

LIFE MORE LOUSY THAN SAVAGE :

“The Great Hunger” by Patrick Kavanagh

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パトリック、カバナーの「大いなる飢え」の分析

— 悲惨なる人生 —

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If genius is gauged by creative achievement rather than by the quasi-astrology of standardized tests, its appearance is one of life's most curious manifestations. On one hand we have a Beethoven, a Matisse, a Yeats in whom genius developed continuously from youth through old age. On the other hand we have someone like the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh[1904-1967], a genius of a radically different sort. “The Great Hunger”[1942], a poem about the miseries of Irish rural life, is one of the best long narrative poems of this and all centuries. Yet reading through Kavanagh's *Collected Poems* [Martin Brian & O'Keefe, London, 1964, 1973] one finds no verse close to equaling “The Great Hunger” [34-65]. Though Kavanagh was to repudiate this poem, it represents the single burst of genius from a poetic voice warped into petty bitterness and self-pity by a life wracked by poverty, isolation and ill-health.

The Great Hunger is another name for the Great Famine of 1845-1848 caused by the potato blight and allowed to continue by the British government's ignorant faith in free market economics. Most of Ireland then was rural and living on the edge of starvation. The continued failure of the most important crop pushed millions over the edge and 750 thousand people died of hunger. Born of poor farming stock when the famine was within living memory, Kavanagh was well aware of the emotional power of his title--whose major theme is not famine but sexual frustration, and, in the deeper sense, perpetual loneliness.

“The Great Hunger” is about a plowman named Patrick Maguire who is successful enough to have men work for him but too poor to change his life. The poem begins in a bleak wind-seared Irish October when Maguire is in his mid-to-late sixties. Through flash-backs the poem looks at Maguire's unrequited longings for a wife and satisfaction of the flesh from youth to old age. In the final stanzas it returns to the present and then briefly looks ahead to Maguire's death and his eternal virginity. This is the bare bones of the poem. In fact little actually happens that is outstanding, and nothing that is the result of Maguire's volition.

In his “Author's Note” to the *Collected Poems*, Kavanagh writes that “*The Great Hunger* is a tragedy and Tragedy is underdeveloped Comedy, not fully born” [xiv]. The elements of the tragic (or pathetic) and the ridiculous are so thoroughly mixed throughout

the poem that neither can exist independently.

Part I begins : "Clay is the flesh and clay is the word : " a loud echo of religious epic and of Genesis. God made Adam out of clay ; through the act of God the Word was made flesh. The next stanzas deflate this solemn opening, and yet, in a perverse sort of way dignify it. Thus :

Clay is the word and clay is the flesh
 Where the potato-gatherers like mechanised scarecrows move
 Along the side-fall of the hill--Maguire and his men.
 If we watch them an hour is there anything we can prove
 Of life as it is broken-backed over the Book of Death? Here crows gabble over worms and
 frogs
 And the gulls like old newspapers are blown clear of the hedges, luckily.
 Is there some light of imagination in these wet clods?
 Or why do we stand here shivering? [I, 34]

A not so subtle blasphemy is present in these opening lines. But the "mechanized scarecrows" and "wet clods" cry real tears that fall on a real earth, not the earth of an urban romantic's Eden. The setting is pastoral, but no carefree shepherds tend gentle flocks of sheep fleecy and light as clouds. This is the real rural life of endless drudgery and little reward. Profundity is forced out of the grotty commonplace as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the sarcasms, the petty-blasphemies engender the pure terror and the pity of tragedy, or something close to it.

The poem is a mirror of real life and yet it is also like a tragic play :

Which of these men

Loved the light and the queen
 Too long virgin? Yesterday was summer. Who was it promised
 marriage to himself
 Before apples were hung from the ceilings for Hallowe'en?
 We will wait and watch the tragedy to the last curtain,
 Till the last soul passively like a bag of wet clay
 Rolls down the side of the hill, diverted by the angles
 Where the plough missed or a spade stands, straitening the way.
 [*ibid.*]

As in classical tragedy we know outcome before the performance begins. We are not watching to see "how it all turns out" but to experience the emotions of the characters' heroic struggles against Fate. From the first we know that Patrick Maguire is

not going to meet the woman of his dreams and live happily ever after. Kavanagh rubs that fact in :

But his passion became a plague
For he grew feeble bringing the vague
Women of his mind to lust nearness,
Once a week at least flesh must make an appearance.

