



“A poet is a theologian”: wonder and sacrament in
the work of Patrick Kavanagh

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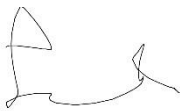
By Paul Corcoran

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Paul Corcoran

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Corcoran', with a stylized, cursive script.

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Prologue

On First Hearing News of Patrick Kavanagh

By Paul Durcan

October 1960, Gonzaga College, Dublin:

“Boys” – Father Joseph Veale, S.J, joins
 Together in a steeple his long, cloistral fingers –
 Our teacher whom we’d trust with our lives –
 Our tall, dark, enigmatic man in whom
 Are spliced in a thrilling, glamorous mix
 Gravity and levity –
 “Boys – thank you, Paul, yes, open the window –
 You all know my distrust of the word ‘phoney’;
 Well, I don’t like saying it but poetry
 Or, I should say, what passes
 For modern poetry is phoney
 Or strikes me as phoney. In our country only
 Patrick Kavanagh strikes me as genuine
 And in America William Carlos Williams
 Whose ‘Flowers by the Sea’ you will remember
 I chalked up on the blackboard in April.
 Yeats for all his indubitable mastery of rhetoric
 Strikes me as nailed down to a trick.
 Alas, you will hear, if you have not already heard,
 People make unkind, cruel even,
 Cuts about Patrick Kavanagh.
 I have heard an urbane, honourable senator state:
 ‘Patrick Kavanagh is an absolute lunatic.’
 When I protested the senator added:

‘Patrick Kavanagh would talk to anything.’

“Myself, I have seen with my own eyes
Patrick Kavanagh conversing with trees
On Waterloo Road.

As I walked past, I thought to myself:

There is a man in touch with reality.

Poetry, I believe, when it is not phoney,

Is – like Milton – the figure of reality.

What I thought the trees were saying to Patrick Kavanagh

was:

‘Come Dance with Kitty Stobling’

Which, as it happens, is the name

Of Patrick Kavanagh’s most recent volume

Published by Longmans in London.

But boys – please take note –

It was not a one-way conversation.

Patrick Kavanagh was talking to the trees –

Yes, he was – in down-to-earth, matter-of-fact, everyday

tones;

but the trees also were talking to Patrick Kavanagh

In similar vein – in down-to-earth, matter-of-fact, everyday

tones.

Now, let us resume *Paradise Lost*.¹

¹ Paul Durcan, “On First Hearing News of Patrick Kavanagh,” *Greetings to our friends in Brazil: one hundred poems* (London: Harvill, 1999): 130-131.

Introduction

Patrick Kavanagh's first appearance on television, on RTE's *Self-Portrait* in 1962, was the occasion he chose for the provocative declaration that "a poet is a theologian"¹. Kavanagh had been invited to speak on his life and work on the condition that his script could be amended and deemed acceptable by RTE. Kavanagh refused. He wrote in reply "There can be no censorship. I must have absolute freedom."² RTE relented and Kavanagh delivered a self-portrait to the nation that his confidante brother considered "the high point of his career."³

First, he had asserted himself as a poet with the authorities and won; second, he had issued his statement to the public both in what he said and in his manner of saying it. Only the most obtuse could now say that he was a vulgar eccentric fellow. From now on nothing mattered very much, debts, publication or even his health. He would enjoy what days remained to him.⁴

As his brother recognized, Kavanagh had suffered at the hands of an Ireland that had taken little interest in getting to know the gentle poetic spirit beneath the rough exterior. *Self-Portrait* was the chance Kavanagh took to right the record, to "issue his statement"⁵. An admirer of the poet remembers the effect Kavanagh's television appearance had on an impressionable young viewer:

[Kavanagh's self-portrait] was profoundly shocking. Not only was there the apparent rudeness and iconoclastic frankness, but there was also the accent! Antitheses of all that one had been raised to hold proper and acceptable. But yet, there was something subtly attractive and subversive that prompted the toffee-nosed viewer to find, take up and read the Collected Poems that had just appeared.⁶

This description captures well the effect of a statement like "a poet is a theologian", which formed part of an emphatic closing salvo to Kavanagh's self-portrait. The frankness of Kavanagh's declaration is at once shocking, subversive and subtly attractive. Ultimately, it prompts the listener to sit up and take closer stock of what Kavanagh is doing and saying in

¹ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Prose* (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1967), 22.

² Peter Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper: a biography of Patrick Kavanagh* (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1979), 343.

³ Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper*, 344.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Henry O'Shea, review of *A Buttonhole in Heaven? The mystical imagination of Patrick Kavanagh*, by Una Agnew, *The Furrow* 70, no. 11 (November 2019), 632.

his poetry. The aim of this study is to take Kavanagh at his word and to explore the theological elements of his poetry as conjured by his self-designation as a poet-theologian. This will require an interdisciplinary approach that grants a parity of esteem to the poetic and the theological currents in his work. This will be undertaken under two headings: wonder and sacrament. In the first half of the thesis the concept of wonder will be posited as the basis of a robust and fruitful dialogue between poetry and theology. Wonder, it will be argued, is a state of mind inherent and conducive to the work of both the poet and the theologian, who share a co-reliance on what Kavanagh calls the “imaginative unreason”⁷. The first chapter of the thesis will examine the history of this multifarious concept in the theological tradition in order to present the distinguishing features of ‘Christian’ wonder over time. In the second chapter, this Christian wonder will be measured against the poetic wonder of Kavanagh’s writings in order to set in motion a fertile interdisciplinary analysis of the beliefs and methods of the ‘poet-theologian’. The work of Thomas Aquinas, referenced by Kavanagh in several crucial instances as a kind of standard-bearer for the theological tradition, will be of particular importance to this first half of the thesis.

The second half of the thesis will take the concept of sacramentality – itself rooted in wonder – as the basis of a deeper examination into the work of Kavanagh the poet-theologian. Kavanagh’s work has been credited by several studies with a “sacramental”⁸ impulse, but few critics have defined the term closely enough to distinguish its place definitively in Kavanagh’s theological outlook. This thesis will argue for a more clear-eyed assessment of sacramentality in Kavanagh’s work, one rooted in sacramental theology. Divine initiative, human need, and Christ’s agency will be taken as three essential elements of a theological understanding of the sacraments of the church. These sacraments are not abstract rituals but lodestars of the Christian life in all its blessedness and brokenness. Kavanagh had a deeply-felt intuition for the fundamentals of this Christian life, and the writings of the poet-theologian, it will be argued, radiate a sacramentality that is rooted in the essentials of sacramental theology. As Chapter Four and the final sections of the concluding Chapter Five will demonstrate, the sacramentality that characterizes his work as a poet-theologian is first developed as a reaction against the suffocating theological

⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, “Literature,” *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, April 12, 1952.

⁸ Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: Born-again Romantic* (New York: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), 194, Una Agnew, *A Buttonhole in Heaven? The mystical imagination of Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: Columba, 2019), 243, Tom Stack, *No Earthly Estate: God and Patrick Kavanagh: an anthology* (Dublin, Columba Press, 2002), 17.

landscape he identified in his own lifetime. Overall, this thesis will posit that Kavanagh's considered deliberations on this landscape produce a still centre in his work. Despite extended periods of rejection, resentment and self-sabotage in his life, this still centre plots a theological trajectory in Kavanagh's work that is characterized by a fragile *continuity* rather than the randomness settled on by more skeptical critics of his theological credentials.

Caveat and caution abound in the few assessments of Kavanagh's work that approach his self-identification as a poet-theologian.⁹ Stack praises Kavanagh's "believing intelligence" that "shimmers in a uniquely personal fashion throughout his public work",¹⁰ but elsewhere is more careful:

In examining the religious content of poems one must, of course, be on guard against forcing the material into categories that more properly belong to the discipline of theology. The poetic statement is essentially evocative, whereas theology is discursive. Poetry does not yield systematic declarative statements. Rather it puts images to work in an illative enterprise of discovery. Because of Kavanagh's exceptional familiarity with his religious tradition, his Catholic imagination continuously informs his poetic utterance but fidelity to the poet's mind is important, reading neither too much nor too little into his reflections. Once we accept the complexity and capriciousness of Kavanagh's mind, we can begin to understand the ambiguities and elusive features of his written lines which by turns, swagger and genuflect their way into religious terrain.¹¹

Una Agnew, whose work on the spirituality and 'mystical imagination' of Kavanagh broke new ground, credits Kavanagh with a "sophisticated theology of incarnation well ahead of the official Church of his time", but is nonetheless careful to circumscribe her work with a warning:

Kavanagh was often palpably moved by the strength of God's energy in nature, in the smallest flower, in the riot of color of the bog in full bloom, in the beggarman who sold ballads at street corners. Nevertheless, there is no conscious theological schema in his allusions to God, Trinity or indeed to the Holy Ghost. His theology, like his revelation, 'comes as an aside'. It derives from an innate charism that defied systematization.¹²

⁹ Maurice Harmon, review of *No Earthly Estate: God and Patrick Kavanagh: An Anthology*, by Tom Stack, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (February 2007), 121 is typical of this caution: "It is a delicate matter. The poet's spirituality is instinctive and non-intellectual. Its simplicity is attractive yet difficult to explain. To surround the work with too weighty or too complex an interpretation is to risk obscuring the simplicity."

¹⁰ Stack, *No Earthly Estate*, 28.

¹¹ Tom Stack, review of *A Buttonhole in Heaven? The mystical imagination of Patrick Kavanagh*, by Una Agnew, *The Furrow* 50, no. 3 (March 1999), 179.

¹² Agnew, *Buttonhole*, 234.

Antoinette Quinn, author of several substantial biographical works on Kavanagh, grants that the poet “drew liberally and unselfconsciously on Roman Catholic beliefs, symbology and terminology, with the ease of one who takes his religious culture for granted.”¹³ As for something more theologically considered or concerted, Quinn is firm in her assessment: “Kavanagh was not exercised by the doctrinal aspects of religion or by abstruse theological debate.”¹⁴

Much of this caution that surrounds the wider discussion is borne from an unease and suspicion at the interdisciplinarity inherent in the figure of the poet-theologian. The study of literature and theology has long been plagued by “suspicion and resentment” that comes with “an uncomfortably tense proximity”.¹⁵ Practitioners in the field have despaired at times at theology’s inability or unwillingness to “take literature seriously.”¹⁶ It has certainly not always been clear that the conditions necessary for a fruitful dialogue between the two have been met, particularly on the point of whether theology is willing to abandon the presumption that it has “the answer to every existential question.”¹⁷ In terms of Kavanagh the poet-theologian, literary critics could be skeptical of a theological analysis ‘weighing down’ the work of Kavanagh. Theologians might consider the poetry of the Monaghan poet as unworthy of the truth claims reserved for theology. A fruitful question for both sides of this debate might be: ‘what theology, what poetry?’. This study aims for a broad-mindedness that is willing to expand rather than enclose traditional understandings of the disciplines of poetry and theology. This is not because of some ideology or idealism, but because this is precisely what Kavanagh did in declaring that “a poet is a theologian”¹⁸.

The methodology of the thesis aims to enshrine a balance between poetry and theology that is inherent in Kavanagh’s poet-theologian and which takes heed of contemporary scholarship in this interdisciplinary arena. Susan Felch’s 2016 collection of essays on the “varied interrelationships”¹⁹ between literature and religion captures the sense of tension

¹³ Quinn, *Born-again Romantic*, 389.

¹⁴ Quinn, *Born-again Romantic*, 162.

¹⁵ Michael Kirwan, “Theology and Literature in the English-Speaking World” in F.B. Knox and D. Lonsdale eds., *The Power of the Word* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2015), 10.

¹⁶ Langenhorst, Georg, “Why Theologians are Interested in Literature” in F.B. Knox and D. Lonsdale eds., *The Power of the Word* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2015), 42.

¹⁷ Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Vielleicht hält Gott sich einige Dichter* (Mainz: Matthias-Grunwald, 1991), 313.

¹⁸ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

¹⁹ Susan M. Felch, “Introduction” in Susan M. Felch ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2.

that can exist when even the very nature of the interdisciplinary enterprise undertaken by studies such as this one is constantly called into question:

Even the notion of religion and literature as an “academic field,” with its concomitant implications of tidy boundaries, tight furrows, and predictable harvests is questioned. Readers should not assume a uniform set of assumptions, terms, theories or texts nor agreement among... authors. Readers can expect a stance that deeply engages both literary and religious concerns within the same frame of references.²⁰

The caution inherent in Felch’s statement in the same volume that “no religious or literary term is innocent”²¹ is well-founded, as is her expectation of a common “frame of reference”, a level-playing field as it were, for a conversation between the religious and the literary to take place. The methodology of this thesis has been to establish wonder and sacrament as the frame of reference for an interdisciplinary investigation into the nature of Kavanagh’s writing as a poet-theologian. In order to “deeply engage” with these concepts from both a literary and a religious viewpoint, the chapters proceed alternatively so as to approach these two foundational concepts – wonder and sacrament – from both a theological and a literary perspective. This methodology allows for a sense of balance and integrity to the interdisciplinary enterprise undertaken by the thesis, one that respects the differences between religion and literature, between poetry and theology, while simultaneously investing itself in the possibility that each can enliven and enlighten an appreciation of the other. By the end of the thesis, the fruits of separate theological and literary studies into the shared concepts of wonder and sacrament will be brought together in such a spirit of mutually-enriching discourse.

As this study will make clear, his insistence on an innocent wonder at the everyday and his pursuit of a flourishing sacramentality stretched what was conceivable for a poet and for a Christian in the times in which he lived as well as for those that came after him. For this Augustine Martin considers him the “the finest religious poet Ireland has produced.”²² The measure of theology credited to this “religious poet” has over time said more about Kavanagh’s assessors than the poet himself. Mindful of the apparent dangers, this study will

²⁰ Felch, *Introduction*, 4-5.

²¹ Felch, *Introduction*, 4-5.

²² Peter Kavanagh, ed. *Patrick Kavanagh: Man and Poet* (Newbridge: The Goldsmith Press, 1987), 292. Martin continues at p. 292: “Alone among poets writing in English Kavanagh has managed to explore together the visionary and the moral, the sacramental and the ethical.”

seek to do justice to the broad-minded creativity inherent in the figure of the ‘poet-theologian’.

Chapter One: A ‘Christian’ wonder

Introduction

Within the history of the Christianity, the concept of wonder has suffered for its imprecision. Enlisted in hymns, prayers and devotionals, it has risked being consigned as a mystical, inherently unreliable experience, impregnable to methodical understanding. In such a scenario, it is too often left to the individual believer to identify and navigate their own personal experiences of wonder at a sunset, a sermon, or a sonnet. But of what relevance are such experiences of wonder to life in the Christian faith? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to clear a theological foundation for the concept of wonder. Only then, when we can identify what is distinctive in a *Christian* wonder, can we hope to understand its significance in the life and history of the Church. We must know what Christian wonder is before we can know what to do with it. That is the primary aim of this chapter – to provide a theological grounding to the multifarious concept of wonder. This gives rise to several interrelated objectives of this portion of the thesis - such as: how does wonder arise in us, and where should it lead? Can we self-activate, or at least, self-regulate our sense of wonder? Are there areas of life that are more appropriate to or more evincing of wonder for the Christian than others?

In the first section of this chapter, this work will investigate what was distinctive in the Christianized wonder that emerged from the roots of classical philosophy in the early centuries of the Church, particularly in the writing of St. Augustine. Christian wonder emerged as an instinct for God’s presence in our midst, but one that could easily be confused with a more superficial and sinful *curiositas*. In the end, what distinguished a *Christian* wonder was that it came from God and returned the wonderer to God. The second section of this chapter will consider how Thomas Aquinas systematized Christian wonder by clarifying the ambiguity and the pessimism of the patristic tradition from which Augustine came. In the third and final section, this chapter will investigate virtue as the true context of Aquinas’ defining account of Christian wonder. Wonder is most familiar as something by which we are “struck”¹. But humans are not entirely passive recipients of wonder – they have a role to play in ensuring that the gift of God’s wonder is not mistaken or ignored.

¹ William Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being: Metaphysics after Dialectic* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 8.

Faced with temptations and distractions, the Christian is called to nurture their sense of wonder with virtuous habits of living, particularly the virtue of *temperantia*.

William Desmond has acknowledged the difficulties involved in undertaking a thorough study of wonder: “contemporary usage of the word wonder easily slides into the sentimental.”² He has sought to structure his work by distinguishing between three “modalities” of wonder: astonishment, perplexity and curiosity. Astonishment has more of an “ontological bite”³, it is overcome by the “too-muchness”⁴ of the world and the fact that “it is at all.”⁵ This modality of wonder tends towards the contemplative; astonishment reduces the wonderer to a state of being “struck”⁶ by the inadequacy of their own understanding in the face of life’s grandest mysteries. Desmond describes astonishment as “over-determinate”: it resists and transcends the usual processes of human inquiry. Perplexity is a more uneasy state that can arise out of first astonishment. It is the modality in which the wonderer becomes increasingly aware of their inability to solve, or resolve, the uncertainties presented by the “too-muchness” of the world. Desmond characterizes this modality as “indeterminate”: this captures the sense of fitful inquiry initiated by perplexity: “perplexity is often felt as a lack of definite cognition, driving out beyond itself to overcome that lack.” Curiosity is the most “determinate” and specific of all the three modalities of wonder. One can be astonished or perplexed and not know exactly why. Curiosity tends to focus, by inquiry, on the acquisition of knowledge about a clearly defined subject. Curiosity is also the most dominant of the three modalities. One of the reasons Desmond undertakes to delineate between the three modalities in the first place is the danger that curiosity would cannibalise the others: “if we do not properly understand these different stresses, we can mistakenly think all wonder is subsumable into the curiosity that makes of all being an object of determinate cognition. This subsumption might consume curiosity, but it is the death of wonder.” Curiosity is the most pragmatic and fleeting of all wonder. Once it has been resolved by inquiry, it has served its purpose and fades away. The value of a wonder that does not lead, by inquiry, to a determinate solution, is more easily dismissed. As Desmond puts it: “who could possibly want to sing the praises of the indeterminate?” The replacement of wonder’s “ontological bite”⁷ with a

² Desmond, *Intimate Strangeness*, 8.

³ Desmond, *Intimate Strangeness*, 263.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Desmond, *Intimate Strangeness*, 6.

⁶ Desmond, *Intimate Strangeness*, 8.

⁷ Desmond, *Intimate Strangeness*, 263.

more “banalized version of curiosity”⁸ has been identified with what John Haught calls an “epistemology of control”. Haught proposes that the acquisition of knowledge is attractive to humans for the measure of control it gives them over their surroundings. Viewing the world with a more contemplative kind of wonder threatens the “epistemology of control”⁹ with mysteries and questions that cannot be solved easily, if at all. Desmond acknowledges that the three modalities run through in and through each other on a kind of “continuum”, and elsewhere promotes the idea of a redeemed integration of the three modalities: an ideal blend of astonishment, perplexity, and curiosity. Art and religion are “intimately intertwined”¹⁰ in their common attachment to wonder, and are two spheres that Desmond proposes as the setting for such a redeemed integration of wonder to occur. This chapter will take Desmond’s three modalities as a guide for its investigation into wonder in the Christian theological tradition. Aquinas’ definition of wonder as “a certain desire for knowledge”¹¹ seems firmly rooted in the determinate, inquisitive approach of curiosity. Yet, as this chapter will argue, his treatment of wonder remains definitive in the Christian tradition for the unlikely balance it achieves: between fear and hope, between the apophatic and the kataphatic, and indeed between a more inquisitive and a more contemplative kind of wonder. In achieving this balance, he resolved the perplexity and pessimism that preoccupies Augustine in his influential account of wonder in the *Confessions*.

Section One: The Christianization of Wonder: from the Greeks to Augustine

The Greeks were the first to lend intellectual credibility to the concept of wonder. Their word for wonder τὸ θαυμάζειν (containing elements of θεᾶσθαι) finds its root in the verb ‘to see’. The Latin equivalent admiratio (verbal form *mirare*) also traces its origin to the root ‘to see’. For the ancients, wonder was the most natural human impulse: to see was to wonder. Sight was thus the beginning of wonder for the Greeks, and wonder the beginning of human inquiry. Herodotus’ *Histories* (from the Greek ἱστορέω – ‘I inquire’), written on the cusp of Greece’s fifth-century golden age of enlightenment, firmly established the place

⁸ William Desmond, “Intimate Intertwining: an interview with William Desmond on Art and Religion,” *Religion & Literature* 49, no. 1, (2017): 205.

⁹ John Haught, *What is God? How to think about the Divine* (New Jersey: Paulist, 1986), 116.

¹⁰ Desmond, *Intimate Intertwining*, 211 calls this “the intimate intertwining of the aesthetic and the religious.”

¹¹ *ST* II-I, q. 32, a. 8, co.

of wonder in the human search for truth. The *Histories* brims with wonderment. In the very first line of his work, (today celebrated as the beginning of empirical ‘history’ writing) Herodotus vows to inquire into “the great and wondrous deeds”¹² of his Greeks and Persians protagonists. The word *θῶμα* and its cognates occur eighty-three times across the course of the *Histories*, enshrining wonder at the very heart of Herodotus’ ground-breaking undertaking. Even in the ancient world, Herodotus’ fondness for the wonderful earned him a reputation: he was criticized as the Father of Lies even as he was heralded as the Father of History. His interest in wonders was often taken as a rather unbecoming interest in tall-tales, designed primarily to win the applause of the crowd. However, Herodotus’ interest in wonder provides an important basepoint for understanding the early beginning of Greek philosophical thought, which itself would go on to form the basis of the Christian Wonder propounded by Augustine and Aquinas.

Herodotus’ contribution to the history of ideas was in inventing the “problem of sources.”¹³ In the course of his far-ranging inquiries, Herodotus the historian (*lit.* ‘the inquirer’) often takes centre stage, speaking directly to his audience and commenting not on his findings *per se*, but on the difficult process of inquiry that underlay them. Again and again he relates the problem of his new enterprise - empirical, hard-nosed inquiry into the truth of past human events. On forty-three occasions alone he relates that he doesn’t know what account of events to believe. Often he relates numerous accounts (often ‘wondrous’) and lets the audience decide which one to believe. In this way, Herodotus pulls back the curtain of human inquiry and draws his audience into the historical process. Herodotus establishes the roots of his new enterprise by implicating his audience in the same fraught inquiry as himself. His tone at times is evangelical, his message is simple and resounding: keep inquiring. *τὸ θαυμάζειν* (“wonderment”) and *θῶματα* (“wondrous things/ marvels”) play a crucial role in this new mindset of human inquiry. Marvels - often provocative, confounding, and mythological- are a natural part of the human story. Where humans exist, stories of ‘wonders’ that exist on or beyond the edge of human reason will proliferate. By recording and recounting these wonders in the midst of his empirical inquiries, Herodotus faces up squarely to the oft-neglected reality of human life. In doing so, he deals often with questions of religion, myth and miracles, areas that would become unfashionable for later historians

¹² Her. *Hist.* 1.1

¹³ Robert Fowler, “Herodotus and his Contemporaries,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 116 (1996): 86.

and even theologians.¹⁴ Even more valuable is Herodotus' ability to move beyond an initial fascinated curiosity with marvels into the realm of concerted, analytical inquiry. True wonder for Herodotus is "a disposition towards open inquiry among others"¹⁵ - the impulse to investigate and inquire diligently into the details of human affairs in order to establish some verifiable knowledge. This process, as Herodotus reminds us, will not be without difficulty. But in establishing his new genre of History, he insists that the human impulse for wonder is one worth pursuing into the fraught realm of empirical inquiry.

