

‘God Bless the Child’: Unearthing the Dissident Potential of the Jazz Aesthetic in Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger*

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*Them that’s got shall have
Them that’s not shall lose
So the Bible said and still it is news*

— Billie Holiday, *God Bless the Child*

For many thousands around the world, jazz music provided the essential soundtrack for the interwar period. This was certainly not the case for Patrick Kavanagh and his compatriots in Ireland, however, where those in authority railed against the perceived depravity of what they deemed a foreign and ungodly music. Indeed, as the rest of Europe found itself teetering on the brink of a Second World War after German troops invaded Poland on September 1st 1939, these same authorities declared a national state of emergency in Ireland. What immediately followed was the enactment of the *Emergency Powers Act (EPA)*, which laid the foundation to ensure that Ireland could maintain neutral status throughout ‘The Emergency’. These constitutional amendments accorded the Irish Government a number of extraordinary powers; in fact, critics such as Tony Gray have gone so far as to suggest that these measures ‘effectively abolished democracy for the period’ (1997, p. 5). Under the new statutes, the State could, for example, ‘authorise and provide for the censorship or complete suspension of communication, whether public or private’ (*EPA*, 1939, 2h). The State also reserved the right to ‘prohibit the publication or spreading of subversive statements and propaganda’ and to ‘authorise and provide for the control and censorship of newspapers and periodicals’ (*EPA*, 1939, 2i). These emergency orders made further provisions for ‘the detention, or arrest without warrant, of persons where such detention is, in the opinion of a Minister, necessary or expedient in the interests of public safety or the preservation of the State’ (*EPA*, 1939, 2k). Although the provisions concerning arrest and internment were generally applicable only to ‘persons other than natural-born Irish citizens’ (*EPA*, 1939, 2k), there was no such stipulation set in the amendment that further authorised ‘the arrest without warrant of persons who are charged with or are suspected of having committed or being about to commit [...] an offence under any section of this Act or any other specified crime or offence’ (*EPA*, 1939, 2m). In addition, the State also reserved the right to carefully manage ‘all or any services essential to life’ (*EPA*, 1939, 2a), which in effect granted the government total control over all matters pertaining to commerce and the Irish economy.

Ireland’s position was quite understandably eyed with some suspicion by those who allied themselves against the threat posed by Hitler’s Germany, as evidenced by the following excerpt from a 1943 report compiled by the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS):

The Irish Roman Catholic looks upon the United States by and large as an immoral, irreligious, materialistic Protestant country chosen by God to be led along paths of salvation by the Irish and Irish-American Roman Catholic Clergy.

The immorality of our movies, the luxury of our daily lives, the vulgarity of our music and the lack of all forms of discipline in the conduct of our human relationships: these are all adduced by the Irish as proofs of our wickedness, and now that thousands of those ‘wicked’ Americans are occupying Northern Ireland the suspicion and hostility of the Irish Roman Catholic Church have reached an all-time high.¹ Itself a body organised and controlled on authoritarian lines, the Irish Roman Catholic Church, by its affiliations with Franco Spain and Mussolini Italy, its open adulation of the Salazar regime in Portugal and of the Pétain Land-Labor-Family cry, is in large part responsible for the complete concealment of the real nature of continental Fascism from the mass of Irish people. (Wills, 2007, p. 345)

