain lineage from him, whatever their ambivalent relations to him.

By this time Myles' columns could be more splenetic and satirical; the mood chimed with the 13-week run of *Kavanagh's Weekly* in early 1952, to which O'Nolan contributed. Both men remained angry with aspects of Ireland. Events of the 1950s swung Kavanagh's mood. Critically ill after a disastrous legal case, in spring 1955 he recuperated by the Grand Canal and commenced a self-conscious literary renaissance, founded on his gladness still to be alive. O'Nolan experienced his own late revival, notably with two later novels. Kavanagh attended O'Nolan's funeral in 1966, and died the following year.

Such is the historical outline. Let us now retrace our steps and consider certain of these episodes in more detail.

Ploughmen & potatoes

Kavanagh's early poetry is pastoral. It describes nature and agriculture in the Monaghan countryside. 'Ploughman', first published in 1930, voices the experience of a farmer in the field:

I turn the lea-green down
Gaily now,
And paint the meadow brown
With my plough.

I dream with silvery gull
And brazen crow.
A thing that is beautiful

⁴ See Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989), 134.

I may know.

The poem's alternating lines of three and two stresses are a distinctive pattern. The regularity enhances the sense of the ploughman's repetitive activity, in which he enters a kind of agricultural trance. He 'dreams' with a passing gull, experiences 'quiet ecstasy / Like a prayer' in the 'Tranquillity' of the field. Kavanagh's ploughman is beatific, to the point where ploughing is a religious experience: 'O heart / That knows God!', he concludes.⁵

Three years later, O'Nolan published his playlet *The Bog of Allen*, in UCD's student magazine *Comhthrom Féinne*.⁶ The skit describes 'Allen Bogg's hovel in the middle of the Bog of Allen': 'a typically Irish household', where 'All the bed-clothes, including the blankets, are made of Irish poplin'. The text amplifies Irishness ('the Wearin' o' the Green is a strict rule in the house') to a surreal degree: 'Below on the floor is a primitive rack, made of bog-oak, for torturing leprechauns who will not divulge where the Crock of Gold is hidden'. The primary target of this parody is John Millington Synge and the perceived domination of the Abbey Theatre by his work and its imitators. O'Nolan's cooing nativist dialogue – 'Anish, now, musha'; 'Beggorah'; 'Ochone!' – signals that Synge is in his sights. But the earliest Kavanagh belongs, broadly speaking, to the bucolic attitude satirized here: unsurprisingly, as he was initially under the wing of the romantic and ruralist George Russell. Animals were central to Kavanagh's farming life, and recur through his early poetry, including the whole poem 'Plough-Horses': 'The tranquil rhythm of that team / Was as slow-flowing meadow stream'.⁷ A recurring joke of 'The Bog of Allen' is the appearance of animals on stage. 'In the corner is a bed with a white sow in it' (a forerunner of the pigs in *The Poor Mouth*), and the play ends with six cows sinking the house into the bog. The intimacy of human and farmyard animal is farce in O'Nolan where it is a living, inspiring reality to Kavanagh.

The first relation to be posited between Kavanagh and O'Nolan, then, is a simple enough duality. The poet and the jester, the country and the city, sincerity and irony, reverie and comedy: this pattern can describe the contrast between many of the two writers' works. It is also a significant duality within much modern Irish literature in general: from, say, Lady Gregory and the romantic Yeats against the urban and textualist Joyce, to Beckett's division in 1934 of Irish poets into 'antiquarians and others'⁸, and even to the relation between loamy Heaney and ludic Muldoon. It was reconfirmed in the *Irish Times* controversy of 1940, which commenced with Kavanagh's review of a rural novel, but gathered momentum

⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Ploughman', in *Selected Poems* ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 6-7.

⁶ 'The bog of Allen', in Flann O'Brien, *Myles before Myles* ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Grafton, 1988), 40-3.

⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Plough-Horses', *Selected Poems*, 26.