The beginning of philosophy

This is the intellectual context in which Socrates, speaking in Plato's *Theaetetus* (written one hundred years after Herodotus' *Histories*) calls wonder the feeling of philosophy.¹⁶ Philosophy itself was another new type of human inquiry, focused not simply on the past affairs of humans, but on the very nature of humans and their world. As Plato relates, Socrates' dialogical inquiries into the opinions of other men often ended in *aporia*, a mere restatement of the initial sense of incomprehension. For Socrates, to understand clearly the terms of his own ignorance was the summit of philosophical knowledge: "I neither know, nor think that I know."¹⁷

For Socrates, as for Herodotus, wonder was a state of mind more than anything else. Further, it was a state of mind to be nurtured. Wonder was the "beginning of philosophy"¹⁸, it set in train a process of inquiry whose results may be inconclusive or partial, but which was inherently worthwhile in having knowledge as its ultimate aim. Writing a generation later, Aristotle would summarise in much the same vein: "For men were first led to study philosophy, as indeed they are today, by wonder. Now, he who is perplexed and wonders believes himself to be ignorant ... they took to philosophy to escape ignorance ..." ¹⁹ Aristotle here underscores the status of wonder as an essentially epistemological concern for the Greek intellectual tradition, revolving around what *could* be known. Ignorance was the primary cause of wonder and knowledge its ultimate aim. Most often the inquiries set in

¹⁴ The concerted theological attention given by St Augustine to the question of marvels/wonders still holds an uncomfortable place in the history of Christian Wonder.

¹⁵ Joel Alden Schlosser, "Herodotean Realism," *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 239.

¹⁶ Pl. *Theat.* 155 c-d: "I see, my dear Theaetetus, that Theodorus had a true insight into your nature when he said that you were a philosopher; for wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder."

¹⁷ Pl. *Apol.* 21d.

¹⁸ Pl. *Theat.* 155 d.

¹⁹ Arist. *Met.* 982b, translated by Taylor.

train by wonder were not limited by a sense of piety,²⁰ but by humankind's inability to comprehend and communicate true knowledge.²¹

In the space of a hundred years, Greece's era of classical enlightenment helped carve out the place of wonder in the history of ideas. Philosophers, historian and religious thinkers classified wonder as a type of ignorance and a natural human instinct for knowledge. Crucially, for both Herodotus and Socrates, this instinct for knowledge was forever tempered by the *aporia* at the heart of human inquiry. Indeed, both thinkers could humbly conclude that wonder was not merely a point of departure towards some sure knowledge, but rather a state of mind that accompanied and directed a life-long journey of inquiry - conducted often without the assurance of a fixed destination. The goal of the inquirer, and thus the wonderer in such an environment was simply to 'know thyself'. Socrates prescribes this common Greek maxim in several moments throughout the Platonic dialogues to explain and encourage the pathos of the philosopher.²²

Only in the course of its Christianisation would wonder become a moral concern. The focus shifted decisively from what one *could* know to what one *should* strive to know (and wonder at in the first place). In the hands of the Church Fathers, chiefly Augustine, and then St. Thomas Aquinas, the question of how to channel wonder towards appropriate channels of knowledge took on a new religious significance. In this new dispensation, wonder issued not in knowledge, inquiry, or ignorance in and of themselves, but in adoration of the God and His works in whom all wonder found its ultimate object. With its Christianization "the focus of wonder shifted decisively from the subject wondering to the object wondered at and the relationship between the two."²³ Quinn distinguishes between a Greek, Roman and Christian wonder, each shaped by their own highest good. Greek wonder was directed inwards, following the philosophical imperative to 'know thyself'. Guided by the ultimate Roman virtue of *pietas* (a kind of 'dutifulness'), Roman wonder inclined outwards towards the ordering of the collective society. Christian wonder, meanwhile, focused on God. As

²⁰ Socrates does, however, at one point eschew the type of inquiry that threatened 'to offend the gods': Pl. *Crat.* 407d8: "For god's sake let's leave the subject of gods because it frightens me to talk about them..."

²¹ The Pre-Socratic philosophical tradition of Parmenides, Xenophanes, roughly contemporary with Herodotus, had also offered a relatively pessimistic epistemological outlook for humans, whose knowledge was caught up in relativistic custom far removed- perhaps indefinitely- from the Being that underwrote their universe and their existence. Even before these thinkers, Solon and Theognis had established the Greek motif of the inability of humankind to grasp and communicate true knowledge.

²² For example, at Pl. *Prot.* 343b.

²³ Dennis Quinn, *Iris Exiled: a synoptic history of wonder* (New York: The University Press of America, 2002), 118.

Quinn puts it, “the very purpose of wonder was now seen to be changed from the obtaining of knowledge for self-satisfaction or ‘happiness’ or rendering the world order secure and just, to the quest for eternal life for each person and for the whole of mankind.”²⁴

Jesus is the very personification of truth for the followers and as such, he is the ultimate object of the new kind of Christian wonder Quinn describes:

As the God-Man, Christ is himself the greatest mystery, the greatest single provoker of wonder, the greatest object of speculation in the history of the world...He utterly astonished those who knew him, and those who knew him best were the most astonished. His public speeches produced admiration in the hearers because they possessed authority, unlike the pronouncements of the priestly teachers of the day.²⁵

Wonder in the Gospels

A study of wonder in the four Gospels confirms such a reading. It is impossible to speak of a Christian wonder without investigating its place in the accounts that describe Jesus’ life most closely. The verb “to wonder” occurs on 31 occasions in the Gospels. Luke’s gospel, with thirteen, contains more instances of wonder than any other book of the bible. An overview of these moments of wonder provides crucial context for the development of a Christian wonder in the theology of later centuries. Eight of the instances of wonder in Luke relate to what Jesus says, does, or does not do. His miraculous works, calming of the sea²⁶ and banishing demons²⁷ suggest the divine power at his disposal and elicit wonder in onlookers. His attitude to Roman authority²⁸ and his disregard for Jewish law both underline the different type of authority Jesus claims for himself, and strike wonder into those who witness them. Most tellingly, reports and revelations about Jesus’ true identity - from shepherds,²⁹ Simon’s prophecy³⁰ and Jesus himself³¹ - are met by a sense of wonder in those that hear them. As these examples show, wonder characterizes the human response to the reality of who Jesus is. Tellingly, Luke’s gospel suggests that humankind’s realization can be slow, its interpretations incorrect. The initial incomprehension that characterizes wonder proves difficult to translate into true knowledge of who Jesus is. Indeed, in a rare instance when a Roman centurion does recognise his true significance, Jesus himself

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Quinn, *Irish Exiled*, 124.

²⁶ Luke 8:25.

²⁷ Luke 9:43.

²⁸ Luke 20:46.

²⁹ Luke 2:18.

³⁰ Luke 2:33.

³¹ Luke 4:32.

wonders at such a display of faith.³² More often than not, wonder in Luke's gospel does not emerge from initial ignorance into anything resembling true knowledge of who Jesus is. Even after the resurrection, when Jesus shows his apostles his wounds to once and for all prove his divine authority, they are struck with wonder; they have not yet fully understood the nature of Jesus' authority.

In a commentary on Luke's Gospel, Bonaventure highlights Herod as a prototype of vain and misguided wonder.³³ Throughout the Gospels, Herod totally misreads the reality of who Jesus, misconstruing Jesus' divine authority as a threat to his own sovereign power. His intrigue with Jesus remains at the surface level; it does not lead to a genuine inquiry into who Jesus is. It starts and ends with a vain self-concern. By contrast, the humble adoration of the Magi in Matthew's Gospel lies in stark contrast with Herod. Their journey of hope, perseverance and adoration captures the spirit of wonder that inclines instinctively towards the mysterious authority of Jesus. Their journey from ignorance through inquiry to true knowledge of Jesus makes them prototypical examples of true wonder in the Gospels. Herod, by contrast, wonders incorrectly and thus arrives at the wrong conclusion. His sinful actions follow from his misguided inquiries. Herod acts as an admonitory tale: wonder does not necessarily lead to true knowledge. Indeed, misguided or wonder can inject a perilous sense of purpose into a sinful action.

In John's gospel, Jesus himself seems aware of the pitfalls of wonder that does not go deeper than the surface level. In each of its six occurrences, wonder points the way to some confusion, contest, or misapprehension. In one instance the disciples marvel that Jesus is revealing his identity to a mere woman,³⁴ seemingly unable to grasp that this is the sort of marginalised figure with whom Jesus is most concerned. In another instance Jesus revises the terms of the onlooking crowd's sense of wonder: "Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice."³⁵ At another point he chides them for the shallow intrigue at one of his miracles: "I did one work, and you all marvel at it."³⁶ Elsewhere he rebukes the pharisee Nicodemus for his inability to grasp the radical authority of Jesus' message: "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"³⁷ In a final instructive scene, Jesus highlights the short-sightedness of human wonder,

³² Luke 7:9.

³³ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 23c.

³⁴ John 4:25.

³⁵ John 5:28.

³⁶ John 7:21.

³⁷ John 3:21.

reminding the crowd of the awesome power of his Father in heaven: “For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.”³⁸

John’s Gospel is particularly instructive for our study of Christian wonder. In these moments Jesus himself interrogates closely the sort of wonder that characterizes the human response to his life, his works, and his authority. He challenges the people to eschew a shallow curiosity at his miracles that goes no further than the surface level. This is the sort of wonder that we encounter in the Old Testament, where God’s people wait for miracles, signs and wonders as signals of God’s presence and favour. With the eruption of Jesus the God-man into the narrative of human history, such miraculous signs are no longer the terms by which God intends to communicate most closely with his people. Jesus is the ultimate sign of God’s love and favour to his people, and Jesus becomes the ultimate object of all Christian wonder. This is the reason Jesus seeks to interrogate and reorientate the people’s wonder in the Gospel accounts. The type of wonder Jesus envisages for his people is the sort his Father will provide for them:³⁹ a wonder that penetrates to the depths of their hearts and reorientates their very desires towards knowledge of God’s presence in their midst. Although wonder is an instinctive response to the mysterious presence of God in their midst, the Gospel accounts demonstrate that wonder needs to be guided by a virtuous sensibility in the onlooker in order that it might lead back to its ultimate source in God. How to engender this sensibility became the focus of much of the theology of Christian wonder for centuries to come.

Augustine and the Christianization of Wonder⁴⁰

From the earliest days of Christianity, the Church Fathers began to place structures on the human instinct for wonder and the areas of inquiry and knowledge to which it might lead. Tertullian’s remark – “But such curious distinctions are not needful to us, after Christ Jesus; we need no inquiry after the Gospel”⁴¹ was typical of the scepticism that surrounded human inquiry. This is the context in which St Augustine came to craft his *Confessions*, which has a foundational role in the development of a Christian theology of wonder. The *Confessions* is “uncategorizable”⁴² as a piece of writing, a kind of passionate “prayer

³⁸ John 5:20.

³⁹ John 5:20 “For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.”

⁴⁰ This section will consider Augustine’s account of wonder as it appears in the *Confessions*.

⁴¹ Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, vii:

⁴² Serge Lancel, *St. Augustine* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 217.

intended to be overheard”⁴³, and wonder does not receive a systematic theological treatment in the work. Indeed, it is scarcely the object of any concerted attention at all. As this section will argue, Augustine’s treatment is notable for the ambiguous status it creates for wonder in the Christian theological tradition. In one exception, Augustine hints at the role of wonder as a pious response to the gift of God’s creation.

For you, Lord, made the world from formless matter: and you made that almost non-existent stuff from wholly non-existent stuff, so as to make great things for us children of men to marvel at. For this material heaven is truly remarkable, because on the second day, after the creation of light, you said of the firmament, “let it be,” and so it was made.⁴⁴

Creation, it is clear, is something to be marvelled at. Augustine speaks of creation as a divine book, a second biblical revelation.⁴⁵ Just as the Gospel accounts sharpen Jesus into focus as the summit of all our wonder, the book of creation leads us back to God through the wonders of his works in nature. Augustine describes these natural wonders as a *carmen universitatis*⁴⁶, a cosmic song. Augustine’s musical analogy conjures a fellowship of nature and society and of heaven and earth in which humans are drawn to recognise the *numerositas* (“numberliness”⁴⁷) of God’s wondrous creation. Understanding the *numerositas* of God’s creation is for Augustine an ethical act. All parts of God’s creation resound in the *carmen universitatis*, and all God’s people are called to respond with wonder to God’s ongoing creative action in the world. However, an instinctive wonder at creation that did not lead, through personal inner discernment, to God, was of dubious theological worth.

This evokes all kinds of wonder in me, I am overcome with bewilderment. People go off to marvel at the height of mountains and the great waves of the sea and the broad courses of rivers, and the flow of the ocean, and the circuits of the stars: but they neglect [to wonder at] themselves.⁴⁸

Having become a *quaestio* (a conundrum) to himself⁴⁹, Augustine plumbed the depths of his own response to God’s creation in order to understand his relationship with his divine maker. In order to know God, he sought to know himself. This theological interiority is expressed in

⁴³ Robin Lane-Fox, *Augustine: Conversions and Confessions* (London: Penguin, 2015), 2.

⁴⁴ *Conf.* XII.8.

⁴⁵ *Conf.* XIII, 15. 17

⁴⁶ *De Musica* 6.11.

⁴⁷ *De Musica* 34.13

⁴⁸ *Conf.* X. 15.

⁴⁹ *Conf.* X..33.50: “before your eyes I have become a puzzle (*quaestio*) to myself, and this itself is my weakness.”

Augustine's phrase *ab exterioribus ad interiora, ab inferioribus ad superiora*: "from the exterior things to the interior, from the interior to the things above."⁵⁰

Indeed, his *Confessions* have been called an "act of therapy",⁵¹ a "manifesto of [Augustine's] inner world."⁵² From the very beginning of this work, Augustine grapples with self-knowledge in order to achieve knowledge of his own Creator. Even if such self-inquiry only highlights the extent of his own sinfulness and ignorance, the *confessio*, that "commixture of faith, praise, and sorrow"⁵³ achieves its purpose in bringing him closer to God: "do you smile at me for asking these questions - and decree that I must praise you for what I do know about you, and confess my faith in you?"⁵⁴

The theological journey *ab interioribus ad superiora* is not without peril for Augustine. Indeed when it comes to wonder, Augustine is more preoccupied by the ways in which its misinterpretation and misapprehension could lead the Christian astray in their search for God. This danger ranges large in Augustine's account of a seemingly innocuous incident in which his attention was drawn to a lizard as it pursued a passing insect. He becomes gripped by guilt at the cause of his own fascination with the lizard, and questions whether such instances amount to worthy awe at God's creation, or a kind of disordered desire for knowledge. He is unable to come to a satisfactory answer, and concludes with consternation by surrendering himself to God's mercy: "My life is full of such moments, and my only hope is your overwhelming mercy."⁵⁵

This passage illustrates powerfully the extent to which, under Augustine's introspective theology, wonder had become a moral as well as simply an epistemological issue. No longer was human inquiry to be limited just by what one could or could not know, but what one should or should not turn one's mind to in the first place. Augustine's instinctive interest in the trivialities of nature are here construed as a moral sin in need of mercy from his God. The particular sin at hand was what Augustine came to define as *curiositas*, a *libido sciendi nonnecessaria* ("a passion for knowing unnecessary things"⁵⁶) and a *concupiscentia*

⁵⁰ Cf. *Contra epistulam Manichaei*, XXX, 4. 41.

⁵¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 165.

⁵² Brown, *Augustine*, 168.

⁵³ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*. Edited and translated by Carolyn J. B. Hammond, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014, xix.

⁵⁴ *Conf.* I. 10.

⁵⁵ *Conf.* X. 35.

⁵⁶ *Conf.* III. 2.4.

oculorum (“lust of the eyes”⁵⁷). The latter designation Augustine adapted from 1 John 2:16, in which John outlined a triad of worldly sins.⁵⁸ Augustine associated *curiositas* with John’s “lust of the eyes”⁵⁹, as he makes clear in his critique of the “vain and curious craving”⁶⁰:

there is present in the soul—by the same bodily senses—a certain vain and curious craving not for finding enjoyment for the self in what is physical, but of gaining experience through what is physical. It masquerades as a craving for knowledge and understanding. Since it consists in a hunger for knowing things, and the eyes are the principal means of knowing by the senses, in holy Scripture this is called “visual desire.”⁶¹

The great danger of *curiositas* in Augustine’s work is that it is a catalyst for further sinful action. “Masquerading”⁶² as a noble desire for some experience, knowledge or pleasure, it preys on the weaknesses of the individual at hand. His account of *curiositas* is never far-removed from Augustine’s own personal act of confession. The word *curiositas* first appears in relation to the programmatic story of the stolen pears in Book 2 of the *Confessions*, in which Augustine’s innocuous childhood digression becomes a second Eden and the setting of a personal inquest into the motivations for sin. Augustine concludes darkly: “Curiosity seems to affect a love of knowledge, yet you are the one who knows everything absolutely.”⁶³

Here we get an insight into the nature of the sin of *curiositas*: in pursuing inquiries that are beyond the realm of man, they assert a level of knowledge that is reserved for the divine. In doing so, they deny the transcendence and omniscience properly ascribed only to God. When, elsewhere in his writings⁶⁴ Augustine parallels each of the gifts of the Holy Spirit with one of the Beatitudes, he relates Wonder and Awe⁶⁵ to a “poverty of spirit” and a rejection of high-minded pride. As is often the case, there is an autobiographical context for Augustine’s approach here. The regrets of his own past-life had left him to associate human inquiry not with wonder per se, but with *curiositas*, a counterfeit wonder that took advantages of human

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ 1 John 2:16: “For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.”

⁵⁹ 1 John 2:16.

⁶⁰ *Conf.* X. 35.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ *Conf.* II. 6. 13.

⁶⁴ *On the Sermon on the Mount*, Book I, 4:11: “The fear of God corresponds to the humble, of whom it is here said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, i.e. those not puffed up, not proud: to whom the apostle says, Be not high-minded, but fear; i.e. be not lifted up.”

⁶⁵ Elsewhere known as Fear of the Lord

weakness. Only through an examination of *curiositas* can we hope to extract something approaching a Christian wonder in the writings of Augustine.

***Curiositas* in Augustine**

Firstly, *curiositas* is not necessarily a perversion of wonder, it is an impersonation of wonder. In the words of Augustine, *curiositas* “masquerades”⁶⁶ as wonder. This has important implications for our study of Christian wonder. In short, Augustine’s treatment of *curiositas* is of particular use for demonstrating what Christian wonder is not. In doing so, it hints at the positive content of what true Christian wonder is or should be. Two examples from the *Confessions* suggest what Augustine means by *curiositas*: a “visual desire”⁶⁷ bent on “gaining experience”⁶⁸ in ways harmful to the human soul. In the case of a theatrical performance in Book Three of the *Confessions*, *curiositas* works by catalysing a pre-existing weakness in Augustine: his self-gratifying desire for distress.⁶⁹ “I was melting away into iniquity, and pursuing vain curiosity: as a result, even as I was abandoning you, it dragged me down to the depths of impiety.”⁷⁰ One important point emerges from this early example of *curiositas* in the *Confessions*: it existed at surface level: “[the plays I loved were] fictions that, when I heard them, would merely graze my surface.”⁷¹ True wonder for the Christian was something deeper, to be found in the depths of the self, so that it could lead upwards to higher things.

The *curiositas* into which Augustine “melted away”⁷² at the theatre worked surreptitiously; it perpetuated a sinful disposition of which Augustine was, at the time, unaware. It made him sin in ways he did not then understand. In a later treatment of *curiositas* in the *Confessions*, Augustine relates the ominous power of *curiositas* to lure its victim, in mind and body, into actions they already *know* are sinful. In Book Six, Augustine relates in evocative detail how his dear friend Alypius, against his better judgement,⁷³ falls victim by curiosity to the violent

⁶⁶ *Conf.* X. 35.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Conf.* III. 2. 4: “But in those days I was a pitiable creature, in love with feeling distress, and I would seek out occasions for being distressed: whenever the pretended troubles of other people on stage were involved, the more an actor’s performance reduced me to tears, the more pleasure it gave me, the more completely it captivated me.”

⁷⁰ *Conf.* III. 2. 4.

⁷¹ *Conf.* III. 2. 4.

⁷² *Conf.* III. 2. 4.

⁷³ *Conf.* VI. 8. 13: “it was there [in Rome] that he was extraordinarily carried away by this extraordinary appetite for gladiatorial shows. For although he disliked and detested them, he happened to bump into some friends and fellow students on their way back from a dinner, and they used friendly force to drag him, still hotly protesting and resisting, into the amphitheater at a time when the deadly and cruel shows

spectacle of the gladiatorial games. The language used to describe Alypius as he fell prey to the temptations of *curiositas* is telling. Even though he staunchly despises the bloodshed of the games, Alypius is gripped by “madness”; he is not the same man he was when he first arrived at the amphitheatre; he becomes “unaware” of the sin into which he is slipping.⁷⁴ This passage reveals something of the nature of *curiositas*, and by extension, of true Christian wonder. *Curiositas* leads not to knowledge, but a type of ignorance. It does not bring about a growth, but rather a diminution of the self. *Curiositas* catalyses damaging desires and subverts righteous ones. In the end, Augustine is left to speculate whether our will is great enough to manage such temptations:

because flesh strives against spirit and spirit against flesh the result is that [people] do not do what they desire, but have recourse to what they can manage and are content with it, because they do not desire that object for which they have not the strength robustly enough to give them themselves the strength to attain it.⁷⁵

The seductive snares of counterfeit wonder (*curiositas*), rather than the positive content of true wonder (*admiratio*), are the chief concern of Augustine in the *Confessions*: “Our curiosity is put to the test every day, in so many mean and petty ways; who can count up how often we fall?”⁷⁶ Indeed, *Curiositas* is mentioned four times more often than *admiratio* throughout the *Confessions*. The latter occurs on only three occasions throughout the entirety of the work and in each of these cases the use is ambiguous at best. On occasions, *admiratio* seems to be used almost interchangeably with *curiositas*. In Book Six Augustine relates how *curiositas* tempted him towards married life, even to the point of convincing his chaste friend Alypius to consider the same course. With the benefit of hindsight, Augustine concludes that Alypius was merely “captured by wonder (*admiratio*)”⁷⁷ and goes on to praise God for taking mercy on two wretches. Again in Book Thirteen, when criticizing pre-Christian priests for their faithless reliance on “miracles and sacraments and mystical voices”⁷⁸, Augustine explains that it is “ignorance - the mother of wonderment (*admirationis*)”⁷⁹ that accounted for

were taking place. He declared, “You may drag my body to such a place and set it down there, but surely you cannot also fix my mind and gaze upon those performances? I shall be both present, and absent: and so I will defeat both you and them.”

⁷⁴ *Conf.* VI. 6.13

⁷⁵ *Conf.* X. 23.

⁷⁶ *Conf.* X. 35. 57.