So Maguire got tired
Of the no-target gun fired
And returned to his headland of carrots and cabbage
Where eunuchs can be men
And life is more lousy than savage. [II, 37]

But where's the struggle? And above all what's so heroic about this passive, onanistic peasant whose "happiest dream/Was to clean his arse/With perennial grass/On the bank of some summer stream..." [*ibid.*]?

Maguire's heroism, such as it is, is his endurance of the undurable ; it manifests itself most strongly in the gentle decency of his melancholy old age when he finally accepts that his life is hopeless. This is brought out with his frustrated and spiteful spinster sister acting as a foil :

His sister Mary Anne spat poison at the children
Who sometimes came to the door selling raffle tickets
For holy funds.
'Get out, you little tramps!' she would scream
As she shook to the hens an armful of crumbs,
But Patrick often put his hand deep down
In his trouser-pocket and fingered out a penny
Or maybe a tobacco-stained caramel.
'You're soft,' said the sister ; 'with other people's money
It's not a bit funny.' [XI, 49]

Does Patrick Maguire struggle against his fate? Yes and no. No on the outside. As a young man he is suspicious of female sexuality "as a rat near strange bread" [I , 35], This reticence grows into a longing that is never translated into action. His struggle is entirely internal. He wages it all of his life :

He gave himself another year,
Something was bound to happen before then--
The circle would break down
And he would curve the one to his own will.
A new rhythm is a new life
And in it marriage is hung and money.
He would be a new man walking through unbroken meadows
Of dawn in the year of One.

The poor peasant talking to himself in a stable door--
An ignorant peasant deep in dung. [IX, 44]

Of all the arts, poetry is the most culture-bound. Can anyone who does not know something of rural Ireland truly understand what is going on in "The Great Hunger"? The desperation that Kavanagh describes is real. It is something that you will soon come to know if you spend any time at all in a typical Irish village. You will hear (if you talk to the men) that women do not wish to marry farmers because the life is hard and that they migrate to the cities, the consequence being farming communities are short of women. This is certainly not unique to Ireland--the same is very much true of rural communities here in Japan. Yet, the one factor that remains uniquely and painfully evident in Irish rural depopulation is the lasting impact of the Great Famine. Before the famine the Irish population was over eight million. The famine created a diaspora that sent more than a million people overseas between 1846 and 1855, while Ireland's fertility rate fell to the lowest in Europe. When Kavanagh was born, Ireland's population was roughly half of what it had been prior to the potato famine. It had remained that way when he wrote "The Great Hunger." The low fertility level meant that poor Irish communities were practising self-imposed population control as a safe-guard against "over-population" in some future famine, which, given the strict sexual codes of the dominant Catholic Church, meant they abstained from sexual union (and therefore marriage) altogether.

While "The Great Hunger" may be seen as Kavanagh's attempt to explain the Irish farmer to the outside world, as Milton tried to "justify the ways of God to man," he is no social scientist. His bitterness is not historical but personal. He hates poverty, the narrowness of the provincial mind, and the strictures of Church doctrine, but offers no remedies. He laments. And sneers. This is the Kavanagh analysis of the low level of Irish fertility :

The young women ran wild
And dreamed of a child

Joy dreams though the fathers might forsake them
But no one would take them ;
No man could ever see
That their skirts had loosed buttons,
O the men were as blind as could be. [VIII, 43]

The Evil One of "The Great Hunger"--that made the men "blind"-- is the original Great Hunger but the poet avoids any direct mention of it. If there is a human villain in "The Great Hunger" it is Maguire's mother, a woman "tall hard as a Protestant spire," who "had a venomous drawl/And a wizened face like a moth-eaten leathérette" [III, 37]. We are told:

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. [II, 36]

It is the mother who "praised the man who made a field his bride" [I, 35], which is to say that it is she who initially broke Maguire's will to marry with her lies and her constant bullying that made him become "more woman than man" [XI, 47]. After his horrid mother dies, his horrid sister more or less takes over the job of brow-beating him.

