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*Marjan Shokouhi*

## **'If you even go to Dublin town...': Kavanagh's urban flânerie and the Irish capital.**

### **Introduction**

Memories and cityscapes are wrought together in an intricate fashion. The cultural repertoire of the Irish people is full of memories of a troubled past, which is now stretched toward an uncertain future in the current state of economic depression and instability. The death of the Celtic Tiger, which was heralded by Ireland's official entry to the Eurozone recession in September 2008, put an end to Ireland's economic boom, which had started since 1995. The recession has increased the unemployment rates and contracted Ireland's GDP by an average of fourteen percent in 2012 (*Quarterly Economic Commentary* 2012). As the heart of the Celtic Tiger, Dublin was affected by the country's economic boom which fostered new opportunities and increased immigration rates. Likewise, but in the opposite direction, the recession has been affecting Dublin's status as a metropolitan capital; urban sprawl, traffic jam, housing shortage, unemployment, and inflation are the leftovers of the Celtic Tiger period in the city. Yet, it is not the first time that Dublin's socio-cultural identity has been in a state of negotiation among various economic and political factors. The wind of change blowing throughout Europe in recent years is a reminder of the continent's turbulent history in the first half of the twentieth century. The memories of two World Wars, civil conflicts in multiple European countries, downfall of the empires and the rise of new Capitalism are still alive in the European repertoire of cities like Dublin.

Going some seven decades back to the outbreak of World War II, Dublin was shattered by the confusion regarding Ireland's political position during the War period, also known as the Emergency. The Parliament of Ireland adopted a neutral policy at the instigation of Éamon de Valera, the president of the Irish Free State, supported by *Fianna Fáil*. Ireland refrained from joining either the Allies or the Axis, despite the possibility of invasion from both Germany and Britain. The controversial decision remained the same even during the Battle of France, when England's envoy, Malcolm MacDonald proposed

an end to the Partition of Ireland if the Free State was willing to abandon neutrality and join the armed forces against Germany and Italy.

The disastrous events during the war and Ireland's firm decision to retain neutrality paralyzed the romantic imagination of writers who had looked at Ireland, especially the rural west, as a source of solace and inspiration. Their outlook was but an escape from the harsh realities of modern times to the secure romanticized past of the country houses, the Gaelic-speaking peasants, and all that was equal to 'Irishness' in a Yeatsian fashion. When Germany invaded Poland, Louis MacNeice was in Galway writing a book on the poetry of W. B. Yeats. The news made Galway as 'unreal' for the poet as "Yeats and his poetry." Yet he did not miss the occasion where the Irish literati were gathered in a pub discussing the nuances of Irish verse, as nothing seemed to be more real than poetry or as he believed "If war is the test of reality, then all poetry is unreal; but in that sense unreality is a virtue" (MacNeice 1941, 2).

What would make the central discussion in the present essay is not, however, the reaction of Louis MacNeice or some of the more politically involved writers of the time; but of a poet who wove a new web of memory around the streets of post-war Dublin, creating a map to be remembered and followed by his contemporaries and future generations. Patrick Kavanagh, less associated with the poets of his own era, which more or less shared leftist sympathies, nor fitting the 'peasant bard' stereotype of the previous generation, picked his subject matters from the streets of Dublin, creating a fresh ambiance, one that was, 'virtuously unreal', as MacNeice might have hinted. His solution was not a recess to the past, but seeing the present through a new vista; creating memories, which were somatic and evolving like the transient moment. These memories were captured in the poetic sketches of the walking poet like pictures recorded on a photographer's camera— immortalized. The rest of this essay sets Kavanagh's *flânerie* in Dublin as an example of how poetry could define/redefine our understanding of urban life by reconstructing images that are not impaired by propaganda and politicized media coverage.

## Cities and Memories

Cities are an inescapable dimension of modern urban existence. Our quotidian life and sense of identity revolve around urban sites, street scenes, buildings, monuments, parks and shopping malls. Yet if asked about the same street they pass through on a daily basis, few people tend to remember what actually happened around them. The thirsty-for-speed phenomenon of city life does not leave much space for the retention of memories and individual perceptions. Modern commuting and transportation systems leave the city dweller a paralyzed figure in constant movement, unable to pause for a moment and perceive his/her surroundings. Our limited understanding of the world is further impaired by the mass media's politically simulated images behind which the question of reality finds no ultimate answer.