This is, of course, something of an overestimation. As Clair Wills has quite rightly pointed out, there were many Irish Catholics who disapproved of ‘the corrosive individualism and materialism of modern society, without at all approving of the police states on the continent’ (2007, p. 346). And for all the extraordinary powers Éamon de Valera’s government possessed, there were a number of important differences between the Irish State and the European regimes namechecked here in this report; Ireland was not a one-party state, nor was there the kind of blending of the military and the party-political, as there was most notably in Italy and Germany. However, Wills may also have underestimated the matter in suggesting that the OSS were wholly ‘misguided’ to conclude that there was ‘no real difference between authoritarian Catholic thought and totalitarianism’ (2007, p. 345). There is an equally important distinction to be made between the respective characteristics of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. As Hannah Arendt has observed, the former principally seek to maintain *authority* over their citizens, and so they tend to concern themselves only with public expressions of individuality; whereas the latter seek to exert *total* control over the minds of their subjects, thus demanding that the subject ‘surrenders his inner freedom as he surrenders his freedom of movement when he bows down to an outward tyranny’ (1953, p. 320). It is on this key point that Irish Catholic culture most noticeably blurred the boundaries between authoritarianism and totalitarianism in the mid-twentieth century. The restraint of a subject’s sexual liberty is certainly a profound restriction over the life of an individual, and the Irish Catholic Church routinely preached what Terence Brown has described as ‘a sexual morality of severe restrictiveness, denouncing all developments in society that might have threatened a rigid conformism in a strictly enforced sexual code’ (2004, p. 29). Throughout the 1930s, this exacting Catholic ethos reached far beyond the pulpit; indeed, it was openly advocated by a number of highly prominent members of the Gaelic League, who were also members of the Irish Free State’s Executive Council. In *The Great Hunger*, Kavanagh exploits the dissident cadences of the jazz aesthetic to orchestrate a vivid dramatisation of the physical, emotional and psychological burden this ultra-conservative order imposed upon the citizens of Ireland. Crucially, however, he does so at time when using this aesthetic form was in itself a highly subversive act.

If the values espoused by this theocratic order echoed those of Europe’s totalitarian regimes on any one particular issue in the mid-twentieth century, it was most assuredly in its outright

¹ The report refers to the first contingent of US troops that landed in Northern Ireland in 1942 before being deployed on the continental mainland. Their arrival added to what was already a vibrant Ulster jazz scene and Northern Ireland swiftly became the jazz capital of Europe. For more on this, see Solly Lipsitz’s (1971) article entitled ‘Jazz’.

condemnation of the jazz aesthetic. This is not to suggest that the Irish government's disapproval of jazz culture necessarily equates to the strictures the Third Reich imposed on all it renounced as 'decadent art', but the fact remains that the Irish Free State's objections to jazz were essentially indistinguishable from those raised by the National Socialists. From an ideological perspective, jazz is, of course, black music and it was therefore fundamentally incompatible with the Nazis' intensely nationalistic rhetoric. Stylistically speaking, the improvisational character of jazz also encouraged modes of individual expression that were anathema to the Nazis' dictatorial system (Kater, 1989, p. 13). Although Seán Óg Ó Ceallaigh makes no explicit reference to any particular nation or ethnic group in his address to the Mohill Committee of the Gaelic League on January 1st 1934, the Vice President of the Irish Free State's Executive Council nonetheless objected to the 'immoral' influence of this 'foreign' music on the grounds that it promoted sexual licentiousness and encouraged modes of individual expression deemed incompatible with those conducive to 'making young and old more susceptible to Gaelic ideals and adopting a more receptive mental attitude towards Irish nationality' (*Irish Press*, 1934, p. 4). These objections would ultimately trigger the enactment of the *Public Dance Halls Act, 1935*, which served as a means to regulate Irish dance halls by introducing taxation and a licensing system.

In the intervening period between Ó Ceallaigh's New Year's Day speech and the enactment of this legislation, the Irish newspapers were awash with reactions to the launch of this state-sponsored anti-jazz campaign.² On January 5th 1934, for example, the *Irish Independent* published a series of excerpts from a letter addressed to the Mohill Committee of the Gaelic League, and written by the Parish Priest of Granard, Co. Longford. The letter expressed in no uncertain terms that 'the priests and people of Granard' were in 'active sympathy' with the Mohill Committee's attempts 'to stop the demoralising all-night dancing and objectionable sponsored programmes from Athlone Broadcasting Station' (p. 10). That this parish priest was also Chairman of the town's Urban County Council further speaks to the insidiousness with which the power of the Irish Catholic Church made its presence felt throughout the length and breadth of Ireland in the 1930s. Of course, there were those, even from within the ranks of the Gaelic League, who found the State's official stance far too regimental. Less than a fortnight after Ó Ceallaigh's speech, the *Irish Press* reported that the Chairman of the Gorey branch of the Gaelic League, a Mr. P. Clancy, expressed concerns that 'even the most genuine Gaelic Leaguer might find himself at a jazz dance through no fault of his own, but because, perhaps, of his social standing' (p. 8). As suspiciously measured as this response might appear, the overwhelming majority of those who contributed to the media coverage of this very public debate were united in their vociferous opposition to what they deemed a savage and hedonistic musical form.