There is no way around the fact that Kavanagh hates women and that he makes the hero of "The Great Hunger" a man completely dominated, domesticated, and castrated by mother and sister. No father is there to be a "role model" of self-assured masculinity. Not once is the father mentioned, neither in the narrative nor in Maguire's stream of consciousness. Maguire from beginning to end knows only women in his home life, though in the Biblical sense he knows none. What saves "The Great Hunger" from becoming mere peevish sexism, however, is the existential element of tragic choice. In youth, Maguire

...trembled his head away and ran free from the world's halter,
And thought himself wiser than any man in the townland
When he laughed over pints of porter
Of how he came free from every net spread
In the gaps of experience. He shook a knowing head

And pretended to his soul
That children are tedious in hurrying fields of April
Where men are spanging across wide furrows.
Lost in the passion that never needs a wife--
The pricks that pricked were the pointed pins of harrows
Children scream so loud that the crows could bring
The seed of an acre away with crow-rude jeers.
Patrick Maguire, he called his dog and he flung a stone in the air
And hallowed the birds away that were the birds of the years. [I, 34-35]

Is Maguire's bravado and real terror of female passion an innocent reconciliation with what he knows to be his fate, or does Maguire make his own fate by desiring but being too cowardly "to pluck the fantasies/From the fruited Tree of Life" [IV, 40]? Is he the product of Predestination or Free Will?

Of course, stepping back from the consciousness of Maguire and his world, the question is absurd. Were Ireland's peasants fated by the gods or whatever to take mothers like Maguire's seriously they would soon become extinct. This is as obvious as it is rational. But the magic of "The Great Hunger" draws us so totally into the mind and world of Maguire that the seemingly rational and obvious dissolve into the mists of the poem's "October reality." We wonder whether Maguire is foredoomed by fate or wrong choice when we come across lines like the following :

O grip, O grip of irregular fields ! No man escapes.
It could not be that back of the hills love was free
And ditches straight.
No monster hand lifted up children and put down apes
As here. [I, 35-36]

Or :

Once one day in June when he was walking
Among his cattle in the Yellow Meadow
He met a girl carrying a basket--
And he was then a young and heated fellow.
Too earnest, too earnest! He rushed beyond the thing
To the unreal. And he saw Sin
Written in letters larger than John Bunyan dreamt of.
For the strangled impulse there is no redemption. [IV, 39]

Whether the product of Predestination or Free Will, the frustration created by the possibility of happiness is ever-present. Maguire's life is an unending cycle of regrets:

O what was I doing when the procession passed?
Where was I looking?
Young women and men
And I might have joined them.
Who bent the coin of my destiny
That it stuck in the slot?
I remember a night we walked
Through the moon of Donaghmoyne,
Four of us seeking adventure,
It was midsummer forty years ago.
Now I know
The moment that gave the turn to my life.
O Christ! I am locked in a stable with pigs and cows for ever.
[XII, 51-52]

Tilling his fields, Maguire moves in a circle, ending where he begins, and his life too seems to move in a circle, longing always ending with longing: a plowman in Dante's Hell. Kavanagh compares him to "a goat tethered to the stump of a tree--/He circles around and around wondering why it should be" [XIII, 53]. The goat comparison is probably no accident, for the word "tragedy" means "goat song" in ancient Greek.

Before tragedy was stolen from the ancient peasant, and, along with his land, made the exclusive of property of nobles, it was a communal fertility rite in which a goat was sacrificed to the gods who watched over the communal fields. From this standpoint we could argue that Maguire is the communal sacrificial goat destined to eternal virginity so that the community will not be "over-populated" should the potato crop fail again.

But if we take the viewpoint that one lands in Hell not because of destiny but through poor choices, then we must assume that though Maguire's life moves in circles, destiny, history or the human condition does not.

No Eternal Return gives him a second chance. We can go further and, taking the Christian viewpoint, argue that Patrick Maguire fell from grace as a young man because of the deadliest sin of all--Pride--when "he thought himself wiser than any man in the townland" in refusing to marry.