A city could be associated with pleasant images of a tranquil holiday resort or unpleasantly remembered as a place of death and destruction. Cities do not have fixed identities; the example of Baghdad as the capital of a developing middle-eastern country in constant war and turmoil does not bear much resemblance to the fairylore city of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. But which picture do we tend to associate cities with?

Dublin's lofty status as the "city of Literature" in 2010 (UNESCO 2010), reflects the constant negotiation of the city's cultural identity under socio-political and economic changes. Dublin's political importance started with the Viking Settlement of 841 and continues throughout the turbulent eras of Irish history to the present time. Inseparable from this political existence, Dublin also lives a cultural life which has been the heritage of centuries of tradition in arts and literature. The twentieth century alone has witnessed the birth and the rise to immortality of many Irish artists, novelists, poets, and dramatists whose names are now remembered in street corners or commemorated in urban monuments. In the words of Gerry Smyth (2012), "like any other city, 'Dublin' is a constantly evolving possibility, both a physical place and an imaginary construct (Lefebvre); and the cultural representation of the city plays a significant role in that ambivalent process" (205).

Patrick Kavanagh entered the intellectual life of the Dublin society before actually settling in the capital. The young poet had already published in some of the leading Dublin newspapers and journals such as *Irish Independent* or *Dublin University Review*. *The Ploughman and Other Poems* and *Green Fool* were respectively published in 1936 and 1938, thus buying the aspiring poet some recognition in the Dublin literary circles, though more as the long expected 'peasant bard' of the Literary Revival than an 'Irish' poet with no particular labels. But what had turned Dublin city into a site of continual arrivals and departures?

Dublin remained the major literary centre up to the period just before the Second World War (1921-1939), in regards to the printing and publishing industry in Ireland compared to her rival, Belfast, in the North. The literary and cultural institutions working in Dublin at the time included "The National Library of Ireland, The National museum, The National Gallery, The Royal Irish Academy, and The Royal Hibernian Academy" (487). However, London and New York were still the first publishing markets since the "Censorship of Publications Act, 1929" had led to an approximate number of 120 books being banned each year, among which we find the works of Joyce, Beckett, Faulkner and Hemingway, to name a few. Censorship itself remained the main cause of tension between writers and society in the Republic "prior to 1957" (Mercier 2003, 505).

The periodicals published inside the Irish borders also did not fit the pursuits of the leading Irish scholars and intellectuals at the time. During its short period of publication, *AE's Irish Statesman* remained "the most important Irish intellectual journal" (Mercier 2003, 490) of the time. Following the Free State's turbulent and unstable political atmosphere of post-1922, Dublin witnessed an emerging realism after a bitter disillusionment. Frank O'Connor, Francis Stuart, and Peadar O'Donnell were imprisoned; Liam O'Flaherty and Sean O'Faolain left the country, and it was in such an atmosphere that Kavanagh's first disillusioning experiences began in Dublin.

The tension between writers and Ireland eased during the war. Irish writers became "less exile-prone" after "1940, for reasons both psychological and economic." Little by little the atmosphere was becoming one of support. As the foreign markets for the

publication of Irish works were diminishing, those who had remained in Ireland found themselves indebted to their country, which had now turned to be their “alternative source of income.” Radio Éireann, *The Irish Times* and other Dublin papers and The Abbey Theatre among others tended to help the “prose writers—and sometime poets too” (Mercier 2003, 503).

The Irish fiction of the time represented Ireland as some scattered isles with some parts of the mainland. The fictional map of Ireland represented a big West Coast and almost no North or Centre. Dublin did not seem a popular subject matter except for a few writers such as Joyce and O’Flaherty. Although, the capital was home to many of the poets of the period, no one seemed to be as seriously involved in the life of the city as the countryside Northern poet, Kavanagh. Just as Paris had turned into a subject matter for lyric poetry, Dublin became Kavanagh’s Paris and an ultimate source of inspiration. Baudelaire’s poetry, according to Walter Benjamin (1999), is not a commemoration or a “hymn to the homeland,” but “the gaze of the allegorist [...] the gaze of the alienated man [...] the gaze of the *flâneur*” (10). What was, then, the situation of Kavanagh in the Metropolis?