Despite the emphasis these reactions placed upon the ungodliness of jazz music, it is important to acknowledge that the crusade launched by Ó Ceallaigh renounced, not only what he called 'the noise termed dance-music', but also the accompanying 'doggerel, or "jazz poetry"' that was 'all too readily available in mass production on the radio, on the gramophone and in the talkie' (*Irish Press*, 1934, p. 4). Given the complexion of this sociohistorical backdrop, it seems

² The origins of the State's opposition to jazz culture may be traced back to the early 1920s. For more information on the first incarnation of this state-sponsored anti-jazz campaign, see Luke Gibbons's 'Labour and Local History: The Case of Jim Gralton, 1886-1945', and Jim Smyth's 'Dancing, Depravity and All that Jazz: The Public Dance Halls Act of 1935'.

highly significant that Paul Durcan has deemed it appropriate to hail Kavanagh as ‘a maestro of the improvised line’ and to further claim that ‘the only development in recent Irish poetry was Kavanagh’s introduction of the jazz line’ (1988, p. 56). There are two major schools of thought when it comes to determining what exactly it is that makes any particular poem a ‘jazz poem’. For some critics, it is imperative that a jazz poem somehow manages to encapsulate the syncopated rhythms that most immediately characterise the jazz aesthetic; while others argue that a jazz poem must refer directly to a jazz musician in order to meet the requisite criteria. The latter position seems somewhat rigid and reductive, however, and all the more so in light of the complex and inherently fluid structure of the musical form in question. As Robert O’Meally explains, jazz is essentially ‘freedom music, the play of sounds that prizes individual assertion and group coordination, voices soloing and then (at their best) swinging back together, the one-and-many *e pluribus unum* with a laid-back beat’ (1998, p. 117). The kind of ‘Play’ O’Meally has in mind typically occurs during the ‘Break’, which in jazz terminology denotes a deliberate disruption in the normal cadence of a piece of music. To clarify precisely what Play means within this context, Albert Murray notes that the Break is not simply an open invitation for jazz musicians to ‘wing it’; rather, it invites the ‘kind of improvisation [...] applicable to educational methods, to scientific method, [and] to inventions’ (1998, p. 132). And so it is in these critical moments that the truly dexterous jazz musician can reveal their intimate knowledge of chordal structure by drawing on what Murray calls ‘a rich storehouse of tunes, phrases, ditties which he uses as a painter uses his awareness of other paintings, as a writer employs his literary background to give his statements richer resonances’ (1998, p. 132). Put in the simplest terms, then, jazz is an aesthetic form which is above all characterised by a polyphonic structure and its reliance upon improvisation, but it is of pivotal importance that this improvisation be facilitated by an accomplished manipulation of a chord, a melody, or a group of contrapuntal lines of music—a technique more commonly as ‘Inversion’.