⁸ Samuel Beckett, 'Recent Irish Poetry', in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), 70.

when the newspaper published his poem 'Spraying the Potatoes' on 27 July. The poem vividly recalls a scene of agricultural labour. Kavanagh specifies strains of potato stalk: 'The Kerr's Pinks in a frivelled blue, / The Arran Banners wearing white'. The speaker works with 'barrels of blue potato-spray' and a 'knapsack sprayer', a modicum of technology that is set in a languorous rural realm, a 'headland of July':

And over that potato-field
A lazy veil of woven sun.

The poem centres on agricultural work, but also dazzlingly renders rural beauty, scattered with colours and foliage that becomes personified: roses are 'young girls hanging from the sky', dandelions 'showing / Their unloved hearts to everyone'. The poem's close seems to dramatize Kavanagh's new distance from the countryside – 'poet lost to potato fields' – yet insists on the spellbinding powers of memory.⁹

Within two days O'Nolan had responded, under no less a guise than 'F. O'Brien'.

At last, I said to myself, the Irish banks are acknowledging the necessity for hygiene. My eye had lighted on the heading "Spraying the Potatoes" and I had naturally enough inferred that our bank notes were being treated periodically with a suitable germicide, a practice which has long been a commonplace of enlightened monetary science in Australia.¹⁰

The supposed misunderstanding is strained, as O'Nolan has overlaid Kavanagh's evident literal meaning with a fancifully slangy one, probably with an American source. (He varies the slang definition later in the letter with his observation, not for the last time, that *Gone With The Wind* had won Margaret Mitchell 'many thousands of tons of tubers'.) His version is implicitly urban (banks) to Kavanagh's rural (farms), and crookedly idiomatic to Kavanagh's straightforwardness. The frankly emotional tone of the poem – characteristic enough of Kavanagh – makes O'Nolan's wilful misreading verge on a public insult. Drawing Kavanagh's delicate work of art into the comic cacophony of the letters page violates a generic and tonal boundary, more than the original response to Kavanagh's review had done. O'Nolan does not become much more polite in rectifying his supposed error, upon realising 'that the heading had reference to some verses by Mr Patrick Kavanagh dealing with the part played by chemistry in modern farming':

Perhaps the *Irish Times*, tireless champion of our peasantry, will oblige us with a series in this strain covering such rural complexities as inflamed goat-

⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Spraying the Potatoes', *Collected Poems*, 36-7.

¹⁰ F. O'Brien, letter to *Irish Times*, 29 July 1940, reprinted in *Myles before Myles*, 207-9 (207).

udders, warble-pocked shorthorn, contagious abortion, non-ovoid oviducts and nervous disorders among the gentlemen who pay the rent.¹¹

O'Nolan now takes Kavanagh literally – but too literally. He professes to read the poem as a factual guide to farming practices, and his list of future topics places Kavanagh's poem in a series of unsavoury agricultural ills. 'Spraying the potatoes' was the occasion of Kavanagh's reverie, but potato blight – though a historically resonant topic – was not supposed to be the poem's focus. O'Nolan has thus wrenched Kavanagh's art out of context; affected to miss its literal meaning; reinstated the literal meaning, but read it too pragmatically and non-aesthetically; ignored the poem's beauty and implied instead that its topic tends toward the grotesque; and done all this in a patently artificial tone, conveying an effect of insincerity equal to the sincerity suggested by Kavanagh's verse.

Some other letters also referred to the poem. Jno. O'Ruddy, apparently Niall Montgomery, scornfully asked 'What matters it if Mr Kavanagh leaves his dandelions to grow hoary-headed in his potato-beds'. Lir O'Connor replayed F. O'Brien's reading of 'potatoes' as 'good Runyon' (American slang) but 'very poor Kavanagh', and affected to doubt Kavanagh's existence. Na2 Co3 reprised O'Brien's pedantically pragmatic reading: 'Mr Kavanagh should severely reprimand his Muse for not having consulted the Department of Agriculture's leaflet on potatoes (sent free on application) before inspiring him'.¹² It is striking that a poem that would become a staple of Irish secondary education began its public life with this transit through a hall of mirrors. A later critic of O'Nolan would interpret the whole correspondence as hostile to Kavanagh, pitting metropolitan irony against his country simplicities with the message 'You are not of our class. You have not had our education'. But Cronin denies that Kavanagh took the japes personally.¹³ Of greatest interest is the response with which Kavanagh was finally allowed to bring the correspondence to a close. Only seven years older than O'Nolan, he assumed the tone of a wise, reflective elder, shaking his head sadly at the empty energy of his comic assailants. He had wondered in his original review about 'the empty virtuosity of artists who were expert in the art of saying nothing'. His almost self-parodically characteristic phrase for such artists was 'Ploughmen without land'. O'Nolan and friends were such figures, and Kavanagh asserted that their condition was a tragedy.¹⁴ This was one way to recast the rural / urban opposition. By this metaphor, Kavanagh's university-educated interlocutors lack the very thing that Kavanagh had possessed, and had made poetry from. By now, he too literally lacked 'land': he would spend most of his life in rickety Dublin digs. But his metaphor