⁷⁷ The Loeb translation of this passage even goes as far as to translate *admiratio* as ‘curiosity’. It is not an objectionable translation. In the sense of Augustine’s Latin, the two concepts are almost indistinguishable here.

⁷⁸ *Conf.* XIII. 21

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

the fruitless reliance on such “secret signs”.⁸⁰ It is unclear from the *Confessions* whether anything positive can arise from the ignorance in which wonder begins. As is often the case with his theology, when Augustine is talking about *curiositas*, he is talking about himself. The transgressions of his own sexual, religious and academic past-life had left him to associate human inquiry not with wonder per se, but with *curiositas*, a counterfeit wonder that preyed on the weakness of the human will. What results is a Christian wonder that is partial and negativistic. Any wonder that does emerge requires a sharply defined goal: a humble, pious knowledge of creation, self and ultimately God. In the process of Augustine’s treatment, Christian wonder had become a moral as well as an epistemological concept, raising the question not only of what knowledge humans could have of God, but what inquiries they *should* pursue in the first place. In the end, Augustine’s open-air *confessio* raises as many questions about the content of a Christian wonder as it answers. As this section has argued, his treatment of wonder is ambiguous at best. One is left to work backwards from the extended treatment of *curiositas* in the *Confessions* to surmise what positive content could be ascribed to a Christian wonder. On several occasions the adjective ‘vain’ is used to describe *curiositas* in Augustine’s work.⁸¹ If *curiositas* is vain, the true Christian wonder in whose place it masquerades should, it follows, contain some element of virtue. Indeed, virtue it was that would form the context for the Church’s most consequential treatment of Christian wonder in the work of Thomas Aquinas.

Section 2: Aquinas and the systematization of Christian wonder

Thomas Aquinas’ is the Christian theological account of wonder that does most to dispel the ambiguity of Augustine’s treatment. Aquinas’ theology of wonder remains definitive, it will be argued, because it clarified the role of wonder in the life of the Christian believer and in the theological enterprise. Aquinas’ innovation was to reenvision wonder as a key catalyst in the search for faith (knowledge of God), and thus, as the true spirit of the theological enterprise. By investigating wonder in its true context – the virtues – in Aquinas’ work, this chapter will clarify the key characteristics of what will be referred to as ‘Christian wonder’ in the thesis at large.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ It is a ‘vain concern’ at *Conf.* X. 35. 56.

Wonder and Fear

Aquinas discusses *admiratio* under several different headings in his *Summa Theologica*. His definition that wonder is a “certain desire for knowledge”⁸² is his most well-known comment, and has remained the lodestar for the study of Christian Wonder over the centuries. Sticking closely to his Aristotelian principles, Aquinas agrees with the Greeks that wonder is an epistemological issue, and forms the beginning of philosophical research. Taking up where the Christian tradition of Augustine had left off, however, Aquinas does not neglect the moral implications of wonder. His treatment of wonder is two-fold, balanced between the concepts of Hope and Fear.⁸³ The latter designation - wonder as a type of fear - is rooted firmly in the pessimistic tradition of the Church Father John Damascene. In his own nuanced treatment, Aquinas’ marries the enthusiasm of the Greek philosophical tradition (wonder as the beginning of philosophy) with the dourer appraisal of the early Christian tradition. The clash of perspectives is raised in the following objection: “Philosophers have been led by amazement to seek the truth, as stated in the beginning of *Metaphysics*. But fear leads to flight rather than to search. Therefore amazement is not a species of fear.”⁸⁴

The objection is an enduring one. A modern Thomist describes a similar discomfort today with the designation of wonder as a type of fear: “young people have an especially hard time accepting that wonder is a species of fear because they suffer from overconfidence: full of animal vigour and having not yet known disappointment, they think that the world, the realm of philosophy included, is theirs for the conquering.”⁸⁵

In response to these objections, Aquinas threads a deft line of argument through the Greek and Christian positions. He acknowledges bluntly that “the authority of John Damascene suffices”⁸⁶ when it comes to the designation of wonder as a type of fear, but proceeds to make a distinction between two types of fear: wonder (*admiratio*) and *stupor*. Both are a natural initial response of fear to a great and unexpected future evil. One wonders at the unknown quantity at hand and recoils from the unexpected challenge. Wonder degenerates

⁸² *ST* II-I, q. 32, a. 8, co.

⁸³ The first portion appears in the section of the *Summa* dealing the Passions under the heading ‘The Cause of pleasure’. The second portion appears under the heading of ‘Fear’.

⁸⁴ *ST* II-I, q. 41, a. 4, obj. 5.

⁸⁵ Marie George, “Philosophical Wonder as a Species of Fear: The Position of Thomas Aquinas,” *Angelicum: Periodicum Trimestre Pontificiae Studiorum Universitatis a Sancto Thoma Aquinate in Urbe* 72, no. 2 (1995): 216.

⁸⁶ *ST* II-I, q. 41, a. 4, s. c.

into stupor if it does not move beyond this initial recoiling. Wonder moves quickly towards inquiry, while stupor is rooted by a type of laziness, says Aquinas, in a state of mental inertia.

He who is amazed [wonders] shrinks at present from forming a judgment of that which amazes him, fearing to fall short of the truth, but inquires afterwards: whereas he who is overcome by stupor fears both to judge at present, and to inquire afterwards. Wherefore *admiratio* is a beginning of philosophical research: whereas *stupor* is a hindrance thereto.⁸⁷

Here Aquinas maintains the vocabulary and authority of the Christian tradition while keeping to the spirit of inquiry at the heart of the Greek philosophical tradition of Aristotle. What has been added in the process is something of a change of stakes. The move from wonder to inquiry is the gateway to philosophy, an epistemological end in itself. When wonder is transposed to a Christian theological context, however, inquiry for inquiry's sake cannot suffice. Fear, as Aquinas points out, always takes as its object some future evil. If wonder is a type of fear, the future evil it takes as its object is not a physical evil but an intellectual one: the fear of error. Struck initially with some idea, concept or incident that overwhelms it, the intellect fears to make a theological judgement lest it stray into error. In the theological tradition, such an error could constitute a serious sin. In affirming wonder as a species of fear, Aquinas underlined the ultimate destination of wonder made necessary by its Christianization: proper knowledge of God.

Wonder and Hope

The tradition of John Damascene and Augustine had made clear the implications of a misdirected wonder that degenerates into a type of proud, shallow *curiositas*. Such misguided intellectual excursions endangered the moral wellbeing of the self and distracted attention from its ultimate purpose in God. Based as he was in the philosophical tradition of Aristotle (which saw all pursuit of knowledge as inherently virtuous), Aquinas sought another marriage of Greek and Christian traditions in his categorization of wonder as a cause of pleasure. Aquinas here roots wonder in the Christian virtue of hope. Hope gives rise to desires, and desires give rise to pleasure. "Consequently wonder is a cause of pleasure, in so far as it includes a hope of getting the knowledge which one desires to have. For this reason whatever is wonderful is pleasing, for instance things that are scarce."⁸⁸

⁸⁷ *ST II-I*, q. 41, a. 4, ad. 5. *ST II-I*, q. 41, a. 4, ad. 5: *Ad quantum dicendum quod admirans refugit in praesenti dare iudicium de eo quod miratur; timens defectum, sed in futurum inquit. Stupens autem timet et in praesenti iudicare, et in futuro inquirere. Unde admiratio est principium philosophandi, sed stupor est philosophicae considerationis impedimentum.*

⁸⁸ *ST II-I*, q. 32, a. 8, co.

It is at this point that Aquinas defines wonder as a “certain desire for knowledge” derived from a hope that proper inquiry can ultimately lead to sure knowledge. Pleasure results from this process of inquiry because: “man takes the greatest pleasure in finding or learning things for the first time.”⁸⁹ Therefore wonder is a type of desire for knowledge that is sustained by our Christian hope in God and which results in a particular type of pleasure that comes from recognising and addressing our ignorance of that same God. Two key points about Christian Wonder emerge. Firstly, wonder (as a desire) is sustained only in hope. Thus Christian Wonder, like the virtue of hope on which it is based- is not an abstract, isolated phenomenon but an active, ongoing process. Just as Christians are called to continuously live out their hope: to work towards the ends they wish to see, so too Christian wonder is an ongoing process: Christians are called to sustain by their actions (proper theological inquiry) the wonder they feel in response to God and his creation.⁹⁰ As God’s gift of life is sustained and enacted in each moment, so too should be our hope in that gift. This hope sustains our wonder at the ongoing gift of God in creation, and our constant desire to grow in knowledge and love of the gift and its divine Giver. By this conception, the centrality for human inquiry is reaffirmed. It is not simply an end in itself - as it was for the Greeks. Rather, it is the only proper ongoing response to God’s continual gift of life.

Aquinas’ definition of wonder as a “certain desire for knowledge” drew on the Greek philosophical tradition and the ambiguous treatment of the Church Fathers to produce something altogether new. Aquinas created a comprehensive account of a Christian Wonder that began and ended in God. God was known through his continual creative presence in the world. This sustained an active human hope which in turn grounded Christian Wonder. It was this wonder that accompanied, governed and returned human inquiry towards knowledge of God. Emerging from a state of ignorance, the prospect of this knowledge could elicit fear (in case of error) and pleasure (in case of new knowledge). Taken to excess, wonder as fear could degenerate into stupor that precluded inquiry, while wonder as desire for pleasure could degenerate into a shallow *curiositas* that misdirected inquiry.

From his Aristotelian standpoint, Aquinas had softened the pessimism of Augustine’s *curiositas*. The idea of human inquiry (and thus its beginning - wonder), was not caught up in a fraught act of theological “therapy”⁹¹ as it had been in the *Confessions*. Pursuit of

⁸⁹ *ST* II-I, q. 32, a. 8, ad. 2.

⁹⁰ Cf. Randall B. Smith “If philosophy begins in wonder’: Aquinas, creation, and wonder”, *Communio*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2014): 102.

⁹¹ Brown, *Augustine*, 165.

knowledge, (especially of God) was virtuous in and of itself, but depended on the manner in which we pursue it.

Wonder and Studiositas

To be sure, the danger of *curiositas* still existed for Aquinas: “the desire to know is natural to human beings, and so it will be virtuous and laudable if human beings strive for knowledge as right reason dictates. And there will be the sin of curiosity if one exceeds the rule of reason.”⁹² But now, the responsibility for *curiositas* lay with the individual inquirer and rested on the cultivation of a corrective virtue Aquinas termed *studiositas*:

It belongs to temperance to moderate the movement of the appetite so that it not tend excessively to that which we naturally desire. But just as a person naturally desires the pleasures of food and sex, so too, in regard to his soul, a person naturally desires to know. . . But the moderation of this desire pertains to the virtue of *studiositas*.⁹³

Studiositas derives from the term *studium*, which Aquinas himself expresses as “a vigorous application of the mind to something.”⁹⁴ Aquinas goes on to define *studiositas* as the corrective to *curiositas*. It involves a certain intellectual humility: knowing the right teachers and traditions from which to learn, relating all knowledge to its ultimate source in God and acknowledging one’s own intellectual limitations.⁹⁵ Here the fault lines between an epistemological and a moral interpretation of wonder start to show. Following the Greeks, Aquinas seems here to acknowledge the epistemological boundaries of wonder: humankind is limited by what it can know. But following Augustine, Aquinas viewed wonder as a moral issue, and *curiositas* as the moral sin in question.⁹⁶ Part of the moral responsibility on the human inquirer lay in his cultivation of *studiositas*, including the ability to judge the limits of his own intellect. But Aquinas does not, and perhaps cannot, expand on the details of this intellectual self-regulation: “Thomas is not very specific about what kinds of knowledge ought to be sought, when and where and by whom.”⁹⁷

⁹² *De malo*, 8.2c.

⁹³ *ST* II-II, q. 166.

⁹⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 166. a. 1. co.

⁹⁵ Gregory Reichberg, “*Studiositas*: The Virtue of Attention,” in *The Common Things: Essays on Thomism* (McInerney, ed. Daniel McInerney (Washington: American Maritain Association, 1999), 142: “*Studiositas* is a kind of careful and vigorous attention to some intellectual activity. To concentrate rightly, to occupy one’s mind well, to attend to whatever truly warrants one’s attention.”

⁹⁶ In a development of Augustine’s thought, Aquinas actually differentiated in *ST* I-II. q. 167, a. 1. ad 3 between *curiositas* of the intellect (*circa cognitionem intellectivam*) and *curiositas* of the senses (*circa sensitivam cognitionem*). The latter corresponds more closely to Augustine’s *concupiscentia oculorum*.

⁹⁷ Reichberg, *Studiositas*, 142: “this is in keeping with his keen sense of the limitations of moral science, which cannot direct action in particular instances. The virtue of prudence alone can fully disclose how a specific person ought to pursue speculative inquiry within the context of his or her life.”

In his vision of Christian Wonder, Aquinas had drawn on Greek epistemology and Christian morality to create a more rigorous and hopeful account of Christian wonder at the very heart of mankind's search for God. By Aquinas' scholastic account, our instinct for truth proceeded from God and must return to God the findings of its inquiry. Balancing fear of error with the desire for the pleasure of new knowledge, the inquirer had to cultivate a studious humility that limited his inquiries to the boundaries of his intellect. But it was not clear how humankind could establish these boundaries without exceeding them: "To restrict a man's desire for knowledge once it goes, as Aquinas says, 'above the capacity of his own intelligence', is more easily done in particular cases than in general. Our capacities are not always clear, and prying into the secrets of nature thus may or may not be vain curiosity."⁹⁸

In order to understand the kind of intellectual self-regulation Aquinas had in mind for human wonder, one must consider the important ways in which apophaticism influenced his theology. Apophaticism enshrines for theology the essential unknowability and ineffability of God, and guided Aquinas' own efforts to establish the boundaries of right human inquiry.

The apophatic approach to wonder

Aquinas defined wonder as a "certain desire for knowledge"⁹⁹. For Aquinas, apophasis was the idiom in which the fulfilment of this desire could be spoken of in a theological context. Aquinas himself was aware of the vast expanse of knowledge that lay beyond the limits of human inquiry: "Now we cannot know what God is, but only what God is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which God does."¹⁰⁰ His diligent reappraisal of Augustine had set a hopeful seal on where Christian Wonder could and should lead humankind in their desire for knowledge. His epistemological and moral affirmations are "moderate and equipoised"¹⁰¹, and had suggested the need for a cautionary counterweight – an emphasis on where wonder could and should *not* lead humankind in their search for God. Indeed "looming over all knowledge [in Aquinas' work] is the mysterious incomprehensibility of God."¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Gladden Pappin, "Directing Philosophy: Aquinas, studiousness, and modern curiosity", *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 68, no. 2 (2014): 345-346.

⁹⁹ *ST* II-I, q. 32, a. 8, co.

¹⁰⁰ *ST* I, q. 3.

¹⁰¹ Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 355.

¹⁰² Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 355.

Aquinas' account of Christian Wonder kept "the tensioned truth of God in view."¹⁰³ It had emphasized the delight and the virtue of new knowledge of God, and had simultaneously outlined the moral and epistemological constraints necessary to avoid the excesses of *curiositas* and *stupor*. As Aquinas acknowledged, the limits of the human intellect and the ineffability of the transcendent God posed challenges to wonder: that most natural human "desire for knowledge"¹⁰⁴. Christian Wonder would never 'find the answer' and thus subside, but rather would be a lifelong process of inquiry and relationship with God. Thus, Christian Wonder not only survived the particular challenge posed to it by theology, it subsisted on it. In Aquinas, wonder emerges as the essentially religious state of mind because in God, its desire for knowledge is never, and can never be exhausted. Theology constantly renews and rewards wonder in its search for knowledge of the infinite God. On earth, as Aquinas noted, knowledge of this God *in his essence* was impossible: "here, He can be known through His effects, and in heaven, through His essence."¹⁰⁵ Because of the epistemological challenges, our Christian Wonder, our inquiries and our relationship with God in this life could not deny the reality that "it is not possible to know what He is, but only that He exists."¹⁰⁶ Indeed, in another work, Aquinas' words are even more unequivocal. "this is the summit of humankind's knowledge about God: that it knows nothing about God."¹⁰⁷

In his discussion of Boethius' Trinitarian theology *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, Aquinas considers in article two the question of "Whether the Human Mind can arrive at an idea of God." In the arguments that follow, Aquinas draws on the apophaticism of the eastern theological tradition: he quotes extensively from Pseudo-Dionysius, by whom the apophatic approach was first and most firmly established before being embraced later more generally by the Eastern Church. He concludes that the intellect "cannot know God in this life through that form which is His essence; though it is in this way that He is known by the blessed in heaven."¹⁰⁸ Aquinas, the doyen of Western, kataphatic theology, may appear an unlikely conduit for such apophaticism. But in reality we encounter in his work on wonder a search for balance above all else. This balance achieves a parity between a confident belief in the gift of human reason and a humble respect for the boundaries of human knowledge. This creates in

¹⁰³ Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 356.

¹⁰⁴ *ST II-I*, q. 32, a. 8, co.

¹⁰⁵ *ST I* q. 1 a. 2 ad. 4.

¹⁰⁶ *ST I* q. 1 a. 2 ad. 2.

¹⁰⁷ *Quaest. Disp. De pot. Dei*, q. 7, a. 5, ad. 14.

¹⁰⁸ *Super Boetium De Trinitate I*, q. 1 a. 2 co. 1.

his theology a “tensile equilibrium... [which] strives to interweave positive and negative theology and preserve their close relationship from unravelling.”¹⁰⁹ In doing so, he achieved the most truly catholic theology since Augustine - “betraying a clear predilection for “both/and” over “either/or.”¹¹⁰

Aquinas’ synthesis found an appealing balance between the kataphatic and the apophatic, a balance that maintained the hypertension at the heart of Christian Wonder. An approach to Christian Wonder that neglected one or other of these theological pathways could lead into error and a “distorted image of God.”¹¹¹ An overly affirmative, kataphatic approach could lead to an “anthropomorphic conception of God”,¹¹² a *curiositas* more idolatrous than iconic. On the other hand, an overly apophatic approach threatens an intellectual stupor that “sever[s] all connection between the human and the divine.”¹¹³ In emphasizing the inherent ineffability and incomprehensibility of God, apophaticism narrowed for humans the range of acceptable theological inquiry in Aquinas’ account of wonder. But in narrowing and channelling the range of humankind’s wonder, apophaticism imparted a theological impetus to the search for God. As has been argued, for Aquinas Christian wonder is a two-part process, consisting of an initial incomprehension, followed by a studious theological inquiry into that initial incomprehension. Apophaticism, by holding in focus the inherent mystery of God, heightened the pitch of the former and the stakes of the latter. This does not lead to a theological standstill, for as Meister Eckart made clear when discussing negative theology, no Christian theology or philosophy can end in complete negation, “for negation is undertaken in order to affirm in the truest sense possible.”¹¹⁴

It was by the exercise of virtue that Aquinas hoped to chart for humans their path back to the ineffable God, to a share in God’s self-knowledge. By investigating wonder in its true context – the virtues – in Aquinas’ work, this chapter will clarify the key characteristics of what will be referred to as ‘Christian wonder’ in the thesis at large.

¹⁰⁹ Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 356.

¹¹⁰ Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 356.

¹¹¹ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God : negative theology in the Platonic tradition : Plato to Eriugena* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1995), 11.

¹¹² Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 11.

¹¹³ Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 11.

¹¹⁴ Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 276.

Section 3: Virtue - the context of wonder in Aquinas

Aquinas' account of virtue is best understood in the context of his overall theology at large. Both rest on a dynamic interdependence between nature and grace, which together prepare humankind for the "stumbling journey"¹¹⁵ towards its ultimate end in God. As Aquinas "the demanding optimist"¹¹⁶ stresses, our distinctiveness as creatures of reason implies that humans have been given both the responsibility and also the means for our own happiness in this life. But so too does he acknowledge the supernatural grace required for our supernatural happiness in God. Our individual human nature flourishes through reason and is perfected by grace: *Gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*.¹¹⁷ Aquinas' account of virtue enshrines this deft balance of nature and grace. By developing the acquired virtues of temperance, courage, justice and prudence humankind can achieve "reason in action"¹¹⁸ and hone the dispositions and skills that lead to the "happiness... which a human can obtain by means of one's natural principles."¹¹⁹ By the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, infused in them by the Holy Spirit, humans can come to partake in the very divinity of God: "a kind of participation of the godhead, about which it is written that by Christ we are made partakers of the divine nature."¹²⁰ As Aquinas acknowledges, our stumbling journey is plotted both by virtue and by vice. Virtue is not the mere avoidance of obstacles (vices) along the way, but rather the impulse itself to keep making progress towards our ultimate end in life. The ideal, as Aquinas relates, is that through such a concerted, habitual impulse towards our ultimate good, combined with God's ongoing initiative in our lives, the virtues become a sort of "second nature"¹²¹ to humankind - the means by which we come to the fullness of our humanity and prepare for our own share in God's divinity.

The first part of this section will clarify what is distinctive in Aquinas' account of virtue. His was neither an Aristotelian philosophy "tinctured by Christianity",¹²² nor a Pelagian virtue by which humankind could achieve salvation by its own efforts. Understood in the context of his wider theology, Aquinas' was a ground-breaking departure from the Christian

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Marie Dominique Chenu, *Aquinas and his role in theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 106.

¹¹⁷ *ST I*, q.1, art. 8, ad. 2.

¹¹⁸ Chenu, *Aquinas*, 106.

¹¹⁹ *ST I-II* q.62 a.1 co.

¹²⁰ *ST I-II* q.62 a.1 co.

¹²¹ McCabe, *Virtue and Truth*, 166.

¹²² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, edited by Thomas Gilby (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), xxi.

tradition of morality typified by the medieval sin manuals. Aquinas' account of virtue eschews unthinking obedience or the avoidance of vice *per se*, presenting instead "a moral agenda that is extraordinarily positive, comprehensive, human and hopeful."¹²³ The second section of this section will explain in more detail the nature of the relationship between the acquired and infused virtues, focusing on *prudentia* and *caritas* as the governing example of each, and grace as the "super-nature"¹²⁴ by which the virtues, both acquired and infused, are brought to bear in humankind. Finally, a third section will suggest ways in which Aquinas' account of virtue can enhance our understanding of Christian wonder. Wonder (*admiratio*) as "a certain desire for knowledge"¹²⁵ is governed in the first instance by temperance, but can be understood, like theology *qua sacra doctrina* itself, as a sort of sanctifying, sacramental journey towards the mystery of God. 'Virtuous' Christian wonder can be understood as a gift of the Holy Spirit, "an easy and prompt response to divine inspiration, a meeting between the divine and the human at an instinctual level."¹²⁶ This gift, like the virtues by which it is directed, springs ultimately from the activity of grace in our lives.

A strikingly dynamic moral agenda

The vibrant audacity of Aquinas' account of virtue is cast into stark relief by a comparison with the medieval sin manuals that preceded his work. These manuals took it upon themselves to list and describe in detail the myriad of sins by which the believer could distance themselves from God through sinful vice. The context of these sin manuals was a morality based on deterrence and obedience. The theology that underpinned this brand of morality conceived of the will and the reason as separate, opposed parts of the human person. Aquinas' theology offered "a strikingly dynamic moral agenda"¹²⁷ by contrast, in which "morality is not primarily about doing right actions and avoiding wrong ones."¹²⁸ The will as Aquinas understood it was not inherently untrustworthy and was, in fact, attracted towards that which it understood to be good. The variety of ways in which the reason could and

¹²³ James Keenan, "Virtue," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Summa Theologiae*, eds. Philip. McCosker & Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 196.