Kavanagh’s experimentation with this mode of Inversion can be seen from the very outset of *The Great Hunger*. Although the poem’s first line might initially appear to be written in standard trochaic tetrameter, it is only in recognising the intricacy of this line’s formal structure that the full complexity of the lines that follow can be brought into focus. This line is predominantly comprised of 8 feet, or 4 pairs of syllables, and arranged in a pattern whereby the stressed syllable, marked here in bold, is immediately followed by an unstressed syllable: ‘**Clay** is **the** word and **clay** is **the** flesh’. But there is another type of repetition at play, not at the level of form, but at the level of content: ‘Clay is the word and clay is the flesh’. This repetition draws attention to the fact that there is something of an anomaly in this seemingly regular trochaic pattern. The ‘and’, marked here in bold italics, introduces an additional stressed syllable, and so it acts as a kind of caesura: ‘**Clay** is **the** word *and* **clay** is **the** flesh’. This extra syllable points forward to the word ‘like’ in line 2, marked again here in bold italics, which also acts as a kind of caesura: ‘Where the potato gatherers *like* mechanised scarecrows move’. In this instance, however, it is the respective terms of the line’s simile that draw attention to the more subtle repetition that exists at the level of content: ‘Where the potato gatherers *like* mechanised scarecrows move’. On this occasion, Kavanagh also introduces syncopated rhythms to emphasise the importance of that which is being conveyed by the simile. There is a deliberate disturbance in the standard trochaic pattern that comprises this line’s first two syllables, but the stretched rhythmic pattern that generates this disturbance in the first part of the simile is also mirrored perfectly by the rhythmic pattern of the simile’s second part: ‘**Where** the **potato** gatherers *like* **mechanised** scarecrows **move**’. In line 3, there is a return to the comparatively more standard trochaic rhythm adopted in the opening line, but on this

occasion Kavanagh includes a long dash, and in doing so introduces a more conventional caesura: ‘Along **the** side-**fall** of **the** hill—**Maguire and his men**’. In this way, Kavanagh’s opening lines stretch and manipulate conventional trochaic tetrameter much as a seasoned jazz musician might manipulate a standard chord or a familiar melody. This artful exploitation of poetic convention becomes ever more pronounced in line 4, as the caesura disappears altogether at the level of form, but remains present at the level of content. Here, the reader is required to take a pause between the ‘hour’ and the ‘is’: ‘**if we watch them for an hour is there anything we can prove**’. In this line, the trochaic tetrameter introduced in the first line is once again stretched, but this time the pattern is elongated either side of this ‘invisible’ caesura.

This accomplished manipulation of trochaic meter continues throughout the lines that immediately follow, as it does throughout much of the poem’s opening section. At this juncture, however, another complex pattern begins to emerge as the ‘Of life’ that begins line 5 is juxtaposed against the ‘Of Death’ positioned at the beginning of line 6. This repetition is all the more pronounced owing to the fact the word ‘over’ also appears in each of these lines: ‘Of life as it is broken-backed over the book / Of Death? Here crows gabble over worms and frogs’. In the most immediate sense, this juxtaposition announces the poem’s intent to interrogate the degree to which these concepts of ‘life’ and ‘death’ have become blurred in mid-twentieth-century Ireland. Coupled with the reiteration of the word ‘over’, this repetition calls to mind the kind of refrain that so characterised Langston Hughes’s literary adaptation of the jazz aesthetic, while simultaneously offering a knowing nod to the poet’s cultural context by mirroring the kind of speech pattern that might be used to send out a distress call via military telecommunication: ‘Of life ... over / Of Death ... over’ (5-6). The regularity with which these patterns recur throughout the poem’s first section, and indeed beyond, should in itself be enough to repudiate any notion that *The Great Hunger* is simply composed in *verse libre*. Even in the poem’s second section, in which Kavanagh’s speaker almost uniformly adopts a more concise and paired-back register, these elongated lines are deployed to great effect. In this section’s opening lines, for example, the speaker reveals the following:

Maguire was faithful to the 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 knuckles were cutting the skin of her son’s backside
And he was sixty-five.

The first six lines are clearly no less striking for their brevity, but in line 7 there is a return to the style of elongated line that features so prominently in the poem’s previous section. By introducing a line of such comparatively irregular length, Kavanagh actually demands that the reader pay full attention to what Brown has described as the ‘the dismal fate that befell countless Maguires in the hundred years following the Famine’ (2004, p. 175). These ‘Maguires’ all fell afoul of the developments that radically altered the agricultural landscape in post-Famine Ireland, such as the decline of the domestic industry and the shift from tillage to livestock farming. Indeed, Joseph Lee has argued that these changes impacted dramatically on the rural youth’s capacity to establish ‘independent households without the support of their parents’ and, as these same parents were also beginning to live longer lives, their sons had ‘to

wait longer to inherit the farms and to marry' (1978, p. 38). The devastating effects of these social policies were further compounded by the sexual restrictions foisted upon the Irish people by the Catholic Church, and Kavanagh's pointed engagement with the sum of these effects becomes all the more prominent by way of the Inversion he deploys throughout the poem's subsequent sections.