¹¹ Ibid, F. O'Brien, letter to *Irish Times*, 29 July 1940, reprinted in *Myles before Myles*, 207-9.

¹² See *Myles before Myles*, 209, 212, 221.

¹³ See Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 110.

¹⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, letter to *Irish Times*, 7th August 1940, reprinted in *Myles before Myles*, 225-6.

perhaps implied that his background had bequeathed him a poetic substance that his erudite juniors would never now gain.

Counter-pastoral

Kavanagh had thus complicated the binary opposition and turned it on his mockers. Yet the opposition, by now, was hardly so simple in any case. For one thing, Kavanagh's poetry had often shown a looseness and irreverence that stretched any simple pastoral model. The ambiguous ending of his famous 'Inniskeen Road: July Evening' –

A road, a mile of kingdom, I am king
Of banks and stones and every blooming thing

– is an instance, with its suggestion of exasperation at the empty countryside.¹⁵ But the complication was deeper than this. Kavanagh had written pastoral, but by the 1940s he was no sponsor of the national self-image. He now wrote counter-pastoral. 'Stony Grey Soil' was published in the first issue of *The Bell* (October 1940), to which O'Nolan also contributed a report from the Dublin dog track. The poem strikes down the happy identification with the land found in some earlier poems. It may be taken as a retraction of 'Ploughman' a decade on:

You told me the plough was immortal!
O green-life-conquering plough!

The poet blames the soil of Monaghan itself for the mystification and for damaging his life – 'You burgled my bank of youth!'.¹⁶ But in his long poem *The Great Hunger* (1942) it is not merely the soil that is accused, but Irish society. The poem's fourteen sections circle the life of the potato farmer Patrick Maguire, whose life has been ruined by fear of sexuality and emotional involvement. Obeying his aged mother for decades, he has dedicated his energies to working farmland that has yielded him scant satisfaction. Kavanagh varies poetic forms, winding in and out metres and rhyme schemes as his poem repeatedly resets its sights and formal bearings. The overall effect remains of an extraordinary, perhaps unprecedented challenge within Irish poetry: a poem that reaches at will for unlikely rhymes or sudden shifts of gear, while starkly maintaining its scorn for the country's shibboleths. The poem retains a place for lyrical appreciation of nature –

Going along the river at the bend of Sunday
The trout played in the pools encouragement

¹⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Inniskeen Road: July Evening', *Collected Poems*, 15.

¹⁶ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Stony Grey Soil', *Collected Poems*, 38-9.

To jump in love though death bait the hook¹⁷

– along with its repeated glimpses of unattainable female beauty. But the pastoral impulse, here, has been betrayed by social convention; nature's abiding bounty cannot compete with life's limitations.

The Great Hunger was contemporary with two major counter-pastorals by O'Nolan. One, of which Kavanagh could have no inkling, was *The Third Policeman*. The novel's estranged depiction of the Irish Midlands as Hell is comparable, in a sense, to Kavanagh's project, which pictures Maguire still conscious in his coffin, surrounded by 'wet clod' and opening his eyes 'once in a million years'.¹⁸ The novel's cyclicity is also echoed in the poem, which commences with a hillside scene, tracks away from it and returns to it in the last section; and which sounds a doom-laden sense of the repetition of seasons and social rituals. More concretely still, Maguire

[...] would have changed the circle if he could,
The circle that was the grass track where he ran.
Twenty times a day he ran round the field
And still there was no winning post where the runner is cheered home.¹⁹

The peasant, Kavanagh writes in more general terms,

[...] 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.²⁰

'Hell goes round and round', O'Nolan had thought of calling his second novel. *The Great Hunger* does not rival its dizzying invention, but in their different ways both texts make the Irish countryside – so often revered in literature – into a place of recurrent dread.