¹²⁴ Thomas O'Meara, "Virtues in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas," *Theological Studies* 58, no. 2 (1997): 274.

¹²⁵ *ST* II-I, q. 32, a. 8, co.

¹²⁶ O'Meara, *Virtue in Aquinas*, 269.

¹²⁷ O'Meara, *Virtue in Aquinas*, 269.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

should direct the will towards the ultimate good amongst goods, God, means there are a variety of acquired virtues by which reason achieves its purpose in humankind.

More important for Aquinas than mere obedience was the idea of practical intelligence - governed primarily by the moral virtue of prudence. Practical intelligence means knowing the right thing to do in specific, concrete circumstances. It formed the necessary compliment to theoretical intelligence (knowledge of the 'rules') on which the medieval sin manuals were primarily based. Herbert McCabe uses the analogy of a game of football to underline the importance of practical intelligence:

being thoroughly familiar with... [the] laws [of the game] does not help you to play well - indeed it is quite compatible with not playing the game at all... As you get better at playing you become more enthusiastic about the game. This is the combined operation of practical intelligence and will.¹²⁹

The enthusiasm of which McCabe speaks is significant. For virtue is not merely about actions, but about intentionality. For a virtue to achieve true expression, it must conform with the deepest personality of the human actor. Being virtuous is not just about effort, or the development of a "grooved action."¹³⁰ As Pinckaers has suggested, even the translation of the Aquinas' *habitus* to the English 'habit' can be misleading.¹³¹ Crucially, one does not act virtuously because it is the easiest thing to do but because of "an inclination to do so - because of the sort of person we have become...not out of a sense of duty [but] because it is what you really want to do."¹³² Thus virtues do not reside on the surface level as a superficial veneer of obedience, but penetrate deep into the interiority of an individual's powers, shaping the sort of person they are and the sort of life they desire to lead. As McCabe concludes, "the manuals show no serious interest in the development of Christian life, the growth in grace by which people are educated in the moral dispositions, virtues, so that they mature into being their true selves."¹³³ To live with true virtue, then, is not to sacrifice or deny part of yourself but indeed to "become fully alive."¹³⁴

Aquinas' morality enshrines the true individuality of each human creature, but his account of virtue is careful not to overstate the ability of humankind to achieve their ultimate

¹²⁹ McCabe, *Virtue and Truth*, 166.

¹³⁰ O'Meara, *Virtue in Aquinas*, 265.

¹³¹ Servais Pinckaers & Bernard Gilligan, "Virtue is not a Habit," *CrossCurrents* 12, no.1 (1962): 72.

¹³² McCabe, *Virtue and Truth*, 167.

¹³³ McCabe, *Virtue and Truth*, 168-9.

¹³⁴ Keenan, *Virtue*, 196.

end outside of God's involvement. In the realm of virtue, practice makes better, but does not quite make perfect. To attain perfectly to our ultimate end in God, our efforts in honing the acquired virtues are not enough; the infused theological virtues of faith, hope, and love are required. The balance of this relationship between the acquired and infused virtues is of critical importance to Aquinas' account of virtue. It is not the case that God is present in the infused virtues and absent in the acquired. Even in the acquired virtues, God's grace is at work. For as Aquinas states: "God works in every will under every nature."¹³⁵ Rather, as James Keenan observes, "God is constantly empowering us."¹³⁶ Our virtues, even the acquired virtues, are "rooted in God's initiative."¹³⁷ To overlook or ignore God's constant involvement in the life of virtue would be to diminish the role of grace in the theology of Aquinas, the "super-nature"¹³⁸ that oversees all the virtues and brings them to their ultimate end in God. What differentiates the acquired from the infused virtues is that while "the acquired virtues require our agency; the infused require only our assent."¹³⁹ To acknowledge the role of grace throughout every stage of the virtuous life is not to detract from the freedom of our human nature. Rather, as McCabe concludes: "to act from the personality you have built for yourself or which has been given to you by God's grace, or both, is to act in total freedom, to act from yourself."¹⁴⁰

Prudentia, Caritas and Grace

Virtues are described by Aquinas as "that which makes its possessor good, and their work good likewise."¹⁴¹ Aquinas uses the word *habitus*¹⁴² which has been translated variously as habits, arts, skills, dispositions.¹⁴³ Particularly in the case of the acquired virtues, these *habitus* are most recognisable in the life of the virtuous person, whose greater facility for good acts, says Torrell, can appear incomprehensible to those who do not share it.¹⁴⁴ The acquired virtues present us with the "profile of the type of person we ought to become."¹⁴⁵ While our unique individuality means our virtuous acts will not mirror exactly

¹³⁵ ST I-II. 55. 4 ad. 6.

¹³⁶ Keenan, *Virtue*, 199.

¹³⁷ McCabe, *Virtue and Truth*, 166.

¹³⁸ O'Meara, *Virtue in Aquinas*, 265.

¹³⁹ Keenan, *Virtue*, 199.

¹⁴⁰ McCabe, *Virtue and Truth*, 167.

¹⁴¹ ST I-II q.56 a.3 c.

¹⁴² *habitus sunt*, cf. ST I-II q.55 a.1.

¹⁴³ Pinckaers & Gilligan, *Virtue is not a habit*, 72.

¹⁴⁴ Jean Pierre Torrell, "La vision de Dieu "per essentiam" selon saint Thomas d'Aquin," *La Visione E Lo Sguardo Nel Medio Evo* 1 (1997): 44.

¹⁴⁵ Keenan, *Virtue and Truth*, 197.

those of our virtuous neighbour, the disposition to practice “reason in action”¹⁴⁶ in pursuit of our own happiness is common to all those who live in virtue. The acquired virtues will also be recognizable in someone by a certain balance in their actions. All of the acquired virtues are based on the idea of a mean between two extremes. Temperance, for example, is a mean between insensibility, on the one hand, and misguided desire on the other. The maintenance of this moral mean prevents social and political collapse and requires both theoretical and practical intelligence. As Aquinas outlines, prudence is the acquired virtue that governs the practical implementation of the moral virtues in achieving this required mean.¹⁴⁷ As Chenu emphasizes, “prudence is reason itself rendered perfect in its judgment and its choices...[it] directs the activity of the virtues toward eternal life.”¹⁴⁸

Once again, Aquinas’ account of the virtue of prudence is rooted within his wider theology. Prudence governs the practical implementation of the moral virtues in real concrete situations. The decisions arrived at by prudence are based, as Aquinas relates in the *Summa*,¹⁴⁹ on a number of practical factors: the memory of past experiences, prioritizing a particular goal, deference to those who are wiser or more experienced, careful attention to circumstances and future consequences, assessment of obstacles and opportunities. Much of the material that goes into the proper exercise of prudence, then, comes from sensual experience. These experiences, Aquinas explains elsewhere in his theology, are organised by the “interior senses”¹⁵⁰: the *sensus communis*, the *imaginatio*, the *sensus memoria* and the *vis cogitativa*. All of these interior senses are, as McCabe puts it, a “bodily affair”¹⁵¹. The senses are thus not to be inherently mistrusted in Aquinas’ theology or in his account of virtue. Rather, they are the very basis by which individual human actors come to develop and exercise prudence in real-life, concrete situations. Prudence, then, governs the practical implementation of the moral virtues, which themselves come to perfection in the infused theological virtues. The interdependence of Aquinas’ account of virtue is well summarized by McCabe: “For Aquinas the basis of the moral life is *prudentia*, right practical reason in the development of *caritas*; an intellectual virtue which cannot be exercised without the moral virtues and cannot be exercised effectively without the infused divine virtues.”¹⁵²The

¹⁴⁶ Chenu, *Aquinas*, 106.

¹⁴⁷ *ST* I-II.64. art. I, ad.1.

¹⁴⁸ Chenu, *Aquinas*, 111.

¹⁴⁹ *ST* II-II, qq. 48, 49, 51 passim.

¹⁵⁰ McCabe, *Virtue and Truth*, 169.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

acquired virtues can be traced to the schema of Aristotle, who saw them as the means to humankind's ultimate end in God. However, in incorporating Aristotle's thought into his Christian theology, Aquinas expanded upon Aristotle's conception of how humankind could achieve its ultimate end. Aquinas saw the acquired virtues of Aristotle as an imperfect achievement of this end, and thus added the infused theological virtues of faith, hope and charity to his account of virtue. These infused virtues, gifted to humankind through the supernatural grace of the Holy Spirit, allow for the perfect realisation of our ultimate end in God. Aquinas understood these theological virtues sequentially. Without faith, "a sort of knowledge [of God]"¹⁵³, the other theological virtues cannot proceed. *Caritas* is described as the "form"¹⁵⁴ of all the other virtues. By this Aquinas does not equate it with God's governing grace. Rather, *caritas* can be best understood as *directing* all the other virtues in humankind. Technically, acquired virtues performed without *caritas* would still be virtuous (raising the possibility of non-Christians in whom virtue can still be recognised). The ideal of Christian life is friendship in God – *agape*. The pursuit of such a life without *caritas* would be hollow and imperfect. *Caritas* perfects our stumbling journey back to friendship in God. This is the extent to which *caritas* can be understood as the form of the virtues, the "the most excellent virtue."¹⁵⁵

Aquinas is careful to distinguish the infused virtue of *caritas* from the gift of God's supernatural grace. "Charity is called the form of the other virtues not in the mode of exemplification or of essence but rather in the mode of an efficient cause as it bestows a particular form."¹⁵⁶ Grace, as O'Meara puts it, is the "the context of the virtues... [it] names the message, the power, and the goal"¹⁵⁷ of Aquinas' wider theology and his account of the virtues in the *Summa* and elsewhere. Aquinas uses various formulations to describe grace in his theology. Grace is a participation in deeper levels of God's life,¹⁵⁸ but also a "supernatural principle moving one interiorly."¹⁵⁹ Grace is a created "quasi-form"¹⁶⁰ of the uncreated, "a kind of supernatural reality in the human being coming from God",¹⁶¹ a "kind of

¹⁵³ *ST* II-II q.1 a.1.

¹⁵⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 6.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 8.

¹⁵⁷ O'Meara, *Virtue in Aquinas*, 259.

¹⁵⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 43, a. 3.

¹⁵⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 6, a. 1.

¹⁶⁰ *De Veritate*, q. 27, a. 1 cf. *ST* 1-2, q. 110, a. 4: "Grace, prior to virtue, is in the essence of the soul as a subject, participating in divinization."

¹⁶¹ *ST* I-II, q. 110, a. 1.

quality."¹⁶²As Aquinas explains, it is through grace that God equips the human person to achieve their ultimate end in the supernatural order: “for those moved to reach an eternal supernatural good he infuses certain forms or qualities of the supernatural order according to which easily and enthusiastically they are moved by God to attain that good that is eternal. And so the gift of grace is a kind of quality.”¹⁶³In the end, “grace is not said to make one graced effectively but formally.”¹⁶⁴ In other words, grace is not necessarily something you do but something you are. As O’Meara neatly describes, grace is ultimately “a sharing in something divine.”¹⁶⁵

Virtue and Wonder

This final subsection will consider ways in which Aquinas’ account of the virtues can influence an understanding of Christian wonder. Aquinas defines wonder (*admiratio*) as a “certain desire for knowledge” in his *Summa*.¹⁶⁶ As a desire of some kind, wonder comes under the command of the virtue of temperance. As Austin has outlined, an appreciation of the true meaning of ‘temperance’ has suffered for the word’s repressive associations.¹⁶⁷ To speak of ‘virtuous’ wonder need not be to conceive of a wonder suppressed or limited in its scope. Rather, a truly virtuous Christian wonder, guided by temperance, is directed towards its ultimate source in God. Such wonder achieves the sort of golden mean redolent of all virtuous actions. Aquinas outlines in his *Summa* that *admiratio* strikes a balance between fear (of the unknown) and desire (for knowledge thereof).¹⁶⁸ Virtuous wonder, guided by what Aquinas terms *studiositas* (a sub-virtue of temperance), achieves a rational balance between excessive fear (*stupor*) and excessive, ill-guided desire (*curiositas*). This is the effect of temperance. As Austin clarifies: “the primary work of temperance is not containment and is still less suppression; it is the integration and right ordering of the desires of attraction rooted in the human body and capacity for emotion. Temperance is... a formed spontaneity.”¹⁶⁹ If, as this study has suggested, a life in virtue is a process of formation and expression of our truest, fullest selves, then wonder will benefit from this formation and be

¹⁶² *ST I-II*, q. 110, a. 2.

¹⁶³ *ST I-II*, q. 110, a. 2. Elsewhere, at *ST I-II*, q. 112, a. 1, he comments in similar style: “No being can act beyond the limits of its specific nature...Now the gift of grace surpasses every capacity of created nature, since it is nothing other than a certain participation in the divine nature, which surpasses every other nature.”

¹⁶⁴ *ST I-II*, q. 111, a. 1, ad 1.

¹⁶⁵ O’Meara, *Virtue in Aquinas*, 262.

¹⁶⁶ *ST II-I*, q. 32, a. 8, co.

¹⁶⁷ Nicholas Austin, *Aquinas on Virtue: A Causal Reading* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 13.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. *ST II-I*, q. 41 for Fear and *ST II-I*, q. 32 for Hope.

¹⁶⁹ Austin, *Aquinas on Virtue*, 13.

itself directed towards the good while maintaining the spontaneity at its heart. Virtuous Christian wonder, guided by temperance towards its ultimate end in God, is indeed a “formed spontaneity.”¹⁷⁰

The relationship between Christian wonder and the infused virtues themselves bears further scrutiny, particularly in the case of faith. Aquinas describes faith as “a kind of knowledge [of God]”¹⁷¹, the pursuit of which ultimately forms the goal of the entire enterprise of theology. As Ryan puts it, “the object of faith is simultaneously the subject of *sacra doctrina* – God.”¹⁷² So too is God the object of our Christian wonder. If wonder is understood, *par* Aquinas, as a sort of desire for knowledge, then the best type of wonder is that which desires after knowledge of God - the virtue of faith. Thus wonder, directed by the acquired virtue of temperance and perfected by grace, can be understood as a sort of desire for faith. As such, Christian wonder is intimately linked with the process of theology *qua sacra doctrina*. In the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, St. Thomas Aquinas specifies that the particular elevation of seeing the wonderful works of God is the *elevatio fidei*.¹⁷³ Thus, theology can be understood as wonder in action. It is the spirit in which theology *qua sacra doctrina* should begin, proceed and arrive at its ultimate goal. Theology would be hollow without wonder, just as wonder would be directionless without theology. Just as the process of theology *qua sacra doctrina* is a sacramental, sanctifying, holy-making journey into the mystery of God, so too can Christian wonder be considered truly sacramental, sanctifying and holy-making. Humbrecht captures this reality: “to have faith is the fruit of divine illumination but reflection on it is done in a human way.”¹⁷⁴ Theology is this reflection. Christian wonder, meanwhile, is the animating spirit of the theological enterprise, guided in reason by the virtue of temperance and perfected in God by the gifts of grace. As Clement of Alexandria was to say, wonder begets faith.¹⁷⁵

Aquinas’ account of virtue illuminates the relationship between wonder and grace. His work describes how the gifts of the Holy Spirit (as well as the infused virtues) are brought to bear in the human by the workings of God’s grace.¹⁷⁶ To the extent that all the virtues, even the

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ *ST* I-II, q. 12 a. 13 ad. 3.

¹⁷² Fáinche Ryan, *Formation in holiness: Thomas Aquinas on Sacra doctrina* (Leuven, Peeters, 2007), 75.

¹⁷³ *In Psalmos*, 148.

¹⁷⁴ Thierry-Dominique Humbrecht, “La theologie negative chez saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Revue thomiste* 93 (1993): 550.

¹⁷⁵ Quinn, *Iris Exiled*, 122.

¹⁷⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 2.

acquired moral virtues such as temperance, operate on the initiative of God, virtuous wonder can be said to be a result of God's grace in our lives. More directly, however, Christian wonder can be understood through association with the Gift of the Holy Spirit known as Fear of the Lord. This particular Gift is often referred to as Wonder and Awe, and with good reason. As Aquinas relates, Christian wonder (*admiratio*) achieves a balance of fear before God and desire for knowledge of his mysterious ways. 'Fear' in this context is best understood as an aversion to sin of any kind, particularly in our knowledge of God. A healthy amount of fear when encountering the unknown (particularly the divine) is an appropriate response and a reliable insurance policy against any dangerous mistakes. A well-formed fear of the Lord defines the appropriate boundaries for a flourishing relationship with God. The ability to achieve a healthy, appropriate, and beneficial 'fear' of the Lord is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Such gifts are infused by grace and are "climaxes... heightened modes"¹⁷⁷ of the virtues Aquinas describes in his theology. As Aquinas puts it: "It is suitable that there be in the human being higher perfections according to which a person is disposed to being moved by God. And these perfections are called gifts."¹⁷⁸ O'Meara calls these gifts "an easy and prompt response to divine inspiration, a meeting between the divine and the human at an instinctual level. [T]he gift is a less deliberative mode of living."¹⁷⁹ Such a description fits Christian wonder well and illuminates virtuous Christian wonder as a grace of God infused directly into the human for their supernatural end: truly "a meeting between the divine and the human at an instinctual level."¹⁸⁰

The classification of wonder as a type of grace has important theological implications for an understanding of Christian wonder. Simply put, if wonder is understood as a grace, then we cannot have too much of wonder; it is intrinsically good. Infused in us as a gift from God, this wonder requires only our assent. *Curiositas* or *stupor*, properly understood, are not actually wonder. *Stupor* is the result of humans failing to assent to the gift of wonder in their life. *Curiositas*, as Augustine suggested, is counterfeit wonder. It is not an instance of too much wonder, because such a thing does not exist. Neither, technically, can we call *curiositas* 'misguided wonder', because it is not wonder. We could call *curiositas* a misguiding sense of wonder, or a mistaken sense of wonder that leads the human astray. For *curiositas* comes about when we lack prudence and mistake sinful desires for true wonder,

¹⁷⁷ O'Meara, *Virtue in Aquinas*, 269.

¹⁷⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 1, cf. *ST* I-II, q. 69; q. 70.

¹⁷⁹ O'Meara, *Virtue in Aquinas*, 269.

¹⁸⁰ O'Meara, *Virtue in Aquinas*, 269.

which is a righteous desire for knowledge (ultimately of God). It is by instances of moral misapprehension that *curiositas* takes hold and masquerades as true wonder. The avoidance of such misapprehension is where the moral virtue of temperance comes into play. In other words, the grace of wonder in our lives requires only our assent, the recognition and avoidance of its impersonator *curiositas* requires our agency: the exercise of our virtue.

Aesthetic virtue and wonder

Roger Pouivet's concept of "aesthetic virtue"¹⁸¹ fits well the sort of active moral agency required to safeguard and embrace the grace of wonder in the Christian life. Pouivet describes aesthetic virtues as "the dispositions to answer appropriately to aesthetic properties of works of art and natural things. These virtuous responses, because appropriate, constitute a fundamental aspect of a person's flourishing."¹⁸² Our aesthetic experiences are tied up with our desires. We respond to the aesthetic properties of a play, or a gladiatorial contest, a dead body, a swan on a canal, a mountain, because something in it attracts us. As Augustine's preoccupation with *curiositas* demonstrated, not all aesthetic responses are in and of themselves virtuous:

But in those days I was a pitiable creature, in love with feeling distress, and I would seek out occasions for being distressed: whenever the pretended troubles of other people on stage were involved, the more an actor's performance reduced me to tears, the more pleasure it gave me, the more completely it captivated me. Is it surprising that when I was an unfortunate sheep, finding your guardianship irksome and so wandering from your flock, I became defiled with disgusting disease?¹⁸³

Pouivet makes the same point: "There are aesthetic vices as well as aesthetic virtues. Responding with disgust to a work of art that deserves this reaction is morally and aesthetically virtuous. Not to do so, or to appreciate a work of art that does not deserve it, is a vice, it debases us."¹⁸⁴ Pouivet uses the example of art, but the same can be said of any aesthetic experience in the natural world. Augustine's *Confessions* provides a variety of examples that prompt an aesthetic response: a lizard chasing a fly,¹⁸⁵ the grotesque fascination of a dead body¹⁸⁶, or the unfathomable *carmen universitatis* of God's creation.¹⁸⁷ Thus, *curiositas*, such as gripped Alypius at the bloody spectacle of the games in Book Six

¹⁸¹ Pouivet, *Art and the Desire for God*, 402.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ *Conf.* III. 2.4.

¹⁸⁴ Pouivet, *Art and the Desire for God*, 405.

¹⁸⁵ *Conf.* X. 35.

¹⁸⁶ *Conf.* X. 55.

¹⁸⁷ *Conf.* XIII, 15. 17.

of the *Confessions*, constituted an aesthetic vice, a failure to respond appropriately to the aesthetic experience of the games. Experiences of true Christian wonder require a functioning sense of aesthetic virtue. This aesthetic virtue rejects those experiences not worthy of our attention thus opening the way for experiences that lead to God. Art and nature are two domains in which the aesthetic virtues find particular use. As Augustine relates, these areas of life pose unique temptations to the believer. But so too do they represent a unique opportunity for instances of true Christian wonder. Art and nature can lead the believer through wonder back towards some knowledge of God. Further, the aesthetic experiences encountered in art and nature “perfect us by the virtues that they require.”¹⁸⁸ Augustine highlighted the dangers posed by *curiositas* in the realms of art and nature. Aquinas was more hopeful, taking virtue as the context of wonder, highlighted to ability of humans to navigate the pitfalls of *curiositas* by the exercise of the infused virtue of temperance, and its sub-virtue *studiositas*. Pouivet’s concept of aesthetic virtue does not deign to add any virtues to those of Aquinas.¹⁸⁹ However, by implicating all of the virtues (intellectual, moral, theological) in our aesthetic experiences in art and nature, Pouivet accounts for the mixture of assent and agency at the heart of Christian wonder. Further, his aesthetic virtue guides a discussion of Christian wonder in a less negativistic direction. With the exercise of aesthetic virtue, wonder is not something to be controlled but rather protected and nurtured as a gift of the holy spirit. In the eyes of an aesthetically virtuous person, art and nature are no longer arenas of temptation but opportunities for to come to the fullness of our humanity in our search for God.

Conclusion

This chapter has taken as its focus Thomas Aquinas’ account of Christian wonder, both for its theological innovation and for its later influence on Patrick Kavanagh’s conception of religio-poetic wonder. Aquinas’ theology of wonder remains definitive, it has been argued, because it clarified the role of wonder in the life of the Christian believer and in the theological enterprise. As has been shown, Aquinas’ definition of wonder as “a certain desire for knowledge”¹⁹⁰ and his grounding of wonder in his treatment of the virtues

¹⁸⁸ Pouivet, *Art and the Desire for God*, 408.

