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A Poet's Country
Selected Prose

By Patrick Kavanagh
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In 2000 *The Irish Times* published a list of the favorite poems of the Irish people. Of the first fifty, ten were by Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967). His "Raglan Road," set to a traditional air and recorded variously by The Dubliners, Van Morrison, and Joan Osborne, is loved around the world: "And I said let grief be a fallen leaf at the dawning of the day." From the fields and the farm life of Inniskeen, one of ten children, a dropout at thirteen, Kavanagh is reckoned by Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney to be, beside Yeats, one of the two most influential Irish poets of the twentieth century.

Like his poems, Kavanagh's prose is characterized by an overwhelming love for the land, the fields and hills of home achieving the status of a beloved being: "Ah, the fields looked at me more than I at them, and at this moment they are still staring at me." Inniskeen provided Kavanagh with a sense of belonging he could never find among his fellow creatures: "I think now that the Spirit of Place has a more powerful attraction for us than friends or relations. A tree, a stone or a field recreates for us the happiest—and the saddest which is the same thing—moments of our lives—in other words, our moments of most intense experience." He refers to the countryside in terms of deepest affection: "Standing on the side of a hill in Monaghan, an indifferent landscape of crooked lanes and little humpy hills covered with whins [rocks], I found love, the kind of love that purifies, a sort of Divine love."

Kavanagh had a sure sense of himself as a God-made creature in a God-permeated world, and believed that great poets "attempt something more than this earthly thing." His criticism of Auden, whom he greatly admired, is the "possible defect" of his poems' being "entirely earth-born" with "no (or very few) intimations of anything more." Yet he understood the perils of trying to impart a lesson by way of art and noted the amorality of most great writers, including Shakespeare and Homer: "A great poet is a monster who eats up everything." Though he praises Yeats as "a marvelous technician" who "could produce magic in verse almost automatically," Kavanagh faults him for having "no central loyalty—except to his poetry," and, perhaps more significantly, for being "too detached, too careful, too prudent to be human": "Yeats wrote at a consistently high level but one single scream of the heart that pierces heaven he could never reach."

A Poet's Country expresses poignantly the predicament of the artist in a world that needs him in the long run, but has little use for him in the short. When Kavanagh decided to leave behind the threshing of the fields in county Monaghan to take up his true vocation of poetry (“threshing the stars of bright truth from their husks of material words”), he could not have known, quite, what it would mean to his life. Looking back, he came to understand something of what he had given up: “A man (I am thinking of myself) innocently dabbles in words and rhymes and finds that it is his life. Versifying activity leads him away from the paths of conventional unhappiness.” He writes that “poetry made [him] a sort of outcast” and comes to the strange realization, ultimately clear-sighted and accepting more than bitter, that “I do not believe in sacrifice and yet it seems I was sacrificed.”

Kavanagh never achieved a high level of recognition outside of Ireland and was haunted by poverty throughout his life. A difficult, sometimes arrogant, man, with all the quirks of genius (“there was some kink in me, put there by Verse”), Kavanagh often felt friendless and isolated in the world. Undervalued in his lifetime, he was mocked by the locals for his dreams of being a poet (“the keynote to Irish thinking is summed up in the phrase ‘And where will that get him?’ when someone refers to the achievements of a great poet or thinker”). Yet it is through his work that perhaps the most authentic and best-loved evocation of rural life has come over the green fields and up the lane and home to a lasting place in Irish literature. There is no Patrick Kavanagh without the poet; these prose writings lead always back to Inniskeen and the poems it gave rise to, “Saying here is the place of Love / And you will never get over it quite.”

– Ann Stapleton