We could, however, as easily condemn him from the pagan viewpoint by saying that he is eternally damned because he fails to "do what comes naturally."

We can look at Maguire from a Freudian perspective, drawing inferences from his mother being "Wife and mother in one," and perhaps make a case for some sort of psychological determinism.

A Marxist approach could intelligently form a synthetic view of Maguire: Man makes his own history but in the confines that history has set for him. Given the environmental limitations put on Maguire, his freedom of choice is severely limited but he still has the creative potential to change his life (as indeed Patrick Kavanagh did). In the end, though, there still remains the ultimate mystery of where outside influence ends and individual choice begins.

Whether one wishes to be consciously Marxist or not, one finds evidence enough that Kavanagh sees Maguire and his community as products of their environment. That is, the clay that they drill to plant their potatoes, the clay that perpetually sticks to their clothes and flesh, is the glue that holds their world view together and, as it were, cements body to soul.

Of course there is no intrinsic evidence that Kavanagh is a Marxist any more than there is that he is a Freudian or a Druid. Anyone looking for a trace of the revolutionary in Kavanagh has only the last enigmatic lines as encouragement: "The hungry fiend/Screams the apocalypse of clay/In every corner of this land."

Given the spirit of protest and rebellion in Irish literature--everything from Swift's "A Modest Proposal" to popular ballads like "The Wearing of the Green"--it is remarkable how unrevolutionary Kavanagh looks in comparison. In "The Great Hunger" there are no absentee landlords, capitalists, sneaky lawyers etc. who keep the peasant poor--nor lists of martyrs who gave their lives for Irish freedom over the centuries. Even the patrician W. B. Yeats seems more revolutionary in a poem such as "Easter, 1916" Like Maguire's father history does not exist in Maguire's world, while present events, like the World War, are reduced to banal pub talk by people whose "intellectual life consisted in reading/*Reynolds News* or the *Sunday Dispatch*,/With sometimes an old almanac brought down from the ceiling/Or a school reader brown with the droppings of thatch"[X, 46]

One must keep in mind that "The Great Hunger," published in 1942, is post-revolutionary. Ireland has broken free of English rule, but little has changed for the Irish peasantry, except that its life is now less savage if just as lousy. Given the bitterness of "The Great Hunger," it is not true that there is no real enemy that Kavanagh is attacking. But it is not the enemy outside--Great Britain--but the enemy within. Within Ireland and within each Irishman.

One aspect of this "enemy" is the Catholic Church, which for centuries was the guardian of the oppressed Irish under British rule. 'Now got to Mass and pray and confess your sins/And you'll have all the luck' Maguire's mother tells him [VII, 42]. Of course Maguire does not get the luck he so desperately wants. Instead, for his innocent devotion,

the Church returns a totalitarian control over him that goes beyond life into eternity :

If he opens his eyes once in a million years--
Through a crack in the crust of the earth he may see a face nodding
in
Or a woman's legs. Shut them again for that sight is sin. [XIV, 55].

Much of Kavanagh's rage is aimed at the pastoral and romantic traditions that turn the peasant into a noble child of nature :

The world looks on
And talks of the peasant ;
In his little lyrical fields
He ploughs and sows ;
He eats fresh food,
He loves fresh women,
His is his own master
As it was in the Beginning
The simpleness of peasant life.
The birds that sing for him are eternal choirs,
Everywhere he walks there are flowers.

....

The travellers touch the roots of the grass and feel renewed
When they grasp the steering wheels again. [XIII, 52-53]

The irony is heavy-handed, but right. Kavanagh is a real peasant poet, and as such, he is well qualified to deflate the stupid sentimentality of an urban civilization that is alienated from the realities of nature and rural life.