¹⁸⁹ Pouivet, *Art and the Desire for God*, 402-403: “What then are the virtues at work in the apprehension of aesthetic properties? I see no reason to add to the traditional types of virtues—the theological, moral and intellectual virtues. The aesthetic virtues, through which we identify works of art and respond appropriately, through which we are sensitive to the aesthetic properties of natural things, these virtues are nothing else than the intellectual virtues and moral virtues (and even I guess the theological virtues).”

¹⁹⁰ *ST* II-I, q. 32, a. 8, co.

systematized the previously ambiguous role of wonder in the Christian tradition. Augustine's preoccupation with the sin of *curiositas*, counterfeit wonder, was typical of the negativism that had characterized these previous theologies of wonder. Augustine's wonder was itself an advancement from the epistemological wonder of the Greeks and was designed to account for the lustful *curiositas* that Augustine identified in his own lapses into academic, sexual, and religious impropriety. However, Augustine's account had been ambiguous as to the positive content of Christian wonder. As has been argued, Aquinas' innovation was to reenvision wonder as a key catalyst in the search for faith (knowledge of God), and thus, as the true spirit of the theological enterprise. By investigating wonder in its true context – the virtues – in Aquinas' work, this chapter has clarified the key characteristics of what will be referred to as 'Christian wonder' in the thesis at large. As has been demonstrated, true wonder for the Christian is a gift of God, imparted through grace as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Such wonder engenders a sort of receptivity in the believer to the mystery of God's presence in the world. It is the responsibility of the believer if not to self-activate, then to cultivate and nurture the gift of wonder in their life by virtuous habits of living. Without such virtuous habits, the believer can squander, ignore, or misapprehend (often for its counterfeit – *curiositas*) the true wonder by which God's mysterious presence is recognised in the world.

As this chapter has demonstrated, Aquinas approaches in his account of Christian wonder the kind of ideal blend of astonishment, perplexity and curiosity advocated for in the work of William Desmond. This definition of wonder as simple "a certain desire for knowledge"¹⁹¹ is undoubtedly rooted in a more inquisitive, determinate curiosity that seeks knowledge of God – faith – by the methods of his theological inquiries. Rooting his account of wonder in the virtues, particularly in temperance and its sub-virtue *studiositas*, was an attempt to achieve a degree of control over the perplexity and pessimism that characterized Augustine's writings on *curiositas*, counterfeit wonder. However, Aquinas himself would recognise that the ability to identify and respect the proper limits of our own human understanding was difficult to achieve. Ultimately, his feeling for the apophatic gave his work a more contemplative streak in the face of such difficulties: a gracious reliance on God and a humble acknowledgment of the boundaries of our human reason. The appealing blend of inquiry and contemplation approaches the kind of ideal blend of

¹⁹¹ *ST* II-I, q. 32, a. 8, co.

curiosity, perplexity and astonishment Desmond champions. The Christian wonder of Aquinas retains its “ontological bite.”¹⁹²

¹⁹² Desmond, *Intimate Strangeness*, 263.

Chapter Two: Christian Wonder and Patrick Kavanagh

Introduction

This chapter will propose that wonder in the work of Patrick Kavanagh's can be approached through the same three modalities and methods that held the key to understanding Aquinas' defining account of Christian wonder. Kavanagh, for whom poetry was a "mystical thing and a dangerous thing"¹, could be as easily typecast as Aquinas. Just as one might assume the theologian's predilection for a more inquisitive curiosity, a poet such as Kavanagh might be taken to prefer a kind of contemplative astonishment in his work. Up to a point, this is accurate. As this chapter will argue, there can be identified in Kavanagh's writings a certain apophatic streak that tends towards the "imaginative unreason"² for its truest experiences of both God and poetry. Kavanagh is suspicious of a human reason that would obscure the "flash"³ of divine inspiration in his work with its own self-absorption. The complex trajectory of his writing as a poet-theologian tends to follow a kind of *via negativa*; despite setbacks and diversions, Kavanagh returns gradually to a more humble, simple, joyful style that strips back what is harmful in order to reveal the still centre underneath. However, part of the fascination of Kavanagh the poet-theologian is the sense of "rectitude"⁴ with which he approaches the work of the poet as well as the theologian. As a study of his comments on the role of the poet and the theologian will demonstrate, Kavanagh shows an affinity and an admiration for the more deliberative systematics of Aquinas: the "dry stuff... dry as soaring flames"⁵ he identifies in the work of the theologian. Investigating how his sense of wonder balances an apophatic astonishment with the stringent "rectitude"⁶ will shine crucial light on the nature of the poet-theologian.

Patrick Kavanagh declared that "a poet is a theologian."⁷ He did not say 'a poet can be a theologian.' That is a different caliber of statement. He does not advise that 'a poet should be a theologian' or observe that 'all poets have within them a certain theological streak.' Kavanagh makes the maximalist claim. Neither does he say 'this poet is a theologian' -

¹ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1964), xiii.

² Patrick Kavanagh, "Literature," *Kavanagh's Weekly*, April 12, 1952.

³ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Prose* (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1967), 195.

⁴ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 230.

⁵ Patrick Kavanagh "A Central Passion," *Kavanagh's Weekly*, May 24, 1952.

⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 230

⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Prose* (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1967), 22.

which is maximalist but individual. His claim is maximalist and universal. It claims the most amount for the most amount of people: all poets are always also theologians. How then, can we interrogate such a grand claim? The first section of this Chapter will argue that the thought of Thomas Aquinas is a crucial resource in understanding Kavanagh's figure of the poet-theologian. Kavanagh invests more attention throughout his work in considering the role of the poet rather than the theologian. But where concrete references to the theological tradition are found (particularly in his prose and journalistic articles), Aquinas is by far the most common figure cited. In fact, Aquinas is the only theologian properly referenced anywhere in the writings of Kavanagh. By analyzing the moments when Kavanagh paraphrases, parses and explicates the meaning of Aquinas' theological arguments, this study will argue that Aquinas becomes for Kavanagh a kind of representative of the entire theological tradition and an unlikely model for the theological element in Kavanagh's poet-theologian. The second section of this chapter will chart a vocabulary of wonder in Kavanagh's work, giving examples of the manner in which he describes, defines and experiences instances of wonder throughout his work. From the refined naivete of his earliest work, Kavanagh gains enough confidence in his poetry and his faith to gradually come to recognize and reverence God in unlikely moments of luminous personal encounter. As will be shown, Kavanagh's radiant wonder never departs far from the fundamentals of Christian theology; it is rooted in humility and treads closely to the Christian idea of virtue and vice (*curiositas* in the language of Aquinas). Amidst his fluctuating poetic journey, Kavanagh identifies ego, indulgence and resentment as examples of vices that block the virtuous child-like innocence necessary for the flourishing of his poetic wonder. An apophatic humility, it will be argued, characterizes his God-language, and culminates in the spiritual and poetic rebirth he underwent in the last period of his life. Most basically, the case for a recognizably *Christian* wonder in the work of Kavanagh will derive from the fact that for Kavanagh, wonder comes from God and leads the wonderer back to God.

Consumed by the presence of God

In his own lifetime, the light of Kavanagh's personal and poetic force shone too bright for a considered appraisal of his poetic and theological ethos. There was no hope for his claim to be treated reasonably; its nuance was lost in the prevailing caricature of Kavanagh as a Dublin 'character'. Since his death, treatments of Kavanagh's life and work

have taken great care to extract what it meant for Kavanagh to be a poet,⁸ but there have been no serious attempts to assess the implications of this on Kavanagh's own claim that "a poet is a theologian"⁹.

Tom Stack's *No Earthly Estate* undertook something of a quantitative rather than a qualitative approach, identifying 131 poems of Kavanagh's with religious themes, images or allusions.¹⁰ Anthologizing Kavanagh's vast and diverse output in this way does not prove much, however, about Kavanagh's own claim that "a poet is a theologian". Stack does not dwell too much on this claim, in fact, and seems more intent to demonstrate just how often Kavanagh manages to slip God into his poetry without his audience sitting up and taking note. By the end of the book, the printed poems and the helpful notes on themes such as Sacrament and Pilgrimage ensure the audience is no longer ignorant on this point. However, arranging his poems in this way diminishes something of the deftness of his poetic touch in Kavanagh's writings about God. If every poem in the collection is about God, it robs Kavanagh of the contrast in his work that makes his occasionally more overt theological flourishes stand out. It was the consistency of his faith in God in, through and sometimes despite other concerns in his work that make it most dynamic and engaging. The doubt - the moments when Kavanagh despaired, wondered and wandered away from God are missing from Stack's analysis, and yet they are the ones with which we can build a full picture of what it meant for Kavanagh to be a poet, and thus a theologian. Stack, in contrast to much analysis of Kavanagh since his death, considers the religious side of Kavanagh's work at something of an expense to Kavanagh the poet. Only by grasping the latter in all its wild fullness can we appreciate the religious and theological side of Kavanagh's work.

Anyone who wants to take the measure of Kavanagh the theologian must appreciate the complexity for Kavanagh of being a poet in the first place. The difficulty up to now in arriving at a satisfactory analysis of Kavanagh's statement that "a poet is a theologian" is

⁸ One prominent example is Michael O'Loughlin, *After Kavanagh: Patrick Kavanagh and the Discourse of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1985).

⁹ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

¹⁰ Stack is cautious in claiming too much for Kavanagh the poet-theologian in Tom Stack, review of *A Buttonhole in Heaven? The mystical imagination of Patrick Kavanagh*, by Una Agnew, *The Furrow* 50, no. 3 (March 1999), 179: "In examining the religious content of poems one must, of course, be on guard against forcing the material into categories that more properly belong to the discipline of theology. The poetic statement is essentially evocative, whereas theology is discursive. Poetry does not yield systematic declarative statements." Stack's caution is a fine starting point. However, to limit the poet to what he writes in his poetry, as Stack seems to do here, does a disservice to the type of deeply felt, practical religiosity of someone like Kavanagh. "To narrow the poetic spirit down to its expression in verse is equivalent to narrowing religion down to something that happens on Sundays" as Kavanagh himself puts it in Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 233. This study will take a broader appraisal of all Kavanagh's life and work (including his large prose output) in order to assess his claim that "a poet is a theologian."

that many of the studies on Kavanagh the poet lacked the concern or the capability to approach Kavanagh the theologian. Conversely, the rare studies – like this one – with the intention of considering the religious and theological element in Kavanagh’s work must be careful not to overstate the case or lose a sense of nuance in Kavanagh’s output; a balanced appraisal is required.

This sense of balance in most modern treatments of Kavanagh suffers for their inattention to the fact that Kavanagh, by his own account and those who knew him at closest quarters, was a man “consumed by the presence of God.”¹¹ Raised into the rural Catholicism of his native Monaghan, his neighbours later recalled that he would “never miss a Sunday mass” in his adopted parish of Haddington Road in Dublin 4.¹² He spent several stints writing for Catholic newspapers in Dublin and was actively supported at various stages of his career by the influential bishops of Dublin and Galway. He died in harness with his faith, repeating the words “O God, I believe”. But Kavanagh’s was a religiosity that extended beyond the conventional, beyond the childhood room where “Five holy pictures/Hang on the walls:/The Virgin and Child/St Patrick our own/St Anthony of Padua/Pope Leo XIII/and the Little Flower.”¹³ His faith, as he later put it, “was not of the Lourdes/Fatima variety.”¹⁴ Indeed, he later came to decry the dour pessimism that had, to his mind, had come to infect Irish Catholicism in his own lifetime.¹⁵ His faith was tied up inextricably with his poetic outlook, and subject to the same individualism and intensity. He was a *holy* man, not in the traditional sense of piety, but as one “fascinated with God.”¹⁶ Elisabeth O’Farrell, who along with her husband and young children took Kavanagh into their home for a year as he convalesced from a serious illness, experienced this fascination daily at the kitchen table and in overheard conversations with her children: “It was not just that he believed in God as I did. It was that he was aware of God’s presence in all things.”¹⁷

¹¹ Elisabeth O’Toole, *A Poet in the House: Patrick Kavanagh at Priory Grove* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2021), 45.

¹² Peter Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper: a biography of Patrick Kavanagh* (Newbridge, Goldsmith Press, 1979), 12.

¹³ Patrick Kavanagh, “My Room,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 12.

¹⁴ Agnew, *Buttonhole*, 290.

¹⁵ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 257.

¹⁶ Agnew, *Buttonhole*, 278.

¹⁷ O’Toole, *A poet in the House*, 73.

Such a holistic view of Kavanagh - a man, poet and believer of unique intensity - is the necessary starting point for this Chapter's investigation into his challenging declaration that "a poet is a theologian."¹⁸

Section One: Kavanagh and Aquinas

Kavanagh makes direct reference to Thomas Aquinas on four recorded occasions, all in the course of his prose writings and public comments. Three of these references appear in *Kavanagh's Weekly*, a publication produced by the poet and his brother Peter over the course of twelve self-published editions in the spring and summer of 1952. The publication failed to garner sufficient public and financial support to prolong its mercurial existence. The forthright tone of the publication offended many but unconstrained by editors (Kavanagh had survived in Dublin by writing for several journals and newspapers), Kavanagh writes about the place of religion and poetry in the society of his day with the greatest self-possession of his career up to that point. In one short illustrative piece in *Kavanagh's Weekly*, the writer makes this mention of Aquinas:

As we said in another publication 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. Undoubtedly it will get him nowhere if you don't believe in the God of Life, the God of the grass, of the sun. What kind of a world would it be if there was no hope, if we all said and felt with the average Gael 'Where will that get him?'. There would be no Shakespeare, no Homer, nor a Saint Thomas Aquinas. There would only be, as here, men swilling themselves into forgetfulness.¹⁹

This piece does not engage with the content of Aquinas' work but is valuable in sketching the esteem in which Kavanagh held the saint and the discipline of theology itself. In the first instance, it is clear from his inclusion at the end of the quote that Aquinas is considered amongst the ranks of what Kavanagh deems to be great poets and thinkers. The inclusion of Homer and Shakespeare as representatives of the classical and literary traditions is understandable enough, but the inclusion of a theologian in their company shows the esteem in which Kavanagh holds the discipline of theology (and Aquinas himself as assumed representative of that discipline). But something more personal, and significant, is at stake

¹⁸ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

¹⁹ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 151.

with the inclusion of Aquinas in such company. In talking about these famous names, Kavanagh is also talking about himself. These great poets and thinkers are the of same ilk as himself, and their achievements, no less than his own, would suffer from the sort of suffocating cynicism Kavanagh identifies as denying him the respect he deserves in his own time. The inclusion of Homer and Shakespeare represent the classical and literary elements in Kavanagh's make up. Shakespeare's literary influence needs no explanation, and neither does Homer's when we consider the number of poems directly or indirectly addressed to the ancient bard and the Parnassian muses who inspired his work.²⁰ Including Aquinas alongside Homer and Shakespeare suggests that Kavanagh considers that he is doing the same sort of thing as Aquinas: that he belongs in his number. Mentioning Aquinas' name in such a context is shorthand for theology in the same way Shakespeare is shorthand for literature or Homer for classical poetry. In this brief moment, Kavanagh gets as close to his bald statement "a poet is a theologian"²¹ as anywhere else in his writings.

In fact, this passage is a key companion to that statement as here Kavanagh says quite plainly that no-one who does not have a religious, even a theological sensibility ("if you don't believe in the God of Life, the God of the grass, of the sun"²²) will appreciate the fullness of what Kavanagh is trying to do in emulating and combining the influences of such greats as Homer, Shakespeare and Aquinas.

A further instructive reference to Aquinas comes in another edition of *Kavanagh's Weekly* in which the writer argues for a more serious approach to life and living than is afforded by what he considers the narrow confines of Irish nationalistic thought. This kind of serious thought is recognizable by a "central passion"²³ in a thinker, in whose number Kavanagh counts Aquinas:

Humanity is what matters and the fate of humanity is at stake. Let us not stare ourselves stupid and blind upon the local affairs of what is called 'our' nation. A better task is ready for us. But that task asks more of us than a lyrical outpour of criticism. It needs intense thinking and hard, tiresome work. That means: Doctrine and organisation. Where these are lacking, there is no "central passion." There is only literature. Only literature, even when this literature is like a strong, fresh breeze of Genius. A "central passion" is only to be found, in such "dry stuff" as

²⁰ A prominent example is Patrick Kavanagh, "Epic," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 238.

²¹ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

²² Ibid.

²³ Patrick Kavanagh "A Central Passion," *Kavanagh's Weekly*, May 24, 1952.

Thomas Aquinas wrote, or Spinoza, or Lenin if you like. “Dry Stuff.” Dry as soaring flames.²⁴

As with the initial reference to Aquinas considered above, this instance is significant in the first place for what it says about Aquinas and secondly for what it says about Kavanagh. Kavanagh here conveys a familiarity with the work of Aquinas. He does not get into theological detail, but he feels comfortable enough in his knowledge of Aquinas to comment that it is “dry stuff”²⁵ containing some great animating idea or cause – what Kavanagh calls a “central passion”²⁶. Once again Aquinas is listed amongst heavyweights of the political and philosophical realms. Theology – with Aquinas once again enlisted as its representative, is afforded a place in what Kavanagh considers the domain of mankind’s greatest pursuits. What is perhaps more significant is what this reference says of Kavanagh himself. Kavanagh advocates openly here for “doctrine and organisation”²⁷ in the pursuit of a “central passion” and a life worth living. The possibility of a theological element to Kavanagh’s work has been downplayed by the kind of criticism that sees Kavanagh’s statement “a poet is a theologian”²⁸ as essentially a contradiction in terms. Stack’s objection is typical: “the poetic statement is essentially evocative, whereas theology is discursive.”²⁹ Here, however, Kavanagh seems at the very least to be aware of this objection, and even seems to move to address it. He acknowledges the limitations of the literary and argues for the advantages, even the necessity to move to a more discursive, organised approach – the “dry stuff”³⁰ – when dealing with life’s most important questions. Kavanagh counts Aquinas (and by extension theology) in this category of central passions and one can surmise that Kavanagh took inspiration for himself in the “soaring”³¹ achievement of Aquinas. Most importantly, Kavanagh’s perspicacity in this passage puts to bed the false dichotomy that would see literature and theology as mutually incompatible in a writer like Kavanagh. In moments like this, Aquinas extends the ambition of Kavanagh’s outlook beyond the poetic or the literary.

²⁴ Patrick Kavanagh “A Central Passion,” *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, May 24, 1952.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

²⁹ Stack, Review of *Buttonhole*, 179.

³⁰ Patrick Kavanagh “A Central Passion,” *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, May 24, 1952.

³¹ Patrick Kavanagh “A Central Passion,” *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, May 24, 1952.

It is important to note that Kavanagh's references to God and theology are not merely incidental. Later in the same article, it becomes clear just what it means for Kavanagh to claim for himself something of the same aspirations as Aquinas.

If we accept the fundamental truth of Christianity, that Man is created after God's image, have we therefrom to draw the conclusion, that Man is living in and for eternity and that the only activity worthy of him, is on pointing towards eternal values? The only qualities of importance in human culture are virtue and genius and they have nothing to do with any nation as such.³²

It becomes clear here that Christianity is not an aside or an affectation in Kavanagh's work; it is a deep conviction so lightly worn and deftly expressed that it appears commonplace. In the end, when Kavanagh weighs up the contributions of Aquinas alongside Shakespeare and Homer as one of history's great poets and thinkers, he makes it clear which one of the literary, classical and theological domains holds the ultimate claim in making sense of human life:

One must beware of being too logical about anything. If we go on in a logical way we come to cage bars. But Hope soars gaily above these logic bars. There is wonderful freedom for the spirit in the world but we must beware of demanding the ultimate answer. "Why" is God.³³

Here it is apparent that God is the first principle for Kavanagh in his life and his work. If God is the reason behind all he does and all he is, then for Kavanagh, his poetic vocation is at once a religious one, his intellectual pursuits – in pursuit of a central passion – are by nature theological. Aquinas spoke of faith as 'a kind of knowledge of God' and this is the manner in which Kavanagh treats his faith. His was not a static, unquestioning faith but a vibrant, curious one subject to the same sharp intellectual comment as any other body of knowledge.

In a June 1952 edition of *Kavanagh's Weekly*, criticizing what he calls a "sentimental Christianity"³⁴ prevalent in Ireland (and in the work of a certain O'Connor), Kavanagh underlines the need for such a penetrating, candid approach to his faith:

³² Ibid.

³³ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 152.

³⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, "The New Partition," *Kavanagh's Weekly*, June 21, 1952.

A note of sentimental Christianity is widespread here among schoolteachers in particular. There is no element of doubt in O Connor's mind, and without that element thought is not energised. The man who fully and without any doubt accepts Christianity is in some way incapable of being a Christian. Where there is no doubt the wheels can't move.

I have observed this particular kind of Catholicism in Ireland for many years, and while on the surface it seems admirable, yet in some way it is defective. There is no activity in it; it cannot produce the fruits of a tremendous faith in God and in the importance of man.³⁵

To say that discussing God energises the thought of Kavanagh is an apt a summation of the theological element at play in his work. A third references to Aquinas comes in an April 1952 edition of *Kavanagh's Weekly* in which the writer decries the "pernicious Gaelic tradition" and "scalliwag versifier[s]" that continued to dominate the literary landscape in his own day.

My own view [is] that the primary destructive element in this matter is reason, the reason that leads to despair. Nothing matters. And speaking out of the horrible light of reason we see that nothing does matter. And yet when we have seen that nothing does matter we realise that unless by some fanatic emotion we can escape our reason we will lose our reason. There is nothing for it but [to] drink ourselves to death. Even St. Thomas Aquinas, after all his reasoning, returned to the imaginative unreason. God was more wonderful than Aristotle's logic could analyse.³⁶

This is the closest Kavanagh gets in writing to direct theological commentary on the work of Aquinas. The reference seems to emerge almost from random, based only on Kavanagh's assertion that reason can be a destructive force that obscures the judgement of humans. It eventually leads to the sort of epiphany that Kavanagh achieves ("nothing matters"³⁷) or it drives humans to distraction and worse. Kavanagh seems to summon Aquinas as a witness to corroborate the account he has given. Even Aquinas, by Kavanagh's reckoning, abandoned his own conspicuous attachment to reason and realised, like Kavanagh, that where reason inevitably falls short, the "imaginative unreason"³⁸ persists.

This references to Aquinas is significant in how casually it is taken up (and left down) in the middle of an article entitled "Literature". Theology is not seen to intrude upon the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Patrick Kavanagh, "Literature," *Kavanagh's Weekly*, April 12, 1952.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, "Literature," *Kavanagh's Weekly*, April 12, 1952.

discussion, it does not even warrant an introduction or explanation. The sympathy that poetry and theology share – in the instance their co-reliance on the “imaginative unreason”³⁹ – seems to be taken for granted. The exact nature of this “imaginative unreason”⁴⁰ is not expanded upon, but it seems to intuit that God is too wonderful for logic to analyse. The “imaginative unreason”, like poetry and theology, resides and revels in wonder first and foremost, according to Kavanagh. To live with wonder is to abandon oneself to the imaginative unreason. Kavanagh speaks from experience in the case of poetry, and it seems, with the help of Aquinas’ example in the case of theology.