### **The *Flâneur* in Dublin**

Kavanagh “had no belief in the virtue of a place” (Kavanagh 2003, 309). His urban poetry, though highly place-conscious, could not be categorized under the same class of poetry, which aimed at representing Ireland for the purpose of implementing a certain identity pattern, i.e. ‘the myth of ‘Irishness’. According to Seamus Heaney (1981), “The ‘matter of Ireland’, mythic, historical or literary, forms no significant part of [Kavanagh’s] material” (115). One can say that he had already moved on from the whole anxiety associated with representing Eire. His was the recreation of a dwelling devoid of “cultural anxiety” (Heaney 1988, 9).

Kavanagh’s relationship with the capital was a peculiar one, not far from his attitude towards his native Monaghan. His prose essays refer to Dublin as “malignant Dublin” (Kavanagh 2003, 307); Dubliners are named as “heartless philistines” (Quinn 2001, xi); yet

his mature poetry speaks more obliquely. Dublin could be a jungle where he would walk through “Pembroke Road”, “As far as Ballsbridge”, “Down Clyde to Waterloo” until “Baggot Street Bridge” (*Collected Poems* 149). It could represent resurrection by the waterside, where he would like to be commemorated on “a canal-bank seat for the passer-by” (227), and where he asks the reader to look for him after his death. In short, it is in Dublin more than anywhere else, that Kavanagh’s poetics matures and his love/hate relationship with his environment comes to reconciliation.

Like the city dweller, Kavanagh was in constant movement, but of a slower kind; the one that urges you to stop, stare, sit, and contemplate— namely, walking. His poetry is full of references to the acts of walking and observing. “Leaves of Grass”, “October”, “Is”, “Canal Bank Walk”, “Song at Fifty”, “Yellow Vestment”, “Living in the Country”, “New Item”, “The Poets Ready Reckoner”, “A Summer Morning Walk”, “Jungle”, “Tale of Two Cities”, and “Auditors In” are instances of Kavanagh’s mature poetry which set the poet at the heart of urban existence, on the streets. Most of Kavanagh’s urban poetry includes elements of *flânerie* or refers to idling and observing, explicitly or implicitly.

Walter Benjamin had acknowledged the death of the *flâneur* by the advent of Modernity; however, if we trace the origins and influences of *flânerie* out of its nineteenth century Parisian context, the arcades, and Baudelaire, the role comes alive before and after its popularity, in and outside Paris. The term, *flâneur*, entered the English language probably in 1854 in the August edition of *Harper’s Magazine*, which referred to window shopping in the sunny Metropolitan city as an act of *flânerie*. As a literary device, *flânerie* could be traced back in “survey” or “urban panoramas” books in the sixteenth-century (Brand, cited in Carlaw 2008, 17). Anke Gleber (1999) in *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flânerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture*, also investigates the debut and practice of *flânerie* out of the nineteenth-century Parisian context.

The *flâneur* is someone between *le badaud* and *l’homme de foules* in Baudelaire’s vocabulary. According to time and space, his role oscillates in the spectrum that chronologically extends from *le badaud* on the left to *l’homme de foules* on the right. Both *le badaud* and *l’homme de foules* are passive observers who are immersed in the throng. *Le*

*badaud* is a man who is interested in the urban sphere only superficially and *l'homme de foules* is consumed with the undifferentiated public in “a quasi-mystic” or “quasi-orgasmic” fusion (Burton 1994, 5). The *flâneur*, however, is not as alienated or engaged as *le badaud* and *l'homme de foules*. “Sometimes he is a poet; more often he comes closer to the novelist or the moralist; he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains,” thus explains Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (1995: 4, 5).

Keith Tester (1994) explores *flânerie* in relation with seeking identity in urban existence.