The Great Hunger can be satirical, but is explicitly tragic. Kavanagh came to disparage the poem on this score, reckoning tragedy 'underdeveloped Comedy, not fully born'.²¹ That accusation cannot be levelled at O'Nolan's second major counter-pastoral: *The Poor Mouth*. Kavanagh's quietly despairing Maguire is matched by O'Nolan's Bonaparte O'Coonassa, a peasant of open heart and low intelligence. O'Nolan's Corkadoragha, a fictional region on Ireland's Western seaboard, offers abysmal conditions to match Kavanagh's Northern countryside. Between pigs in the

¹⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, 'The Great Hunger', *Collected Poems*, 76.

¹⁸ Kavanagh, 'Great Hunger', 88.

¹⁹ Kavanagh, 'Great Hunger', 70.

²⁰ Kavanagh, 'Great Hunger', 86.

²¹ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Author's Note' to *Collected Poems* (1964), in *Collected Poems* ed. Quinn, 292.

bed and endless rain, O'Coonassa is apt to brood upon 'the ill-luck and evil that had befallen the Gaels (and would always abide with them)'.²² If Kavanagh's epic was the counter-pastoral inversion of a poetic mode in which he had previously been able to partake, O'Nolan's short novel was an affectionate yet devastating parody of Irish peasant memoirs. Both works debilitated the idealization of peasant life: Kavanagh's by suggesting its true pain, O'Nolan's by making a cartoon of it.

Section XIII of *The Great Hunger* strikingly shifts focus from the potato-farmer's life to those who observe him from a distance: 'The world looks on / And talks of the peasant'. Kavanagh pictures motoring tourists who 'stop their cars to gape over the green bank into his fields'. Their view differs from what we have seen thus far:

The peasant has no worries;
In his little lyrical fields
He ploughs and sows[.]

For the amateur anthropologists, the peasantry remains the heart of unspoiled Ireland. This primitivist veneration sees rural life as 'the pool in which the poet dips': 'Without the peasant base civilization must die'. This external view is flatly contradicted by the rest of the poem. Kavanagh wished not only to condemn the conditions of rural life in themselves, but to indicate the mystificatory role that rural life played in versions of Ireland which were, if anything, broadcast from the city. His tourists

[...] touch the roots of the grass and feel renewed
When they grasp the steering wheels again.²³

Kavanagh's thought here is notably close to O'Nolan's. *The Poor Mouth*, too, while showing us the haplessness of the Gaels, most keenly satirizes the outsider's view of them. A wealthy visitor from Dublin arrives in Corkadoragha with a recording device, eager to capture Gaelic folklore before it dies out (for its like will never be there again). The locals are glad to let him buy them spirits 'to remove the shyness and disablement from the old people's tongues', and do not necessarily respond by telling folk tales. The ethnographer is thrilled to take away the grunts of a pig, which is assessed in Berlin: 'they never heard any fragment of Gaelic which was so good, so poetic and so obscure as it'.²⁴ One joke is the provincials' merciless exploitation of the naive metropolitan. (The same point applies to the Gaelic feis, staged in a later chapter to gain money from visiting 'Gaeligores'.) Another is the idea that the pig's grunts might be taken as Gaelic, which renders the Irish peasantry close to animals.

²² Myles na gCopaleen, *The Poor Mouth*, trans. Patrick C. Power (London: Flamingo, 1993), 46.

²³ Kavanagh, 'Great Hunger', 85.

²⁴ Myles na gCopaleen, *The Poor Mouth*, 43-5.