"The Great Hunger" is not in the political sense a revolutionary poem. It did apparently manage to insult a great many people. In his "Author's Note" to the *Collected Poems*, he writes that shortly after "The Great Hunger" was published :

... a couple of hefty lads came to my lonely shieling on Pembroke Road. One of them had a copy of the poem behind his back. He brought it to the front and asked me, 'Did you write that?' He was a policeman. [xiv]

Unfortunately Kavanagh does not tell us what he replied and what the policemen and Irish law consequently did with him and his poem. He only says :

It may seem shocking to the devotee of liberalism if I say that the policeman was right. For a poet in his true detachment is impervious to policemen. There is something wrong with a work of art, some kinetic vulgarity in it when it is visible to policemen. [*ibid.*]

These are the words of a sick old man. Do they represent the younger Kavanagh of 1942? If so, we see how much Kavanagh is of the Maguire mentality, settling for the lousy to avoid the savage. Was it at that moment that the coin of Kavanagh's poetic destiny was bent?

Rationalizing that the poet was somehow above politics, did he sacrifice his poetic genius?

No political revolutionary, Kavanagh for one shining moment was a revolutionary in another sense. By entering the inner life of the common man and finding the profound in seemingly trivial everyday existence, he did for poetry what James Joyce did for the novel. And perhaps he did a better job of it in certain ways.

There are similarities between city dweller Leopold Bloom, the hero of *Ulysses*, and countryman Patrick Maguire--both are lonely celibate ononists--but the dissimilarities are greater. Joyce's common man is alienated from Dublin society because of his Jewish background as well as his personal eccentricities. His celibacy is self-willed: a reaction to the death of his son Rudy. In fact, Bloom is not really a common man in the sense of being a typical Irishman or even a typical Dubliner. Patrick Maguire, on the other hand, is as typical of the melancholy rural Irishman as any character can be. Unlike Bloom, he is not alienated from his community in terms of not being accepted. He is in his social life, such as it is, a respected citizen, both as a farmer and a member of the Church. Alone, he sins by masterbating and thinking lewd thoughts; in public he is the model of Catholic piety:

His face set like an old judge's pose :
 Respectability and righteousness,
 Stand for no nonsense.
 The priest from the alter called Patrick Maguire's name
 To hold the collecting-box in the chapel door
 During all the Sundays of May.
 His neighbors envied him his holy rise,
 But he walked down from the church with affected indifference
 And took the measure of heaven angle-wise. [XI, 48]

Bloom is alienated because he is an outsider, Maguire because he is an insider. Maguire's community sees nothing perverse about a man being denied the opportunity to reproduce himself. Consequently, it offers him no solace.

In appearance the tragi-comic Bloom seems an incomplete man. His wife is adulterous, he has little respect from the world, nor does he know lasting friendship. Yet at the end of *Ulysses*, we find that he can go beyond the tragic aspects of his life and think of the day comprising the novel as a good one. In the end his wife, Molly, tells herself that of all the men she loved, Leopold was the best. Maguire has his potentially comic elements when we think of him in his dirty farmer's clothes but with his pipe and "clay-wattled moustache" [I, 35]: an "ignorant peasant deep in dung," yet possessing those touches of masculine vanity and urbanity that make one think of Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp. Yet, the Little Tramp too is complete: he is what he wants to be and in the end he gets the girl or at least kicks the rich man in the plants. The seemingly comic elements in Maguire make him all the more tragic. They all contribute to our sense of Maguire's incompleteness: the seemingly successful member of the community who in his soul is a wreck, the farmer who "lives that his little fields may stay fertile when his own body/Is spread in the bottom of a ditch under two coulters crossed in Christ's name" [I, 35]--but who is left out of the procreative process. Comedy skirts the tragic but ends happily--traditionally with a marriage or a promise of marriage. Tragedy ends with death. Though we have a foreshadowing of his death, we leave Maguire at the end of "The Great Hunger" not dead but in a state of death-in-life:

He stands in the doorway of his house
 A ragged sculpture of the wind.
 October creaks the rotted mattress,
 The bedposts fall. No hope. No lust. [XIV, 55]

Whether "The Great Hunger" is bona fide tragedy or not, it is a wonderful piece of reportage that looks at peasant society through a peasant poet's eyes. No matter how badly he offended the eternal peasant roots of Ireland, Kavanagh knew the hard reality of what the peasant must sacrifice to till Ireland's photogenic irregular fields.

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