Kavanagh claims for Aquinas a return to the imaginative unreason but does not account for this statement. It is not clear what he could mean by this: perhaps he is referring to Aquinas’ retreat from writing in the last months of his life. Alternatively, he could be referring to Aquinas’ own poetic works, which stand among some of his most powerful writings. As Murray puts it “Thomas Aquinas, known for centuries as a thinker of outstanding clarity, a true master of logic and reason, is also... a quite remarkable poet of paradox.”⁴¹ He calls the affairs of poetry “defective in truth”⁴² in a way that cannot be said of theology, which deals exclusively in divine truths. Poetry exists beyond abstraction at a level of metaphor, once removed from the realm of reason. However, the liminal status of poetry when it comes to truth does not condemn it entirely. Tellingly, Aquinas outlines that there are occasions when both poetry and theology, despite the differing calibre of truth claims with which they deal, share a reliance on “poetic logic”⁴³, or what Kavanagh would call the “imaginative unreason”⁴⁴. These occasions arrive when theology must consider topics that are simply beyond the normal capacities of human reason. In these instances, theology becomes like poetry with only a tangential relationship with reason, skirting around the peripheries of truths so mysterious as to evade the normal gaze of the intellect.⁴⁵

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Paul Murray, “Aquinas on Poetry and Theology,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 16, no. 2 (2013): 71.

⁴² *In Primum librum Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, q.1, a. 5, ad. 3: “Poetic knowledge is of things which cannot be grasped by reason because of a deficiency of truth. Hence reason must be drawn off to the side by certain likenesses. Theology, however, is about things that are above our reason, and so the symbolic mode is common to both since neither is proportioned to our reason.”

⁴³ *In Primum librum posteriorum analyticorum*, bk. 1, lect.1, 6, 128.

⁴⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, “Literature,” *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, April 12, 1952.

⁴⁵ *In Primum librum Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, q.1, a. 5, ad 3. In the *Summa*, Thomas writes, “Just as human reason fails to grasp poetical expressions on account of their being lacking in truth, so does it fail to grasp divine things perfectly, on account of the sublimity of the truth they contain: and therefore in both cases there is need of signs by means of sensible figures.” See *ST*, I–II, q.101, a. 2, ad 2.

For all his concern for the high truths and superior reasoning of theology, Aquinas understood too that there were times when poetry was best suited to comprehend the mysterious truths of Christianity that lay beyond the ordinary human intellect. Ten years before his death he turned to poetry in his hymn *Sacris Solemniis* to account for the joyful mystery of the Incarnation, which he describes exultantly as a “thing of wonder”⁴⁶. Another of his hymns, the *Pange Lingua*, deals with the same subject of the Incarnation and once more extols the “wonderful order”⁴⁷ imposed on the world by the Word incarnate.

Wonder, defined elsewhere by Aquinas “a certain desire for knowledge”⁴⁸, characterizes these moments where our human reason fails to grasp the mysterious truths about God but longs to approach, to know and to revel in those mysterious truths more closely. These instances of wonder are the moments when “poetic logic”⁴⁹ (what Kavanagh might call “the imaginative unreason”⁵⁰) becomes part of the theologian’s methodology and the two disciplines align most closely.

The flash

A fourth and final recorded reference by Kavanagh to Aquinas is also characterized by wonder and deals once more with the advantages and disadvantages of reason. The reference arose during Kavanagh’s cross-examination in the witness box in the course of a 1954 libel trial played out to much public and media interest. The transcript contains what is Kavanagh’s most lengthy reference to Aquinas. In it, Kavanagh engages more closely than anywhere else with the theology of Aquinas and draws a line of comparison between himself and the theologian that suggests a familiarity and sympathy with Aquinas’ work. The interest he shows in the “flash [of] Divine Intelligence”⁵¹ has intriguing possibilities for our understanding (theological and poetic) of wonder in this study. The extract from the trial reads as follows:

Quoting what Mr Kavanagh had written on different occasions about truth, Mr Costello came to this passage: ‘The world is full of Pilates asking the question which is always cynical, “what is truth?” And every man who has in him something of Christ will reply, “I am truth”.’

⁴⁶ *O res mirabilis*.

⁴⁷ *Miro ordine*.

⁴⁸ *ST II-I*, q. 32, a. 8, co.

⁴⁹ *In Primum librum posteriorum analyticorum*, bk. 1, lect. 1, 6, 128.

⁵⁰ Patrick Kavanagh, “Literature,” *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, April 12, 1952.

⁵¹ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 195.

Mr Kavanagh: I don't see that I should disagree with that. I hope we all have something of Christ in us.

Mr Costello: I believe we have.

Mr Costello asked if it was not a legitimate comment on the passages from Mr Kavanagh's writings that he had quoted, that the witness regarded himself as the ultimate truth. Mr Kavanagh said he did not.

Mr Costello: But another person might take the view from the article that it is literary criticism?

Mr Kavanagh: Of course, that is so, but it is also pure Thomism.

Mr Costello: What is that?

Mr Kavanagh: It comes from St. Thomas Aquinas. When I said I was truth, I want to explain that to you. Thomas Aquinas speaks not of reason, but of the Divine Intelligence – the flash – and that is the flash I am talking about – the truth. He says you don't arrive at it through true reasoning.⁵²

It is not easy to determine exactly what text of Aquinas Kavanagh is drawing on here, but his reference to truth and the "Divine Intelligence"⁵³ suggest he could have been familiar with the sections of the *Summa* on truth. In section 16 of this text Aquinas makes the comment "the truth of things consists in their relation to the divine intellect."⁵⁴ The mention Kavanagh makes of 'the flash'⁵⁵ could refer to the concept of Divine Illumination, whereby humans require the direct intervention of God in order to illuminate certain knowledge that is otherwise beyond their natural faculties of reason. In his discussion on truth, *De Veritate*, Aquinas confirms the necessity of such Divine Illumination for the understanding of certain first principles of knowledge that are crucial for any subsequent reasoning.

The light of this kind of reason, by which principles of this kind are known to us, is imparted to us from God. It is like a likeness of the uncreated truth reflecting in us. So, since no human teaching can be effective except in virtue of that light, it is clear that it is God alone who internally and principally teaches us.⁵⁶

In the quote taken from his libel trial, Kavanagh seems to be once again taking Aquinas as a theological corroborator for his criticism of reason. Aquinas may seem like a strange choice at first glance, but Kavanagh himself has clearly been struck by the results of his own

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ *ST* q.16, a.1, ad 2. See also *ST* q.16 a.7 ad 1: "the truth of the divine intellect is God Himself."

⁵⁵ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 195.

⁵⁶ *De veritate* 11.1c.

inquiries into Aquinas' work: that there are indeed limits to human intellect and reason, and that in those instances there must be another route (in this instance "the flash [of] Divine Intelligence"⁵⁷) for humans to access the truths of life and their faith. As has been seen above, Kavanagh's theological interest is piqued by moments where reason falls short in the face of God's mysterious truth. Such moments are characterized theologically by wonder, where humans become aware of the inadequacy of their own comprehension of God but incline towards some further knowledge of the divine.

Wonder emerges then as a central area of overlap between the poet and the theologian and a crucial means of understanding what drew Kavanagh to an unlikely affinity with Thomas Aquinas' work. Understanding what drew Kavanagh to Aquinas helps us understand what drew him to theology, as Aquinas acts as a kind of theological standard-bearer for Kavanagh. Kavanagh found something of himself in the combination of "dry stuff"⁵⁸, passion and imagination in Aquinas; it seems clear that he not only related to Aquinas but took him as something of an inspiration and guide for his own intense and unorthodox religiosity - based as it was on a kind of intuitive wonder suspicious of reason.

Section Two: A vocabulary of Wonder in the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh

The next section of this chapter will investigate the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh to demonstrate precisely how moments of wonder constitute for him a natural overlap between the poetic and the theological. In Chapter One it was demonstrated that theological wonder in the Christian tradition proceeded from God and returned the wonderer to God with gracious praise. It was characterized by its concern for virtue and the avoidance of *curiositas*, a counterfeit wonder that distracted and diminished the believer in their relationship with God. This next section will investigate instances of wonder in Kavanagh in order to assess whether a common approach to wonder between the poet and the theologian is one of the criteria by which we can understand Kavanagh's claim that "a poet is a theologian."⁵⁹

Awakening a peasant's prayer

⁵⁷ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 195.

⁵⁸ Patrick Kavanagh "A Central Passion," *Kavanagh's Weekly*, May 24, 1952

⁵⁹ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 22.

Kavanagh's earliest poetic spark was lit in his native Monaghan, in the small rural townland of Inniskeen. This initial poetry gave expression to his youthful wonderment at the natural environment around him. Having left school at age thirteen, Kavanagh honed his own brand of poetry from schoolbooks, periodicals, and gradually, under the tutelage of Dublin patrons such as George Russell, AE. Kavanagh quickly learned to write the type of religio-rural verse that was expected of him by the literary set in Dublin and that appealed to the mystical sensibilities of AE: "Kavanagh was welcomed and patronized as a peasant poet".⁶⁰ Early successes such as the 1930 "Ploughman" were praised for delivering the 'peasant quality' popularized by the Literary Revival writers.

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

I dream with silvery gull
And brazen cow.
A thing that is beautiful
I may know.

Tranquillity walks with me
And no care.
O, the quiet ecstasy
Like a prayer.

I find a star-lovely art
In a dark sod.
Joy that is timeless! O heart
That knows God!⁶¹

This early work was Kavanagh's first to be published and set the tone of his entrance into the literary world. The delicately arranged piece captures a certain naivety in Kavanagh's early outlook. His was a simple wonder ("a quiet ecstasy"), rooted in a natural world charged with the perfection and refinement of God. In "To a Blackbird", another of his earliest known poems from 1930, Kavanagh reveals the simple Celtic spirituality that underlies this joy in nature:

O pagan poet, you
And I are one

⁶⁰ Patrick Kavanagh, *Patrick Kavanagh: Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London, Penguin Books, 2005), xiv.

⁶¹ Patrick Kavanagh, "Ploughman," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 1.

In this – we lose our god
At set of sun.⁶²

Throughout most of the 1930s Kavanagh continued to work as a full-time farmer on his family farm in Monaghan. His ongoing poetic activity continued to show the religio-rural idealism characteristic of “Ploughman”. In 1938 with “Plough-horses”, Kavanagh describes how the Holy Spirit intervenes to baptize nature and to Christianize his simple poetic wonder at the beauty of nature:

Their glossy flanks and manes outshone
The flying splinters of the sun.

The tranquil rhythm of that team
Was as slow-flowing meadow stream.

And I saw Phidias’ chisel there –
An ocean stallion, mountain mare,

Seeing, with eyes the Spirit unsealed,
Plough-horses in a quiet field.⁶³

In these three early examples of Kavanagh’s youthful religio-rural verse, we encounter God in Kavanagh’s idealised version of his natural surroundings. God is “a beautiful thing”, a “Joy that is timeless!”. Kavanagh’s idealized, affirmative God-language presents God as the refinement and perfection of nature: symbolized by the “sun” and “tranquillity”. There is a certain confidence in Kavanagh affirmative identification of God in nature, but his idealistic God-language conjures God as a sort of “*deus ex machina* who could deliver or deny perfection at will”⁶⁴ - an impersonal, uncomplicated God who intervenes to achieve tranquillity and perfection. Keen to produce the type of “peasant’s prayer”⁶⁵ that would ensure his safe travel into the literary world, Kavanagh concealed the type of provocative, playful God-language that would characterize a later confidence in his work.

After an initial social and poetic naivete, Kavanagh’s full-time move to Dublin ushered in a period of reflection and reaction in his work during the 1940’s. Often short of employment

⁶² Patrick Kavanagh, “To a Blackbird,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 2.

⁶³ Patrick Kavanagh, “Plough Horses,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 48.

⁶⁴ Agnew, *Buttonhole*, p. 289.

⁶⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, “Stony Grey Soil,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 73

and forever short of money, Kavanagh's became increasingly dismissive of the literary, religious, and political orthodoxy in Dublin. Instead of writing the religio-rural verse they expected of a peasant poet, Kavanagh now sought to confound convention and to redress the earlier optimism of his poetry. This change in poetic tone would have consequences for the religious outlook of his work. In October 1940 with "Stony Grey Soil" he focuses his newly critical gaze on the Monaghan countryside that had first shaped his poetic path:

You flung a ditch on my vision
Of beauty, love and truth.
O stony grey soil of Monaghan
You burgled my bank of youth.
Lost the long hours of pleasure,
All the women that love young men.
O can I still stroke the monster's back
Or write with unpoisoned pen

His name in these lonely verses,
Or mention the dark fields where
The first gay flight of my lyric
Got caught in a peasant's prayer.⁶⁶

Here Kavanagh struggles to separate and evaluate the dual religious and rural influences in his earlier work: 'the first gay flight of my lyric [that] got caught in a peasant's prayer.' Gone is the idealized rural landscape and the confident, refined God-language of Kavanagh's early work. With the Monaghan countryside now abandoned for life in Dublin city, Kavanagh's God-language would have to find a new setting and a new tone of voice.

Child-like wonder in Kavanagh

Two important poems written in the early 1940s at the beginning of his poetic career in Dublin demonstrate how in these foundational stages of his writing, "wonder is christened"⁶⁷ by the imagination of Kavanagh. "Advent" and "A Christmas Childhood", Kavanagh's wonder emerges as the spark for a religious as well as a poetic experience. At the beginning of "A Christmas Childhood", Kavanagh sketches a childhood scene replete with wonder:

⁶⁶ Patrick Kavanagh, "Stony Grey Soil," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 73.

⁶⁷ Quinn, *Born-Again Romantic*, 217.

One side of the potato-pits was white with frost –
 How wonderful that was, how wonderful!
 And when we put our ears to the paling-post
 The music that came out was magical.

The light between the ricks of hay and straw
 Was a hole in Heaven's gable. An apple tree
 With its December-glinting fruit we saw –
 O you, Eve, were the world that tempted me

To eat the knowledge that grew in clay
 And death the germ within it! Now and then
 I can remember something of the gay
 Garden that was childhood's.

The tracks of cattle to a drinking-place,
 A green stone lying sideways in a ditch,
 Or any common sight, the transfigured face
 Of a beauty that the world did not touch.⁶⁸

Wonder allows Kavanagh to see beyond the ordinary realm of human interaction and recognize in his everyday encounters God's gentle mysterious presence in his midst. Conventional 'knowledge' is no use to Kavanagh in this religious experience, in which ordinary things are 'transfigured' by the wonder of his child-like imagination. As the poem develops, Kavanagh describes the effect of such a wondrous environment as it unseals the eyes of his young child-poet to the mysterious joy of the Christ's birth.

My child poet picked out the letters
 On the grey stone,
 In silver the wonder of a Christmas townland,
 The winking glitter of a frosty dawn.

Cassiopeia was over
 Cassidy's hanging hill,
 I looked and three whin bushes rode across
 The horizon — the Three Wise Kings.⁶⁹

As the poem finishes, it is clear that wonder has become the idiom of prayer for the young boy, his avenue to understanding mysteries – of his faith and of life – otherwise beyond the human reach.

⁶⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, "A Christmas Childhood," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 143-144.

⁶⁹ Kavanagh, "A Christmas Childhood," 144.

My father played the melodeon,
 My mother milked the cows,
 And I had a prayer like a white rose pinned
 On the Virgin Mary's blouse.⁷⁰

Kavanagh seeks to conjure afresh the child-like wonder of this youth and to protect the innocence at its heart. Innocence acts as a kind of guarantee of virtue for Kavanagh in his poetic and religious vocation. Where Kavanagh identifies innocence – often by evoking his own childhood – he approaches in his work, especially in instances of wonder, something of the virtue that was at the heart of Aquinas's conception of Christian wonder. When Kavanagh wrote this poem (in two parts over the course of three years beginning in 1940) he has just made a difficult arrival into a Dublin literary scene that did not prove willing or able to take the time to understand him. The 1940s began a period of financial, professional, and personal disappointments that forced Kavanagh to harden the naivete of his early poetic approach. This poem represents something of an homage to an earlier time where the wonder of his child-poet had not been dampened by the rejections and resentments of life. The light of his poetic, and spiritual insight shone brightest, Kavanagh seems to recognise in this poem, when his wonder was protected by the innocence of childhood.

Advent

“Advent” marks another important attempt to regain for himself something of the virtuous wonder of his childhood innocence. With the Monaghan countryside now abandoned for life in Dublin city, Kavanagh's God-language would have to find a new setting and a new tone of voice. Published two years after “A Christmas Childhood” in 1942, “Advent” marks a significant point on Kavanagh's journey away from the physical and poetic landscape of his youth. Here Kavanagh reflects once more on the legacy of his rural upbringing in the wake of his new urban existence.

We have tasted and tested too much, lover –
 Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.
 But here in this Advent-darkened room
 Where the dry black bread and the sugarless tea
 Of penance will charm back the luxury
 Of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom
 The knowledge we stole but could not use.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Patrick Kavanagh, “Advent,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 124-125.

Resentment has been replaced with a more philosophical tone, in which Kavanagh decries the type of doom-laden worldly knowledge that has replaced the innocence and wonder of his child poet - the “newness that was in every stale thing”⁷². Kavanagh here resolves to rediscover this placeless, childlike wonder “wherever life pours ordinary plenty.”⁷³

Won't we be rich, my love and I, and please
 God we shall not ask for reason's payment,
 The why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges,
 Nor analyse God's breath in common statement.
 We have thrown into the dustbin the clay-minted wages
 Of pleasure, knowledge and the conscious hour –
 And Christ comes with a January flower.⁷⁴

Concluding with a hopeful flourish, Kavanagh seems to discover the means to extract from his rural childhood what is most nourishing for his new poetic life in Dublin. A childlike wonder will act as a poetic inoculation against the false pleasure and knowledge that constitute Dublin's “clay-minted wages”⁷⁵. As ever with Kavanagh, this poetic pledge is also a religious one. His rocky arrival into urban life had damaged his religious as well as his poetic purpose. In rediscovering his poetic *raison-d'être*, Kavanagh's announces a more humble, authentic and virtuous religious outlook that seeks only to recognize and bless “Christ com[ing] with a January flower.”⁷⁶ In shedding the idealized rural verse of his youth, Kavanagh also departed from the idealized God-language that had projected a God of perfection and refinement. In letting go of these early traits, Kavanagh rediscovered and refined the most valuable gift of his rural upbringing- the childlike wonder that suffused his most authentic poetry. For a more philosophical, reflective Kavanagh, his was no longer the God of perfection - the god of tranquility and nature, but God “in a January flower”⁷⁷, in “the bits and pieces of Everyday”⁷⁸. Memories of his upbringing and departure from Monaghan no longer prompted a sense of resentment, but a sense of mature reflection. The rural landscape that had first lit the spark of his child-poet's wonder was interiorized, and his simplicity and virtue of his religious convictions restored. This transformation Seamus Heaney described aptly as a change of setting from “a heavenly place to a placeless

⁷² Kavanagh, “Advent,” 125.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 88.

heaven.”⁷⁹ Only in religious language could Kavanagh adequately reverence the wonder at the heart of the poetic act. Conversely, only through poetry could he elaborate and sustain the deep conviction of his Christian faith: “unless we love God we cannot be happy.”⁸⁰

Writing some years later, his brother Peter (who he entrusted as heir of his memory: the “sacred keeper of his sacred conscience”⁸¹) was explicit in the connection between the religious and the poetic in Kavanagh’s work: “for him God and poetry were the same thing and it would be most unthinkable for him to insult the poetic fire, his most sacred possession and the reason for his being.”⁸² To insult the poetic fire would be to offend against God who had given him his theo-poetic vocation. At times Kavanagh seems to identify a kind of *curiositas* that tempts his poetic journey in directions it should not go. This is the key-note of “Advent” which begins with as evocative a description of Kavanagh’s theo-poetic *curiositas* as one could conceive. “We have tasted and tested too much, lover-/ Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.”⁸³ This statement shows a remarkable degree of maturity and insight, not only in recognizing the error of his ways and the extent of his indulgences, but in pin-pointing the exact nature of the damage he has caused: his indulgences have dampened his ability to wonder. As the poem goes on to outline, the corruption of his wonder has caused spiritual as well as poetic harm. Kavanagh’s realization in this poem follows very closely the Christian understanding of *curiositas*: as Kavanagh diagnoses, *curiositas* leads not to knowledge, but a type of ignorance. It does not bring about a growth, but rather a diminution of the self. Just as virtuous innocence catalyzes instance of poetic and theological wonder in Kavanagh, *curiositas* catalyses damaging desires and subverts righteous ones. Kavanagh realises that he has departed from the virtue of his childlike innocence, and resolves to “charm”⁸⁴ it back. Kavanagh’s temptation at the hands of *curiositas* was characterized by the “chink too-wide”⁸⁵ in “Advent”. Elsewhere, Kavanagh resolved to channel his flow of poetic and spiritual inspiration through the most restrictive apertures to ensure their virtue: a “buttonhole in Heaven”⁸⁶, a “hole in reason’s

⁷⁹ Seamus Heaney, “The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh,” *The Massachusetts Review* 28, no. 3 (1987): 372.

⁸⁰ Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper*, 284: “The weakness, unhappiness and frustration of men springs from the fact that they are dissatisfied with the person that God has made. In other words, they do not love God. And unless you love God you cannot be happy.”

⁸¹ Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper*, 10.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Kavanagh, “Advent,” 124.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Patrick Kavanagh, “From Failure Up,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 161.

ceiling”⁸⁷, “a hole in Heaven’s gable”⁸⁸. The innocent experiences of his child poet had enshrined in him an instinct for the type of virtuous wonder that served his theopoetic vocation best. The “little window”⁸⁹ of his childhood bedroom nevertheless “let in the stars”⁹⁰ and taught him what it was to be a poet. As life in Dublin challenged his assumptions and his outlook, it was to this childlike innocence that Kavanagh returned in order to find poetic and spiritual equanimity.

Point of reckoning

His first decade as a full-time writer in Dublin grievously challenged the poetic convictions announced by Kavanagh in poems such as “A Christmas Childhood” and “Advent”. He spent much of the 1940s in fitful employment and increasingly at odds with the literary establishment that was unable or unwilling to come to terms with a poet who had begun to defy the expectations placed on him by the political and cultural gatekeepers of society. Kavanagh spent much of the 1940’s attacking the hypocrisy and self-absorption of those who seemed, by his reckoning, to prefer a stagnant mediocrity to the imagination and integrity Kavanagh was advocating for with increasing volume. Kavanagh came to view this period during the 1940s as a fruitless squandering of his poetic vocation, admitting later that “[I] ploughed my way through complexities and anger, hatred and ill-will towards the faults of man.”⁹¹

This crisis brought about a point of reckoning in Kavanagh’s poetic vocation, captured by a number of key poems written at the beginning of the 1950s. These poems reorient Kavanagh back towards his mission as poet-theologian as announced in poems like “Advent”, but also point to the future path his journey will take. These poems of the early 1950s show the first signs of a new care-free style wrested from the testing experiences of a decade living in Dublin. This turning point is enshrined most notably by “Auditors In”, published in 1951. The poem enacts a powerful personal inquest into Kavanagh’s recent past, amounting to a powerful restatement of Kavanagh’s theo-poetic mission:

Is verse an entertainment only?
Or is it a profound and holy

⁸⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, “To Hell with Commonsense,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 288.

⁸⁸ Kavanagh, “A Christmas Childhood,” 144.