Considered in isolation, the stanzas in the poem's third section appear to meet the structural requirements associated with the conventional sonnet. The first stanza presents an exception, however, as it is comprised of only thirteen lines and therefore falls just one line short of meeting the requisite criteria:

Poor Paddy Maguire, a fourteen-hour day
 He worked for years. It was he that lit the fire
 And boiled the kettle and gave the cows their hay.
 His mother tall hard as a Protestant spire
 Came down the stairs barefoot at the kettle-call
 And talked to her son sharply: 'Did you let
 The hens out, you?' She had a venomous drawl
 And a wizened face like moth-eaten leatherette.
 Two black cats peeped between the banisters
 And gloated over the bacon-fizzling pan.
 Outside the window showed tin canisters.
 The snipe of Dawn fell like a whirring stone
 And Patrick on a headland stood alone.

The first four lines adhere to a standard ABAB rhyming pattern, and this pattern is repeated in the CDCD rhyming pattern that presides over lines 5-8, but there are only three lines where the third quatrain would ordinarily be found in a traditional sonnet. These lines are comprised of an EFE rhyming pattern, which suggests that there is something that has not, or perhaps cannot, be said. The order that typically characterises the sonnet form is then restored with the GG rhyming pattern that lends the stanza its concluding couplet. Although the remaining stanzas in this section are comprised of the fourteen lines typically associated with the sonnet, this formal anomaly alerts the reader to the fact that Kavanagh intends to continue playing with poetic convention. For the remainder of the section, this manipulation takes place only at the level of content as the poetic form synonymous with professions of undying love is adopted to accentuate the profound sense of joylessness that constitutes Maguire's existence. For instance, the lack of affection Mrs. Maguire displays as she talks 'to her son sharply' (6) with 'a venomous drawl / And a wizened face like moth-eaten leatherette' (7-8) is magnified further by 'the sharpest interest of rivalry' (22) that mediates the relationship between Maguire and his peers. There is certainly nothing in the speaker's tone to indicate that these relationships have been nurtured by the Christian motto of 'Love Thy Neighbour'. And were there any suggestion that these poor unfortunates might find a modicum of solace amongst the language they have internalised as a direct result of their exposure to the rhetoric of Catholic Ireland, this pallid hope surely disintegrates as the poem transitions from the second to the third stanza. It is certainly not a coincidence that the mysticism of St John of the Cross makes its presence felt here as the speaker reveals that 'sometimes when the sun comes through a gap / these men know God the father in a tree' (23-24). But the resolution temporarily offered by this stanza's final couplet is sharply undercut by the dark and desolate imagery that permeates throughout

the section's final stanza, with its descriptions of 'Primroses and the unearthly start of ferns / Among the blackthorn shadows in a ditch / A dead sparrow and an old waistcoat' (28-30). In this way, there is a striking parallelism between Kavanagh's manipulation of conventional poetic form and the kind of Inversion that operates here at the level of content.

These anti-pastoral images offered a point of critical resistance to the romanticisation of the rural that so characterised the Revivalism of William Butler Yeats and his contemporaries. This element of Revivalist practice cast something of a shadow over Ireland in the early-twentieth century; a shadow that would eventually make its presence felt in the utopian imagery de Valera himself conjured up in the now-infamous radio address delivered on St Patrick's Day 1943. However, there are countless occasions when Kavanagh's imagery appears expressly contrived to address these misrepresentations by highlighting the true magnitude of the weight that Ireland's theocratic order forced upon its citizens. The enormity of the physical burden it imposed is, for example, captured perfectly by the speaker's acknowledgement that Maguire lived only to ensure 'that his little fields may stay sterile while his own body / Is spread in the bottom of a ditch under two coulter's crossed in God's name' (*I*, 60-61). The emotional and psychological effects spawned by the severity of Maguire's isolation are also made agonisingly apparent via the poem's none-too-subtle allusions toward the prospect of bestiality and incest. For instance, the speaker tells us that Maguire 'saw his cattle / And stroked their flanks in lieu of wife to handle' (*IV*, 42-43), and that 'the priest was one of the people too—/ A farmer's son—and surely he knew / The needs of a brother and sister' (*IV*, 43-45). This is all a far cry from de Valera's dream of 'a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous [...] with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens' (1980, p. 466). And so, on these occasions, Kavanagh is essentially inverting this kind of utopian ideology by playing these familiar pastoral notes in an altogether different and highly subversive key.