As in *The Great Hunger*, 'The peasant [...] is only one remove from the beasts he drives'.²⁵ But the deepest jest is that the pig's impenetrability is taken as a measure of cultural value: 'that good Gaelic is difficult but that the best Gaelic of all is well-nigh unintelligible'.²⁶ The outsiders seek to understand rural life, but are most impressed by it when it is most alien. The untranslatability of the peasant is the sign of his value. This makes more likely the drastic misreading dramatized more savagely in *The Great Hunger*.

Bards

Cronin makes a deeply perceptive remark about Kavanagh and O'Nolan. They shared, he notes, a 'proprietary claim' on Ireland, 'to be asserted against politicians and other usurpers'. If this amounted to 'megalomania', then '[it] might also be thought to be something both men had derived, in however inchoate a fashion, from their bardic forebears'.²⁷ They felt a certain public vocation for the writer: a right to speak out and strike stances about their society, whether or not society was listening.

One practical result of this was that both men wrote reams of copy for the press and magazines. The motive was partly financial necessity. But it clearly also reflected a desire to lead public conversation. O'Nolan began with *Comhthrom Féinne*, satirizing local targets when he was also a dominant voice at UCD's Literary & Historical Society. *Blather*, which he wrote and edited by friends in 1934-5, extensively spoofed public discourse. In *Cruiskeen Lawn*, O'Nolan found a platform from which he could notionally address the whole country, though his actual readership should not be overstated. Aside from *The Bell* and *Envoy*, Kavanagh was also a regular in the *Irish Times*; film reviewer for the *Catholic Standard*; columnist for the *Irish Press* and the *Irish Farmers' Journal*. Most strikingly, for three months in early 1952 Kavanagh and his brother Peter published the eight-page *Kavanagh's Weekly*: an extraordinary, loss-making investment of time and money to allow Kavanagh his own temporary outlet for still more literary and political critique. O'Nolan published in four issues too, as Myles na Gopaleen. It is telling that he used the platform to attack An Tóstal, a festival celebrating traditional Irish culture.²⁸ If both writers spoke to Ireland, it was never to assert Irishness: more often to deny or undercut it.

Kavanagh's Weekly was blistering about contemporary Ireland. Its first editorial described the 'Victory of Mediocrity' since the foundation of the Free State.²⁹ Week after week subsequently, the Kavanaghs attacked every instance they could find of corruption and mediocrity: in government, the press, cultural institutions. As Gerry Smyth observes, literary criticism was inseparable from social critique.³⁰ Kavanagh's fury (supported by his brother) was different from the

²⁵ Kavanagh, 'Great Hunger', 85.

²⁶ Myles na Gopaleen, *The Poor Mouth*, 44.

²⁷ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 191-2.

²⁸ Myles na Gopaleen, 'How Are You Off For Tostals?', *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 1: 5 (10 May 1952), 4.

²⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Victory of Mediocrity', *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 1:1 (12 April 1952), 1.

³⁰ Gerry Smyth, *Decolonisation and Criticism* (London: Pluto, 1998), 105.

sparkling comedy which has made Myles famous, but not so different from the more irascible polemic of Myles' later years. Both register an incredulous anger at Ireland's betrayal of itself: an ineluctable postcolonial hegemony of the mediocre and unprincipled. 'Being stupid and illiterate', Kavanagh declared, 'is the mark of respectability and responsibility' in modern Ireland.³¹ Displays of Irishness only worsened the situation. Kavanagh could make this sociologically specific, arguing that Protestants like Synge had painted on their Irishness as over-compensation for feeling foreign. But the point extended to all who now sought advancement through 'bucklepping'. In a 1947 review Kavanagh could assert that 'Ireland' was a 'myth and illusion', and that the 'Irishman' 'mystically, or poetically, does not exist'. His editors complained that his point was a sectarian one, scored against the Protestant F.R. Higgins. Kavanagh thus appended a note:

Who wants to be an Irish writer?