⁸⁹ Kavanagh, “My Room,” 12.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

Faith that cries the inner history
Of the failure of man's mission.⁹²

By the end of the poem, we are sure of Kavanagh's answer. A renewed conviction to honour his poetic vocation - the "profound and holy faith" with which he has been endowed - is the only way to overcome the frustrations and failures of life. For this realization, Kavanagh emerges afresh with gratitude and clarity of purpose:

Yet do not be too much dismayed;
It's on your hand the humble trade
Of versing that can easily
Restore your equanimity
And lay the looney ghosts that goad
The savages of Pembroke Road...
Bow down here and thank your God.⁹³

Undertaking an audit of his poetic vocation, Kavanagh was able to identify, as he did in another poem from this period, that "satire was unfruitful prayer"⁹⁴. The resentment and revenge that characterized much of his work in the 1940s was a form of *curiositas* that obscured the wonder and joy at the heart of his poetic vocation. Having restored a sense of purpose to his mission, Kavanagh expands his poetic God-language further during these years in a series of provocative poems. "God in Woman" and "The God of Poetry" both express a growing freedom in the terms of Kavanagh's poetic vocation. Kavanagh expresses the connection between his faith and his poetry in unconventional, often playful language, giving the "God of imagination"⁹⁵ free reign to lead him where he will. In "God in Woman", published in 1951 near to the time of "Auditors In", Kavanagh honours God's presence in the women who have nurtured his poetic vocation most closely:

Now I must search till I have found my God –
Not in an orphanage. He hides
In no humanitarian disguise,
A derelict upon a barren bog;
But in some fantastically ordinary incog:
Behind a well-bred convent girl's eyes,

⁹² Patrick Kavanagh, "Auditors In," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 242.

⁹³ Kavanagh, "Auditors In," 244.

⁹⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, "Prelude," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 275.

⁹⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, "Kerr's Ass," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 25.

Or wrapped in middle-class felicities
 Among the women in a coffee shop.
 Surely my God is feminine, for Heaven
 Is the generous impulse, is contented
 With feeding praise to the good. And all
 Of these that I have known have come from women.
 While men the poet's tragic light resented,
 The spirit that is Woman caressed his soul.⁹⁶

Here Kavanagh has departed comprehensively from the neat, refined symbolism of his early religio-rural verse. God is now symbolized not by the perfection of the sun's rays or the tranquility and quiet ecstasy of nature, but "in some fantastically ordinary incog"⁹⁷ - ordinary scenes from the lives of the women that Kavanagh has come to associate with the work of God in his life. This is Kavanagh's theology of the commonplace in full flow, showing the confidence to let his wonder, his "God of imagination"⁹⁸, take him "wherever life pours ordinary plenty"⁹⁹. These provocative accounts of God's presence in the world are stark examples of unlike symbolism, the technique outlined in by the schematics of the apophatic theologian Pseudo-Dionysius. The theologian gives the scriptural example of God as a worm, a symbol so obviously inadequate as to provoke some meaningful contemplation on the behalf of the inquirer. This phenomenon, eloquently traced by Pseudo-Dionysius, allows those who wish to talk about God to transcend in some small way the inadequacy of human words, phrases and ideas.

The strict refinement of Pseudo-Dionysius' negative theology should not be mistaken as an end in itself, or a "mere move in a conceptual game."¹⁰⁰ The constrictive scrutiny to which Pseudo-Dionysius's negative theology subjects man's theological inquiry is designed to propel it to its ultimate goal, to make possible a self-emptying encounter of ecstasy (*ekstasis lit.* 'stepping out of oneself') with God. This ultimate summit of human experience is characterized by *agnosia*, a type of unknowing that is beyond traditional affirmation and negation. This is the territory of the mystical, the fourth and final stage of Pseudo-Dionysius' theological journey.

⁹⁶ Patrick Kavanagh, "God in Woman," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 237.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Kavanagh, "Kerr's Ass," 254.

⁹⁹ Kavanagh, "Advent," 125.

¹⁰⁰ Rowan Williams, "The theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky: an exposition and critique.", (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1975), 65.

For Pseudo-Dionysius, the aim of unlike symbolism is to confound and provoke the mind towards more profound reflection on the nature and working of God. More straightforward affirmative representations of God - such as were encountered in the refined early God-language of Kavanagh, run the risk of an over-confident representation of God. Kavanagh conveys this provocative shift in the style of his God-language at the conclusion of the 1952 poem "The God of Poetry":

All day I walked, all day I searched,
And had no eyes to see
The genuine god who never looks
A bit like poetry.¹⁰¹

The range of God's guises is as wide as the scope of Kavanagh's limitless imagination. Convention and orthodoxy, both poetic and religious, run the risk of boxing God into our restrictive human parameters. A joyfully cultivated sense of wonder is the key to serving the "God of imagination"¹⁰² and to recognizing and blessing the "genuine god who never looks/ A bit like poetry."¹⁰³ Stripped of the humility and delight that true wonder engenders, conventional poetry will continue to search in vain for true inspiration.

Kavanagh's professional and personal travails had led to a period of self-examination and an eventual reinvigoration of his poetic vocation after a decade in Dublin. A sense of conviction, and a confident rejection of convention now characterizes his poetry and the God-language that suffuses it. "Having Confessed" sets the seal on this new-found conviction in his poetry and his faith. Published in 1952 in the last edition of Kavanagh's self-published *Kavanagh's Weekly*, it is the starkest salvo of poetic and religious humility in Kavanagh's oeuvre.

Having confessed, he feels
That he should go down on his knees and pray
For forgiveness for his pride, for having
Dared to view his soul from the outside.
Lie at the heart of the emotion, time
Has its own work to do. We must not anticipate
Or awaken for a moment. God cannot catch us
Unless we stay in the unconscious room
Of our hearts. We must be nothing.

¹⁰¹ Patrick Kavanagh, "The God of Poetry," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 385.

¹⁰² Kavanagh, "Kerr's Ass," 254.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Nothing that God may make us something.
 We must not touch the immortal material,
 We must not daydream tomorrow's judgement –
 God must be allowed to surprise us.
 We have sinned, sinned like Lucifer
 By this anticipation. Let us lie down again
 Deep in anonymous humility and God
 May find us worthy material for his Hand.¹⁰⁴

This poem underscores the extent to which Kavanagh, in this period of reflection, increasingly sets out to reject any sort of self-absorption that would threaten to obscure the truth of his vocation as a poet-theologian. In the stark humility of its tone, this poem approaches a kind of poetic *negatio negationis*. *Negatio negationis* is another influential method of apophatic theology, introduced originally by the Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus as he outlined the impossibility of knowing what he called the One. Such is the length to which Proclus takes the negation of all positive concepts of the One that he introduces the influential method of *negatio negationis*: the negation of negation itself. In taking negation to its natural conclusion in the *negatio negationis*, Proclus points towards the ultimate destination of apophysis: contemplative silence. Such perfect, un-striving union with the transcendent is beyond all discourse. This seeming dissolution of the apophatic way is, in fact, a critical waypoint in the development of negative theology. Without a recognition of negation's own limits, "we will arrive in the end at an empty space neatly fenced by negative dogmas."¹⁰⁵

Kavanagh's own *negatio negationis* in "Having Confessed" amounts to a rejection of his own social, poetic and religious agitation over the previous years in Dublin. In the course of his disputes with the Dublin establishment, Kavanagh had struggled to maintain the authentic wonder that honoured the profundity of his poetic vocation. He criticizes the righteous presumption (the "anticipation"¹⁰⁶) that underlay his many strivings, and espouses a humble equanimity more conducive to the poetic process, where God may "be allowed to surprise us."¹⁰⁷ After many years spent "daydreaming tomorrow's judgement"¹⁰⁸, Kavanagh avows to remove himself from the cycle of rejection, reaction and reflection that had

¹⁰⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, "Having Confessed," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 256.

¹⁰⁵ A. H. Armstrong, *Hellenic and Christian Studies* (Farnham: Variorum, 1989), 136-137.

¹⁰⁶ Kavanagh, "Having Confessed," 256.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

characterized his life in Dublin, and to surrender himself into God's poetic plan for him. As "Having Confessed" and "Auditors In" demonstrate, moments of poetic reckoning are for Kavanagh most often moment of religious and spiritual reckoning too. God is the one in whom Kavanagh's poetic vocation (and the wonder that catalyzes it) begins. In times of difficulty, when *curiositas* blocks his path, Kavanagh returns to God with apophatic humility to restore him to himself.

Noo pomes and rebirth

Despite his best intentions, Kavanagh's poetic vocation was yet to face its gravest challenge. Two years after "Having Confessed" appeared in the last edition of *Kavanagh's Weekly*, a combination of ill-health, legal trouble, and heartbreak stunted his poetic impulse and made 1954 an *annus horribilis* for Kavanagh, as related in his "Nineteen Fifty-Four":

Nineteen Fifty-Four hold on till I try
To formulate some theory about you. A personal matter:
My lamp of concentration you sought to shatter,
To leave me groping in madness under a low sky.
O I wish I could laugh! O I wish I could cry!
Or find some formula, some mystical patter
That would organise a perspective from this hellish scatter –
Everywhere I look a part of me is exiled from the I.¹⁰⁹

This combination of obstacles threatened to be the gravest and last of Kavanagh's tumultuous life in Dublin. However, just as the flame of his poetic wick was nearing extinction, Kavanagh underwent a personal and poetic rebirth. Successful surgery and a period of convalescence on the banks of the Grand Canal led to a physical and literary transformation. His brush with death had engendered a new carefree abandonment in Kavanagh's poetry. He began to experiment with new rhythms, themes and language in what he proudly entitled his "noo pomes."¹¹⁰ The apophatic humility of "Having Confessed" continued but was now accompanied with an emphatic sense of joy. Kavanagh no longer sought to cast judgement on himself or others, but to steep himself in gratitude for the minute blessings of God wherever they were to be found. "The Hospital", written during the course of his recovery, marks the beginning of this joyful humility:

This is what love does to things: the Rialto Bridge,

¹⁰⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, "Nineteen Fifty-Four," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 227.

¹¹⁰ Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper*, 313.

The main gate that was bent by a heavy lorry,
 The seat at the back of a shed that was a suntrap.
 Naming these things is the love-act and its pledge;
 For we must record love's mystery without claptrap,
 Snatch out of time the passionate transitory.¹¹¹

This is Kavanagh's new poetic mission: to recognise, name, and love the minor incidents that sparked his poetic wonder. His goal was not to form a definitive judgement, but rather to bless these gifts by the very process of naming them. Kavanagh's newfound preference for 'naming' rather than 'judging' is emblematic of the apophatic transformation in his poetry. For Kavanagh, poetry was always a dangerous enterprise, because it tempted the poet into a point of view that was either over simplistic or presumptuous of some greater knowledge than was possible. For a mystical poet such as Kavanagh, for whom poetry was an idiom of prayer, to succumb to naivete or presumption was to fail as a poet and as a Christian. In what he called the "noo pomes"¹¹² of his mature years, Kavanagh discovers a poetic God-language of praise, preaching and prayer that transcends these dangers to his poetic vocation. Gracious 'naming' became the new occupation of Kavanagh's poetry, it was a 'love act' that channelled his poetic wonder towards adoration of its ultimate source in God. In "October" Kavanagh responds with eucharistic assurance to God's gentle presence in nature:

O leafy yellowness you create for me
 A world that was and now is poised above time,
 I do not need to puzzle out Eternity
 As I walk this arboreal street on the edge of a town.
 The breeze, too, even the temperature
 And pattern of movement, is precisely the same
 As broke my heart for youth passing. Now I am sure
 Of something. Something will be mine wherever I am.
 I want to throw myself on the public street without caring
 For anything but the prayering that the earth offers.
 It is October all over my life and the light is staring
 As it caught me once in a plantation by the fox coverts.
 A man is ploughing ground for winter wheat
 And my nineteen years weigh heavily on my feet.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Patrick Kavanagh, "The Hospital," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 280.

¹¹² Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper*, 313.

¹¹³ Patrick Kavanagh, "October," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 292.

Reposed in humble adoration to the sacrament of God's presence in nature ("the praying the earth offers"¹¹⁴), Kavanagh is imaginatively rejuvenated. He no longer needs to "puzzle out Eternity"¹¹⁵, but rather to name and honour the newfound joy that will be his "wherever [he is]"¹¹⁶. Poetic and spiritual inspiration are no longer associated with a particular place or a particular ideal of material success, but in a gracious wonder that is "poised above time"¹¹⁷.

The timeless, placeless, redemptive wonder that characterizes Kavanagh's transformation continues in "Canal Bank Walk". In his emphatic God-language of praise and gratitude, Kavanagh achieves a kind of mystical poetic ecstasy (lit. 'ek-stasis, stepping out of oneself'), replacing his own self-absorption with a surrender to God's sacramental presence in nature.

O unworn world enrapture me, encapture me in a web
Of fabulous grass and eternal voices by a beech,
Feed the gaping need of my senses, give me ad lib
To pray unselfconsciously with overflowing speech,
For this soul needs to be honoured with a new dress woven
From green and blue things and arguments that cannot be proven.¹¹⁸

Kavanagh's poetic vocation is no longer about "puzzling out Eternity"¹¹⁹ or proving arguments, but about "do[ing] the will of God, wallow[ing] in the habitual, the banal"¹²⁰. Poetry now facilitates, rather than frustrates an attitude of spiritual humility in Kavanagh. His "noo pomes"¹²¹ hone his Christian Wonder and train his eye and his heart on the unlikely minutiae of God's creation. "The One" is a final illustration of Kavanagh's emphatic, eucharistic abandonment to the presence of God in nature. Returning to the rural imagery of his early poetry, Kavanagh comes now with a fully developed theology of the commonplace that employs evocative unlike symbolism to joyfully identify the presence of "beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God"¹²² in the details of creation.

Green, blue, yellow and red –
God is down in the swamps and marshes,
Sensational as April and almost incred-
ible the flowering of our catharsis.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Kavanagh, "October," 292.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, "Canal Bank Walk," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 294-295.

¹¹⁹ Kavanagh, "October," 292.

¹²⁰ Kavanagh, "Canal Bank Walk," 295.

¹²¹ Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper*, 313.

¹²² Patrick Kavanagh, "The One," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 292.

A humble scene in a backward place
 Where no one important ever looked;
 The raving flowers looked up in the face
 Of the One and the Endless, the Mind that has baulked
 The profoundest of mortals. A primrose, a violet
 A violent wild iris – but mostly anonymous performers,
 Yet as important occasions as the Muse at her toilet
 Prepared to inform the local farmers
 That beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God
 Was breathing His love by a cut-away bog.¹²³

The eucharistic, humble naming that now constitutes Kavanagh's poetic vocation inclines towards the innocuous for its route back to God. In these poems Kavanagh's God-language approaches the New Apophaticism outlined by Susanna Ticciati, where praise, preaching and prayer constitute the means to speak appropriately about God and thus enact a transformation on behalf of the speaker.¹²⁴ Kavanagh's late poetic and spiritual transformation contain several further hallmarks of the apophatic tradition. In these later poems, Kavanagh eschews a straightforward, refined, affirmation of God and instead inclines towards a type of emphatic, ecstatic super-affirmation, often characterized by verbal repetition: ("so be reposed and praise, praise, praise, the way it happened and the way it is"¹²⁵). He openly negates more traditional forms of knowledge, especially in relation to God - "the One and the Endless, the Mind that has baulked/ The profoundest of mortals."¹²⁶ In place of this knowledge Kavanagh pursues a new poetic love-act, a theology of the commonplace that names and blesses "the anonymous performers"¹²⁷ of God's creation. Plotinus, another Neoplatonist, had first enshrined the importance of super-affirmation in adding some positive content to the apophatic theology: his God is King of Kings, more Good than Good. Pseudo-Dionysus had Christianized the concept, outlining in his *Divine Names* how the Christian God was more than any name or description could impart. John Scottus Eriugena, who interpreted Pseudo-Dionysus' theology for the western Church,

¹²³ Kavanagh, "The One," 292.

¹²⁴ Susan Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs in Studies* (London: Brill, 2013), passim. In advocating for a "New Apophaticism" Susanna Ticciati expands the remit of the apophatic beyond what is possible or impossible to say of God, but also how the speaker is transformed in the process. To say that 'God is Good', is not to represent God in Himself but to associate Him in the ongoing process of our own becoming good. To call God beautiful likewise tells us, as Ticciati puts it at p. 242, "where to look in order to find God."

¹²⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, "Question to Life," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 322.

¹²⁶ Kavanagh, "The One," 292.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

coined his *plus quam* (“more than”) method to articulate the incommunicability of the transcendent Christian God as Pseudo-Dionysius had outlined. God was more than could ever be said or conceived of him by human means. He is simultaneously Goodness, not Goodness, and more than Goodness.

Putting a name to God’s presence in the world was a long running preoccupation of the apophatic tradition, from Plato’s *Cratylus*, through Dionysius’ *Divine Names* and into the writing of Thomas Aquinas. In this tradition “names are given in order to reveal God to finite intelligence: so that we may be drawn upwards and transcend their literal interpretation.”¹²⁸ Thus the apophatic tradition provides an insight into what Kavanagh is trying to achieve when he pledges to “record love’s mystery without claptrap”¹²⁹, or to “Name for the future/The everyday of nature/And without being analytic/ Create a great epic.”¹³⁰ Further, the apophatic principle of God’s essential unknowability is one of the keys to understanding what type of theology Kavanagh understands himself to be practicing with his provocative statement: “a poet is a theologian.”¹³¹ Una Agnew’s influential study has identified Kavanagh’s as a “mystical imagination”. In doing so, she takes as her guide Kavanagh’s own words in 1964:

There is, of course, a poetic movement which sees poetry materialistically. The writers of this school see no transcendent nature in the poet; they are practical chaps, excellent technicians. But somehow or other I have a belief in poetry as a mystical thing, and a dangerous thing.¹³²

By Agnew’s appraisal “there is only the finest line of difference between Kavanagh the poet and Kavanagh the mystic.”¹³³ In her conclusive analysis of Kavanagh as a mystical poet, Agnew takes the poet at his word in a way others have not. As Agnew relates, Kavanagh described poetry as a “mystical thing, and a dangerous thing.”¹³⁴ Borrowing from Evelyn Underhill’s four-part definition of mysticism, Agnew establishes Kavanagh’s mystical credentials under the headings of Awakening, Purification, Illumination and

¹²⁸ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God : negative theology in the Platonic tradition : Plato to Eriugena* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1995), 239. Cf. *Divine Names* VII, 1: “and Him, Who is often sung, and of many names, [is] unutterable and without name, and Him, Who is present to all, and is found of all, [is] incomprehensible and past finding out.”

¹²⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, “The Hospital,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 280.

¹³⁰ Patrick Kavanagh, “Is,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 287.

¹³¹ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 22.

¹³² Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1964), xiii.

¹³³ Agnew, *Buttonhole*, 276.

¹³⁴ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, xiii.

Transformation. It is striking that in the course of her analysis, Agnew does not venture to use the language of apophaticism to describe Kavanagh's poetic and religion outlook. Neither does she take it upon herself to define in detail the sense in which Kavanagh understood the danger of poetry, especially in relation to its mysticism. If we understand Kavanagh's prominent mysticism as part of a more generally apophatic outlook in his work, then to write poetry is indeed quite clearly a "dangerous"¹³⁵ act. The mystical, apophatic element of Kavanagh's character would naturally incline towards a more restrictive use of language and a more contemplative mode of being. The word 'mystic' derives ultimately from the Greek *muein*, 'to be silent'. To write poetry then, was to risk breaking this silence, to venture to ascribe meaning to life. The danger of being a poet was the idea that "one ought/Have something to say/A raison d'etre, a plot for the play"¹³⁶. Even when one's own inclination was for "colour/ Without comment from the scholar"¹³⁷, even when one's instinct advised against it, the pressure existed for the poet to "formulate some theory"¹³⁸ about life. Balancing his poetic curiosity with the danger of "analyz[ing] God's breath in common statement"¹³⁹ was an ever-present preoccupation of Kavanagh's poetic vocation.

Despite taking more seriously than any other commentator the centrality of God in Kavanagh's work, Agnew concludes ultimately that there is no systematization to Kavanagh's theology: "[there is] no conscious theological schema in his allusions to God, Trinity or indeed to the Holy Ghost. His theology, like his revelation, 'comes as an aside'. It derives from an innate charism that defied systematization."¹⁴⁰ However, this chapter has taken a broader assessment of wonder in Kavanagh's entire body of work as the means to identify what, for Kavanagh, was the primary area of overlap between the poetic and the theological realms. It has concluded that by training his innocent, virtuous wonder on the unlikeliest details of everyday life and raising them to importance in the process, Kavanagh is making a profound poetic and theological point: that God is as far above the conventional names and ideas we ascribe to him as a "swamp"¹⁴¹ or a "bent gate"¹⁴² is far away from our conventional sense of poetic beauty. In making them the subject of his poetic wonder,

¹³⁵ Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, xiii.

¹³⁶ Kavanagh, "Is," 287.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Kavanagh, "Nineteen Fifty-Four," 237.

¹³⁹ Kavanagh, "Advent," 125.

¹⁴⁰ Agnew, *Buttonhole*, 243-244.

¹⁴¹ Kavanagh, "The One," 292.

¹⁴² Kavanagh, "The Hospital," 280.

Kavanagh suffuses them with poetic and theological significance, and transforms himself into a more luminous sign of God's presence in the world.

Kavanagh's conception of the poet

The final portion of this Chapter proposes to examine Patrick Kavanagh's conception of the poet and from there to summarise what this figure could have had in common with the theologian by Kavanagh's conception. Up to this point, this chapter has sought to define theologian first by the internal standards of Kavanagh's own work – what Kavanagh seems to consider a theologian – and then by using Aquinas' conception of wonder (rooted in his treatment of virtue) as an external yardstick for the feasibility of Kavanagh's claims that "a poet is a theologian."¹⁴³ In this, the study sought not to prove or disprove Kavanagh's claim, but in subjecting it to a more serious analysis than had been attempted before, to assess what Kavanagh sought to achieve by associating the work of the poet and the theologian so closely with each other.

Kavanagh gives us no shortage of material, in both his poetry and his prose, from which to sketch his conception of a true poet. A recurring feature is otherness – the apartness of the poet from the rest of society: "Analysing the thing now I see or feel that I always had some sort of kink in me. It is this kind which makes a poet, I believe. 'Rectitude', Cocteau calls it."¹⁴⁴

This is not only one among many possible side effects of writing poetry. For Kavanagh, it is a requirement for being a poet in the first place. Being a poet does not, for Kavanagh, consist merely in the act of writing poetry, but is a manner of living and of seeing the world. It is a "point of view"¹⁴⁵ as Kavanagh would have it. "The poet is a poet outside his writing as I have often argued"¹⁴⁶, he suggests in a seminal review of his life's work.¹⁴⁷ Again, in other piece written a few years prior, he made a similar claim "a man may be a poet in prose as well as in verse, or in merely talking to people. To narrow the poetic spirit down to its expression in verse is equivalent to narrowing religion down to something that happens on Sundays."¹⁴⁸ The analogy with religion here is not inconsequential. Most often, it is to religious language that Kavanagh turns to explain the depth of the poetic spirit. Indeed, later

¹⁴³ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

¹⁴⁴ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 230.