Consequently, *flânerie* can after Baudelaire, be understood as the activity of the sovereign spectator going about the city in order to find the things which will occupy his gaze and thus complete his otherwise incomplete identity; satisfy his otherwise dissatisfied existence; replace the sense of bereavement with a sense of life. (7)

Similar to “the sovereign spectator,” who is after satisfying his gaze and “dissatisfied existence,” Kavanagh’s daily walk represented his dissatisfaction with his identity as a poet with rural roots and urban ambitions. Those passing moments where he was not walking, but rather sitting down and sketching his poetic pictures, are the embodiment of temporal satisfaction. Yet, this transience is what makes the *flâneur* move back to the streets and resume walking. Referring to Roquentin in Sartre’s *Nausea*, Tester defines *flânerie* as *doing* rather than *being*. Satisfaction in *being* occurs when the *flâneur* stops temporarily before resuming his activity.

But, inevitably, as soon as Roquentin starts *doing* once again, as soon as he resumes his stroll, the feeling of satisfaction evaporates. Once again, the urban landscape becomes a place of dissatisfaction and of a searching not finding. For the *flâneur*, satisfaction could be anywhere; but that only means that satisfaction is most certainly not here. (Tester 1994, 10)

In his study of Joyce (2001), Luke Gibbons mentions the idea of the *Irish flâneur*. Stephen Dedalus is an example of an idle stroller who observes the urban environment in



a rather disinterested manner. *Flânerie* is another form of national memory, yet contrasted with what Nietzsche calls “the monumental memory,” associated with landmarks, statues and sculptures erected in the memory of heroes in a certain period. “In their most authoritative, stately forms,” Gibbons writes, “commemoration ceremonies, like monuments, institutionalise habit at the heart of the public sphere, attempting not just to represent the past but to freeze it through pomp and ritual” (154). The memories of the *flâneur*, on the other hand, are somatic, involuntary, and transitory. They are associated with movement, with doing rather than being, as already mentioned.

The *flâneur* has a “detached attitude” to the objects and people he observes in the city; “a short step away from isolation and alienation” (Tester 1994, 6). The relationship of mature Kavanagh with his urban surrounding is also that of disinterest in a way that the ebb and flow of the city reach him, but do not drown him. Being a target of harsh criticism, Kavanagh’s poetic merits were downplayed at times. “But for many years I have learned not to care” wrote Kavanagh in his introductory note to his *Collected Poems* published in 1964 (291). Observation is the key target for the poet-*flâneur*. The poem “Is”, where he recorded “The life of a street”, clearly expresses Kavanagh’s philosophy of *not caring* and his belief in the essence and importance of watching, for “The only true teaching/Subsists in watching/Things moving or just colour/ Without the comment from the scholar” (*Collected Poems* 222).

However, Kavanagh’s *flânerie* does not originate in the city. Although *flânerie* is first and foremost associated with the urban sphere, Kavanagh could be called a ‘rural *flâneur*’. Tarry in *Tarry Flynn* is an early example of this rural observer through whom the narrator gives us fresh accounts of his quotidian environment, the people, and the beauties of the countryside amongst the ordeals of farm life. He is not a passive observer; like Kavanagh the urban poet, Tarry is in constant search of beauty, meaning and importance, and interestingly enough he finds it in odd places:

He stooped down under the belly of the animal to catch the girth strap and as he did he caught a glimpse of the morning sun coming down the valley; it glinted on the swamp and the sedge and flowers caught a meaning for him. That was his meaning. Having found it suddenly, the tying of the girth and the putting of the mare in the cart and every little act

became a wonderful miraculous work. It made him very proud too and in some ways impossible. Other important things did not seem important at all. (*Tarry Flynn*, 38)

This appreciation of beauty and finding meaning and importance in ordinary things is almost reminiscent of poems such as the Canal Bank Sonnets, "Auditors In", and "Is" which appear in Kavanagh's later poetry. Like Tarry who finds beauty and importance under the belly of a horse, the mature Kavanagh finds it in odd places as well. In the poem "Hospital" the "functional ward in a chest hospital," the cubicles, washbasins, the staircase, the graveled yard, and all that might be called "an art lover's woe," are named with love: "But nothing whatever is by love debarred/The common and banal her heat can know" (*Collected Poems* 217).