Further correlations can be drawn between the jazz aesthetic and Kavanagh's artful exploitation of the dynamic that exists between the many voices that conspire to lend *The Great Hunger* its polyphonic structure. As Seamus Heaney has pointed out, one of the poem's crowning achievements is its capacity 'to differentiate nicely between the direct speech of the characters and its own narrative which is a selection and heightening of the very speech' (1980, p. 123). While this is undoubtedly true, Kavanagh's poem is often at its most compelling best when it allows these voices to seamlessly amalgamate in a mode of free indirect discourse which highlights the pervasive force of the doctrine proliferated by the Irish State. In the first section, for example, the speaker grants the reader access to the private thoughts of the poem's protagonist: 'And he is not so sure now if his mother was right / When she praised the man who made the field his bride' (56-57). At this juncture, the voice of Maguire's mother is ever so subtly introduced as she lives and breathes within the psyche of her son; indeed, it might well be the voice of Mrs. Maguire that lurks just beneath the surface of the line that immediately follows: 'Watch him, watch him' (58). In this critical moment of ambiguity, it becomes unclear whether these words are simply uttered by the poem's narrator, or recalled by Maguire as he reflects upon his youth and considers the extent to which the very fibre of his being has been moulded by the value system instilled within him by his overbearing mother. The authority embodied by this figure seems to make its presence similarly felt in the poem's fourth section, as Maguire once again considers the prospect of marriage. Here, the voice of Mrs. Maguire, which we are told is 'blown' from overuse (7), puts the following proposition to her son: 'Remember Eileen Farrelly? I was thinking / A man might do a damned sight worse ...' (6-7).

But this voice also seems to reappear as Maguire subsequently sees ‘a girl carrying a basket’ (35), only to have his thoughts disrupted by the cutting cry of ‘Too earnest, too earnest!’ (37). It is once again unclear where exactly this interjection comes from; however, there is a rather striking uniformity between the linguistic structure of this utterance and the aforementioned ‘Watch him, watch him’ (58).

In these moments when Kavanagh’s formal experimentation seems to flirt with the aesthetic practices most closely associated with modernism, it becomes quite difficult to situate *The Great Hunger* within the second wave of naturalism that blossomed in Irish literature from the 1920s to the 1950s. And while it may well be that Patrick Maguire is entirely at the mercy of the external forces that reign over every conceivable facet of his inner and outer being, the same cannot be said of Kavanagh himself as he effectively uses his protagonist’s position as a means to generate a highly potent critique of these totalising forces. The intrinsic dissidence of *The Great Hunger* certainly did not go unnoticed; in fact, shortly after its initial publication, Kavanagh was actually ‘cautioned by the Garda Síochána about his poem’s ‘immorality’ (Goodby, 2000, p. 15). It may simply have been the poet’s pointed Inversion of Revivalist imagery that attracted the attention of the Irish State’s ever-vigilant eye, but it is the poem’s formal experimentation, its equally pointed Inversion of rhythm and meter, and the ways in which Kavanagh delicately manipulates the voices of his characters, that ultimately brings his work into alignment with a mid-twentieth-century Irish counterculture that was centred around the much-demonised jazz aesthetic. Indeed, it is amid these formal flourishes, among those deliberate dexterities that have been ever so deftly buried beneath the layers of clay that constitute the poem’s content, that the dissident potential of Kavanagh’s jazz aesthetic makes itself most poignantly felt.

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