A man is what he is, and if there is some mystical quality in the Nation or the race it will ooze through his skin. [...] National characteristics are superficial qualities and are not the stuff with which the poet deals.³²

As Antoinette Quinn observes, Kavanagh's position is analogous to Wole Soyinka's critique of Negritude: 'A tiger does not proclaim its tigritude'.³³ Myles na gCopaleen was equally impatient: 'I know of no civilisation to which anything so self-conscious could be indigenous. Why go to the trouble of proving that you are Irish? Who has questioned this notorious fact? If, after all, you are not Irish, who is?'.³⁴ Both writers would posthumously become, to a degree, icons of Ireland, familiar sights of its literary tourist industry. It is thus striking that both were ferociously critical of any self-conscious performance of nationality. The role of the twentieth-century bard was not to sing of Irishness, but to expose its more enthusiastic manifestations as a demeaning delusion.

Human comedy

Kavanagh came to spurn tragedy, claiming comedy as the true goal. He ought logically to have envied a man who could write: 'The brother says the seals near Dublin do often come up out of the water at night-time and do be sittin above in the trams'.³⁵ But as Seamus Heaney would remark, Kavanagh's comedy really meant 'something broader, something closer to the French *comédie humaine*' than the wit in

³¹ Kavanagh, 'Victory of Mediocrity'.

³² Patrick Kavanagh, 'The Gallivanting Poet', *Irish Writing*, November 1947, reprinted in Peter Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper: A Biography of Patrick Kavanagh* (The Curragh: Goldsmith Press, 1979), 162-5.

³³ Antoinette Quinn, 'Patrick Kavanagh: Poetry and Independence', in Patrick Kavanagh, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), xxviii.

³⁴ Flann O'Brien, *At War*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Duckworth, 1999), 145.

³⁵ Myles na gCopaleen, *The Best of Myles* ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Picador, 1977), 53.

which Myles was matchless.³⁶ Kavanagh would view as a turning point his recuperation from lung cancer in 1955. He now declared himself released into happy carelessness, both emotional and formal. 'Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin' is the most celebrated demonstration of this mood. Its casually imprecise adjectives ('so stilly / Greeny') and complacent repetition ('water, / Canal water preferably') complement its air of letting go (the whole poem, while relishing life, accepts the prospect of death) and modest demands (a functional bench will suffice in place of a 'hero-courageous / Tomb').³⁷ Kavanagh issued a stream of kindred poems which acted as their own manifestos: 'wallow[ing] in the habitual, the banal'; 'No System, no Plan', 'Let words laugh'.³⁸

At a stretch, Kavanagh's late 'rebirth' could be likened to O'Nolan's Indian summer, from the republication of *At Swim* to *The Saints Go Cycling In*. Both were in worsening health, both returned to successful publication. O'Nolan's first novels in twenty years were matched by Kavanagh's first new book of verse in over a decade, and by new collected editions of his prose and poetry. Yet in truth Kavanagh's late flourish was the more rewarding, and more amenable to consideration under the rubric encouraged by Edward Said, of a 'late style' which might creatively burst the banks of an earlier aesthetic.³⁹ His late poetry alternates sensuality, theology, everyday modernity, in an open form akin to the Beat poets he had met on a trip to the United States. '[T]he only men in America that are alive are men like Jack Kerouac', he declared at an Illinois symposium, as roundly opinionated about a foreign country as his own.⁴⁰ The poetic result was a more productive response to the dawning Lemass era than O'Nolan managed. Kavanagh, four or five decades after the heroic phase of Irish modernism, found forms of verse that let him embrace life in a still changing Irish society. In this respect, O'Nolan's peerless parodies of pastoral did not necessarily have the last laugh. But both writers had long struggled quixotically against the cant and limitations that they found in Ireland. Profoundly different, their projects could yet be curiously parallel. As scholarship of O'Nolan becomes more historically detailed and concerned to reconstruct his cultural contexts, it can echo Kavanagh's lines:

Gods of the imagination bring back to life
The personality of those streets,
Not any streets
But the streets of nineteen-forty.⁴¹

³⁶ Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2008), 112.

³⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin', *Collected Poems*, 227.

³⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Canal Bank Walk' and 'Mermaid Tavern', *Collected Poems*, 224, 240.

³⁹ See Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

⁴⁰ Quoted in James Liddy, *The Doctor's House: An Autobiography* (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Publishing, 2004), 75.

⁴¹ Patrick Kavanagh, 'I Had a Future', *Collected Poems*, 186.