Kavanagh's comparison of the tourist and the poet in "A Poet's Country" brings the role of the poet as *flâneur* to the forefront of his involvement with the city and the countryside. "No poet ever travelled in search of beauty," he wrote, that beauty comes "obliquely" when you are busy with common things. The tourist, however, "is in a hurry; he demands quick returns of the picturesque and the obvious" (Kavanagh 2003: 28, 29). In other words, the tourist is in search of landmarks; his/her map points to places which have already been remembered or commemorated for a reason. The poet's memory, on the other hand, is regenerated, altered, and enhanced by every new observation. He/she is not following a map; he/she is the creator of one.

Kavanagh's poetry, though associated with 'the common and the banal,' escapes the boredom of routine life. His act of walking is that of subversion — the subversion of 'sight-seeing'. According to Hessel, "The *flâneur* prefers *site* to *sight-seeing*, unearthing the hidden histories and unexplained details of what is presented to him" (cited in Gibbons 2001, 149). Beauty is redefined in Kavanagh's mature poetry "as not being first and foremost linked to the land, but as being rather primordially tied to the suchness of things" (Rowley 2009, 98). In other words, Kavanagh changed from "innocent celebrant of nature and her beauties to wry observer of human nature in the cities" (94).

Gradually, Baggot Street Bridge and the Grand Canal in Dublin turned into Kavanagh's new landscape. These locations were the *flâneur's* routine walk. In "If Ever You

Go to Dublin Town”, Kavanagh asks posterity to look for him not in the countryside but on Baggot Street or on Pembroke Road and in a pub rather than a farm. According to Tomaney (2010), these locations became a “setting for the final development of the parochial ethic” (321), an ethic which is based on “sensitive courage and the right kind of sensitive humility” according to the poet himself (2003, 237). In terms of *flânerie*, Kavanagh had turned into a “walking encyclopedia, the literal embodiment of shifting signifiers” (Gibbons 2001, 151). The *flâneur’s* map of Dublin extended from the Grand Canal to Raglan Road, passing through Pembroke Road and Baggot Street.

Among the great number of published materials, various archival documents in city councils, brochures, booklets, and websites that address Dublin’s urban history and local/national identity, literary texts leave a certain gap that encourages the audience to participate in the process of constructing meaning. This is what makes Kavanagh’s accounts of Dublin memorable, turning locations such as Raglan Road and the Canal Bank district places where to look for memory, tradition, and history. By choosing Dublin as his subject matter, Kavanagh liberated the Irish poetry from the “romantic nostalgia” (Gibbons 2001, 139) of the previous generation and their dramatized ‘Irishness’ under the influence of the Irish Literary Revival. Kavanagh’s aesthetics as a Dubliner is the ultimate evolution of his rural-pastoral tradition as cityscapes replace rural landscapes, bringing cities such as Dublin to the forefront of Irish cultural identity.

## Conclusion

The urban history of twentieth-century Dublin takes us to the constant mapping and remapping of her street corners, monuments, houses, and green spaces. The demolition of Georgian buildings in the 1950s and 1960s is one example among many to showcase the role of politics in the living stream of city life. The profit making investors involved in the project were supported by political extremists, who wanted to wipe out the last remnants of the British rule in Ireland. The destruction of Nelson Pillar in the middle of O’Connell

Street or the preservation of Temple Bar as a cultural centre in Dublin are other examples that prove the mutability of urban identity and the influence of political, religious, and cultural parties on urban design and consequently what we associate cities with.

The recession of the early twenty-first century has undoubtedly influenced Dublin's socio-cultural identity alongside political and economic changes. The city will continue to be a port of arrivals and departures, hosting or alienating writers and artists in the constant wave of migration that characterizes Ireland. In the years to come, the work of the post-Tiger generation artists and writers will embody new constructions of Ireland's cultural identity, testifying the country's vibrant cultural scene that continues to evolve despite the current economic depression.

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