¹⁴⁵ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

¹⁴⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 231.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 233.

in this same article, Kavanagh gives an example of the embodiment of this poetic spirit. He does choose as an exemplar a well-admired writer such as Moore, Yeats or Eliot, but St Luke:

A good idea of the nature of the poet is to be found in E.V. Rieu's introduction to his translation of the Four Gospels. He remarks of St. Luke: 'St. Luke was a poet. I do not mean by this that he embroidered his narratives, but rather that he knew how to distil truth from fact.' Rieu goes on to refer to Luke's 'poetic insight into reality' and to his realisation of the part played by Woman in the revelation of the Divine Idea. That is the poetic mind.¹⁴⁹

Kavanagh extends the analogy between poetry and religion in his description of what such a poetic spirit should achieve:

If I happened to meet a poet – and I have met poets – I would expect him to reveal his powers of insight and imagination even if he talked of poultry farming, ground rents or any other commonplace subject. Above all, I would expect to be excited and have my horizons of faith and hope widened by his ideas on the only subject that is of any real importance – Man-in-this-World-and-why... He would reveal to me the gay, imaginative God who made the grass and the trees and the flowers, a God not terribly to be feared...¹⁵⁰

In other words, the ultimate essence and effect of the poetic spirit is theological: it is driven by and directed towards the eternal questions of life, and for Kavanagh these eternal questions, asked in the poetic or the theological idiom, invariably find their answer in God: "There is wonderful freedom for the spirit in the world but we must beware of demanding the ultimate answer. "'Why' is God."¹⁵¹

Without setting out to, Kavanagh reveals what the poetic and the theological frame of mind have in common with such off-hand comments such as these. This is the keynote of Kavanagh the theologian: his theology comes as an aside and is delivered with such lightness of touch that it can go unnoticed. The quality that is redolent for Kavanagh of both poet and theologian is an unworldly detachment: "detachment that sees both the grandeur and insignificance of man in the world... is the most important quality of poetic genius."¹⁵² This unworldly detachment, as this thesis has argued, manifests in wonder. Wonder, particularly

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 233.

¹⁵¹ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 26.

¹⁵² Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 239.

its more contemplative modality, reminds humans of the humble limitations of their reason even as they grasp at the grandeur of that which exceeds it.

It must be acknowledged that much of the overlap between the poetic and the theological in Kavanagh's work is inferred. Only rarely does Kavanagh feel the need to make explicit what for him was so obviously implicit: that poetry and theology had the same essential way of operating. The relative scarcity of the moments when Kavanagh undertakes to explain the connection between the two makes them all the more important. For example, the religious analogy is not far under the surface in Kavanagh's assertion that "the poetic view of life is a view based on a true sense of values and those values must be of their nature what are called unwordly."¹⁵³ One might wonder what these values are, and whether they are explicitly religious, or whether literature can have another set of values that take no stock of the kind of unworldly detachment Kavanagh seems to share with the religious life. In a rare instance of clarity on this important point, Kavanagh looks down on the type of literary vision that takes anything other than God as its ultimate value.

Whatever be the reason, it appears to me that we cannot go on much longer without finding an underlying faith upon which to build our world of letters. Because of this absence of faith, the anger of men like O'Connor and O'Casey is worthless and even pitiful. The Catholic says that he has the answer, and it is an answer. But the Age of Reason denies it. We want to go down prostrate and cry our belief, but our reason refuses. Out of the Age of Reason comes the work of Joyce, Eliot and Picasso, the art that is pastiche, an attempt to create excitement from the manipulation of means. We have no end, no purpose. The real trouble with the world today is that it wants to believe in God and cannot. Sartre has illustrated this dilemma in his work. The end is sex, and kind of physical satisfaction, and despair.

The world today is full of Pilates, asking the question which is always cynical: What is Truth? And every man who has in him something of Christ will reply, 'I am', before he is led off - to starvation.¹⁵⁴

In this crucial passage, Kavanagh shows himself aware of the element of provocation in his self-assured declaration that "a poet is a theologian"¹⁵⁵. He allows for the fact that even if for him it is a truism, such a statement constitutes an open question for the realm of literature, and one to which several other answers have been found. When his self-assurance and the

¹⁵³ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 233.

¹⁵⁴ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 245-246.

¹⁵⁵ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

lightness of touch give way in moments like this to something more polemic or at least systematic, we get a truer understanding of what is at stake in Kavanagh's elementally religious approach to life and poetry. The above passage demonstrates that Kavanagh was not unaware of the dangers of the life of a poet-theologian. Here he acknowledges, even embraces, his fate as a kind of Christ-figure, suffering for his witness as a poet-theologian, his witness to God as the 'Why' of poetry and of life. As Agnew notes, "He enjoyed being a Christ-figure and felt an almost unhealthy security in being crucified. The position of defence was his favourite one, he liked the limits it set, the intransigence of its boundaries, the inescapable cornered sensation."¹⁵⁶ This offers another insight into Kavanagh's designation of the poet as theologian. Both poet and theologian, working from a sense of wonder at the mysteries of existence, are by nature constricted in what they can say. Both agonise in equal measure over the intricacies of language and its possibilities. One can imagine the appeal to Kavanagh of the well-known story of Aquinas – Kavanagh's theological lodestar – retreating late in his life into humble silence at the realisation that all his prolific writings were worth as much as straw. Late in life Kavanagh achieved his own kind of anagnorisis on the banks of the Grand Canal: but chose instead to change his manner of writing rather than to stop it entirely.

If one looks closely, then, it is possible to discover in Kavanagh's work the kind of values by which the true poet-theologian lives their life. These are unworldly values which leave the poet in detached wonderment at the mysteries of the world – mysteries which find their ultimate 'Why' in God. In the work of Aquinas, these values are systematized in the theologian's treatment of the virtues. For Kavanagh, a child-like innocence acts as a kind of virtue that inoculates against the kind of *curiositas* that tempts both poet and theologian alike away from the unworldly values at the heart of their work. Conducting oneself with wonder guided by a kind of virtue, it has been argued, is the concern of both poet and theologian, and is one of the ways we can understand Kavanagh's figure of the poet-theologian.

It is significant, then, that the one instance where Kavanagh does make a reference to theological virtue is in the context of his statement that "a poet is a theologian"¹⁵⁷. The wider quote reads: "But Poetry has to do with the reality of the spirit, of faith and hope and sometimes even charity. It is a point of view. A poet is a theologian."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Agnew, *Buttonhole*, 170-171.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

This statement proves that for Kavanagh it was indeed their common unworldly values that most connected the poetic and theological enterprise. Further, this passage seems to confirm that the values that guide the detached wonder of the poetic spirit are explicitly religious and can be identified with the Christian concept of virtue. For Kavanagh, the poet and the theologian share a point of view, a set of values that inspire what they do and shape how they act. Those values can be understood within the Christian tradition of virtue, shaped most profoundly by St. Thomas Aquinas. As Aquinas' work outlined, virtue is something infused within us, but the virtuous person is also called to actively cultivate habits of living that bring God's gifts to their fullness in them. For Kavanagh, wonder is a key proving ground for his statement that "a poet is a theologian", and virtues are an essential guide to the unworldly values that guide the poet-theologian. As a practicing Catholic of passionate and provocative disposition, he shows an attention throughout his work to his responsibility to be guided by a kind of virtue in pursuit of the wonder that characterizes his theo-poetic vocation. Most notably, as has been argued, he becomes aware of the dangers of counterfeit wonder – a kind of *curiositas* that leads his poetic spirit through resentment and ego away from the path of virtue. His eventual spiritual rebirth and rejection of this path constituted for Agnew a kind of mystical purification,¹⁵⁹ and as this Chapter has argued, lends a humble apophatic streak to the theology at play in his writings.

Conclusion

Taking Kavanagh's poetry as an exemplar of poetical wonder, this study has examined wonder in the theology of Thomas Aquinas in order to establish whether any common ground does indeed exist between the poetic and theological approach. A complete overlap is, of course, unlikely. It does not need to be said that the poetic approach is more evocative and less structured than the theological. However, by revealing the unique esteem in which Kavanagh the poet held the Aquinas the theologian, this chapter has shed light on the spirit of wonder that unites the two disciplines. A sense of the mysterious will always constrict both disciplines in how much their words can ever express. The attitude of wonder characterizes the hunger and humility at the heart of both disciplines. In the case of Kavanagh, it went (mostly) without saying that the mysterious presence from which his wonder derived and to whom it was returned was unquestionably the same as the theological tradition: that is, God. God was the ultimate value, the ultimate guarantor, the ultimate object

¹⁵⁹ Agnew, *Buttonhole*, 211.

of Kavanagh's work. His familiarity with Aquinas, pursued no doubt in conversation with ordained friends and in the course of his copious reading in the Catholic Library on Merrion Square,¹⁶⁰ gave him enough confidence to assert that his values were the same values of the theologian. The detachment that he knew all too well from experience characterized the existence of the true poet, he instinctively recognized in the religious life of the theologian. Such a life was guided by an unworldly detachment. This chapter has suggested that in the Catholic tradition to which he belonged, these values can be understood in the context of the virtues, habits of living that bring to greater fruition in the believer the gifts that God has imbued in them. A child-like innocence emerged as a kind of virtue that preserved in Kavanagh the gift of wonder that more than any other allowed him to "do the will of God"¹⁶¹ in his life, "to wallow in the habitual, the banal"¹⁶² in the course of his theo-poetic writings. In the course of his storied life, Kavanagh struggled with his own *curiositas* of resentment and ego, but particularly in the latter section of his career after his spiritual rebirth on the banks of Grand Canal in 1955, this chapter identified in his work, his life and his theology an apophatic streak that favored humility and praise above all else.

It is not the task of this thesis to make any value judgments on Kavanagh's statement or to say whether he was correct to claim that "a poet is a theologian"¹⁶³. Nor would this be possible - Kavanagh's claim is too broad to allow it. However, as is often the case with Kavanagh, when he is pronouncing with confidence on matters of seemingly general importance, his gaze is often fixed on himself. The possibility must be allowed that his declaration on the theological claims of the poet is one of these instances. In his own life and times, Kavanagh became aware that literature was grappling with the search for an ultimate value, and ultimate guarantee of its worth. His life and work was a challenge to those who found other answers than his, and this is captured in the provocative confidence of his declaration that "a poet is a theologian"¹⁶⁴. As this chapter has determined to show, that God was the answer to this question was almost a truism, barely in need of restatement for Kavanagh. This explains the lightness of touch with which he exhibits and explicates his reasoning on such matters as his feeling that a "poet is a theologian"¹⁶⁵. One may decry his allusiveness or wish he were more straightforward, deliberate or systematic in his theology.

¹⁶⁰ Kavanagh was known to converse regularly with Fr Jack Kelly S.J. in Parson's bookshop off Upper Baggot Street. He was also known to frequent the above-mentioned library regularly in the 1950s.

¹⁶¹ Kavanagh, "Canal Bank Walk," 295.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 22.

¹⁶⁴ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 22.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

It would, for one thing, have assured that his deeply-felt religiosity would not have been so easily obscured from memory in later appraisals of his work. However, ultimately it is the very lightness of touch with which Kavanagh intuits God as the Why to any questions poetry, theology, or any other worthwhile mode of human inquiry could offer that marks out his particular genius as a religious writer.

In this context his declaration that “a poet is a theologian”¹⁶⁶ can be read as something of a mission statement of his purpose, a rare manifesto for his unique and often elusive vision that may have been obvious to him, but too often eluded others. His statement that “a poet is a theologian” is one of the rare occasions when Kavanagh seems to feel the need to state plainly what his belief in God implied for his life as a poet. The relative rarity of these instances can help explain the daring choice of language; it was designed to be self-explaining, to shock an oblivious audience into recognition of just what poetry meant to a man who pursued it deliberately with the reverence of a religious vocation.

As this chapter has shown, Kavanagh approaches his own redeemed integration of the three modalities of wonder describes in the work of Desmond. His is a different blend than was achieved by Aquinas in his theological treatment of Christian wonder. However, as this chapter has demonstrated, Kavanagh seemed to intuit that the two shared something in common. What Kavanagh sensed was an ability on the part of both himself and Aquinas to expand the boundaries of their own disciplines. Kavanagh seemed to respect Aquinas for his ability to pursue the “dry stuff”¹⁶⁷ necessary for a serious “rectitude”¹⁶⁸ as a thinker. Beyond that, however, he admired Aquinas – and related to him – for his ability to achieve an unlikely combination of approaches in his work: a wonder that blended inquiry and contemplation in an appealing balance. Balance was the hallmark of Aquinas’ work: fear and hope, the apophatic and the kataphatic, vice and virtue, the contemplative and the inquisitive were all held in deft hypertension in his work. Kavanagh’s own journey as a poet-theologian seems to be in constant search for his own version of such a balance: poetic, personal, emotional, spiritual. As these first two chapters have shown, Aquinas holds the key to the figure of Kavanagh’s poet-theologian. To expand further, it can be argued that balance holds the key to why Aquinas held such a prominent place for Kavanagh. Aquinas, by Kavanagh’s view, was able to balance complex outlooks in his

¹⁶⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 22.

¹⁶⁷ Patrick Kavanagh “A Central Passion,” *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, May 24, 1952.

¹⁶⁸ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 230.

work, thus expanding the boundaries of his own discipline and the authority of his own work. This balance and authority is what Kavanagh sought in the figure of the poet-theologian.

The degree to which Kavanagh invested himself in his discipline shows the measure of belief he has in poetry. Desmond has complained at the turn of the twentieth century that “too much has been asked of art, with the result that too little, or almost nothing, is now being asked of art.”¹⁶⁹ Desmond speaks here of a “significant displacement of the sense of the sacred... of transcendence”¹⁷⁰ from art. This displacement was achieved notably by Romanticism, a kind of “spilt religion”¹⁷¹ characterized by Hulme as an accommodation with unbelief: “you don’t believe in a God, so you begin to believe that man is a god. You don’t believe in Heaven, so you begin to believe in a heaven on earth.”¹⁷² Quinn has called Kavanagh a “born-again Romantic”¹⁷³ for his passionate belief in the possibilities of poetry. His devotion to expanding the balance, boundaries and the authority of poetry is testament to such a belief. However, what makes Kavanagh such a unique and evocative figure is that his belief in poetry does not lead to a Romantic “displacement... of the sacred”¹⁷⁴, but a reintegration of the sacred at the very heart of the poetic enterprise, with a scholastic theologian as a figure of inspiration. Kavanagh can believe in poetry so firmly *because* of his belief in God. This is the paradox of Kavanagh the Catholic Romantic: captured in the statement that “a poet is a theologian.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ William Desmond, *Art, Origins, Otherness: Between Philosophy and Art* (New York, State University of New York Press, 2003), 265.

¹⁷⁰ William Desmond, “Intimate Intertwining: an interview with William Desmond on Art and Religion,” *Religion & Literature* 49, no. 1 (2017): 207.

¹⁷¹ Thomas Ernest Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924), 118.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Quinn, *Born-again Romantic*, passim.

¹⁷⁴ Desmond, *Intimate Intertwining*, 207.

¹⁷⁵ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

Chapter Three: Sacrament and sacramentality in art and theology

Introduction: the case for an interdisciplinary approach

Patrick Kavanagh was deliberately provocative in his declaration that “a poet is a theologian”¹. That is to say, not only was what he said designed to capture the attention by its boldness, but also by its elusiveness. He does not elaborate on his statement. It comes, in fact, at the end of a retrospective on his life and work, and is delivered with the self-assurance of a man who liked to give the idea that he knew exactly what he was talking about, even (perhaps especially) when his audience did not. Acknowledging that Kavanagh’s statement was meant to be provocative, even elusive, does not degrade its significance. Indeed, taking Kavanagh’s statement as worthy of proper investigation and consideration has been the unique commitment of this thesis. To make good on this commitment, this work has had to provide context and argumentation where Kavanagh did not. It has taken Kavanagh’s own work, prose and poetry, as its surest guide in this.

Kavanagh did comment that to be a writer one has to have a certain “point of view”². This was a *sine qua non* for uniting and empowering everything a true writer had to say. This work proposes that his Christian faith provided Kavanagh with the lodestar not only for his personal belief system, but for his own poetic and artistic agenda. As such, Kavanagh’s point of view as a writer was distinguished by his Christianity. In view of this, throughout the first half of this thesis, wonder became the first theo-poetic category under which Kavanagh’s Christian ‘point of view’ as a writer was taken to account for his understanding of himself as a poet-theologian. In this Chapter, sacrament is taken as the second such category. This chapter will undertake, in two parts, an interdisciplinary investigation of the concept of sacramentality in art and theology in order to discern the value of such an ascription to the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh. In its first half, this chapter will conduct a thorough study of sacramental theology to establish the why and how of the sacraments of the church. This will make possible in the second half of the chapter a more interdisciplinary approach where the application of a broader concept of sacramentality to an artist such as Kavanagh will be considered from both a theological and an artistic perspective. Sacrament is a more

¹ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose* (London: MacKibbin and Kee, 1967), 22.

² Ibid.

decidedly theological concept than wonder, and to apply it to Kavanagh's work (without his explicit use of the term) calls for a careful treatment.

The justification for approaching Kavanagh's work through the prism of sacrament is several-fold. Primarily, it speaks to something in Kavanagh's own doing – his poetic output. Kavanagh's work has been credited by commentators with a sacramentality that “sees the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the eternal in the historical. Properly understood this will never be mistaken for some kind of idolatry, pantheism or magic. True sacramentality affords the Christian believer something of a glimpse of God.”³ By its constant focus on the commonplace details of everyday life, Kavanagh's work transforms and transfigures seemingly innocuous material into something worthy of art, even of God. “God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday”⁴ is a statement about where Kavanagh finds his poetry as well as where he finds his God. It is a poetic as well as a theological proposition. If it is rested on for a moment, it forms the first part of a syllogism that captures the taken-for-granted-ness of God in Kavanagh's poetry. If God is in the everyday bits of life, and Kavanagh takes these commonplace experiences as the stuff of his poetry, then it goes without saying that God is in his poetry. Kavanagh does not use his poetry to go looking for God. So obvious to him is the gentle presence of God in the midst of the commonplace experiences of life, that by faithfully honouring these experiences – by “wallowing in the habitual, the banal”⁵, he will inevitably stumble upon God and enjoy the opportunity to raise his poetic cap to this divine presence like to that of an old friend. To locate Kavanagh's God so deeply in the subconscious of his poetry is not to diminish it, but rather to identify the assumptions from which Kavanagh is working and to account for the unsystematic, undogmatic, unselfconscious lightness of touch with which Kavanagh's God, and by extension his theology is sketched in his work.

These assumptions, it should be said, come from his upbringing in his faith, his ongoing practice and study of Catholicism, as well as the example and friendship of several influential figures who from childhood taught Kavanagh that his faith was something to be expressed and lived with the same unapologetic life force brought to family, farm, social and

³ Tom Stack, *No Earthly Estate: God and Patrick Kavanagh: An Anthology* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2002), 4.

⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 88.

⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, “Canal Bank Walk,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 294.

poetic affairs. Some of these figures and influences will be traced in further detail in the course of this work.

At this point, however, it is apt to note that the assumptions of his Christian point of view on the world are sacramental in the broadest sense. They allow, indeed they expect the possibility that one thing can represent another and be meaningfully transformed in the process. The formal sacraments signify the grace of Christ active in the Church and actually effect that grace by representing it using certain signs, words and rituals. They cannot effect that grace without signifying it. As Timothy McDermott emphasises they effect it *because* they signify it.⁶ The work of a poet like Kavanagh is to achieve something similar. It is to show, by the art of their words, that one thing can be more than it is at the material level. As this chapter will demonstrate, the extent to which the thing becomes actively changed (effected by grace, as the theological language would put it) in the course of such a poetic transformation is perilously difficult to discern. The work of this chapter will be to explore the extent to which such a transformation can be fruitfully understood in the context of the sacramental theology of the Church.

In order to eventually ascribe a sacramentality of any real meaning at all to the work of Kavanagh, it will be crucial to distinguish what exactly is at stake, theologically speaking, in such a designation. David Jones claimed that to be a Catholic artist (as himself) was to be above all else a “sacramentalist”⁷. Jones’ evocative concept of sacramentalism rests on and presupposes a familiarity with the sacramental theology of the Church. In analysing the idea of sacramentalism and how it can help inform an understanding of Kavanagh *qua* poet-theologian, a certain theological groundwork is required to orient the discussion. To this end, this work will begin with a study into the theological roots of the Church’s sacraments in its official documents and in the work of some of its most influential thinkers. The first sections of this chapter will seek to outline the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the sacraments from a theological perspective. This will make clear what sacramental theology does and does not claim for the sacraments. As will be shown, the theology has often stressed what the sacraments are *not* in order to clarify what indeed they are. Foremost amongst the sources relied upon will be the work of Thomas Aquinas. This choice owes to the significance of

⁶ Timothy McDermott, (trans.), *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation* (Maryland: Christian Classics, 1989), 545: “Thomas’ opinion echoes his teaching on the sacraments as a whole: the sacraments not only signify, they cause, and it is by signifying that they cause.”

⁷ David Jones, *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), 155.

Aquinas' thought in much of the history of the Church's sacramental theology, but also to the role of Aquinas as a kind of unofficial standard-bearer for the discipline of theology in the work of Patrick Kavanagh. It is not unreasonable to assume on behalf of Kavanagh a respect borne out of at least a degree of familiarity with the work of Aquinas, who would have featured centrally in the world of Catholic thought occupied by Kavanagh in his childhood and adult life.

As has been noted, the connection between the life of the artist and the life of the sacraments of the church is not made entirely explicit in the work of Kavanagh. It is, however, in the work of a contemporary of Kavanagh's: the Welsh writer and painter David Jones. Jones uses the term "sacramentalist"⁸ to describe the in-between space occupied in society most of all by the artist. The artist re-presents the material world and transforms it into something more than itself. Jones recognises the inherent sacredness of this artistic action in the world, and it is in the sacraments of the church that he finds the theological language and rationale to explain it more fully. Jones undertakes a more systematic treatment of his claims than anything Kavanagh ever approaches. In the second half of this chapter, Kavanagh's poet-theologian is sharpened against Jones' idea of the artist as "sacramentalist" in order to penetrate the apparent obscurity of Kavanagh's remark.⁹

The sacramentality that will emerge from the theological study undertaken in this chapter will be applied and tested against the work of Kavanagh in the final stages of this thesis. This sacramentality will not be a catch-all term for an arbitrary foray of the divine into the material world, but rather will emerge as a way of life for the Church and the believer, a disposition to the gift of God's presence and a response of a dispossessed community to the ongoing salvation offered to them by a life in Christ. This disposition of openness, that recognises our human brokenness and acknowledges the gift of redemption offered by God, will be confirmed against the poetry of Kavanagh, whose work remains open with a porous wonder to the transfiguring possibilities of a life lived in Christ.

⁸ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 155.

⁹ David Jones was active at the same time as Kavanagh, and was strongly influenced by the work of French thinker Jacques Maritain on Christian art and society. There is no known connection between Jones and Kavanagh, but Kavanagh does show an awareness of Maritain's work on some rare occasions in his journalistic output.

Section One: the sacramental theology of the church

Three essential elements of the sacraments

Ryan writes of the sacraments that they are “God in action.”¹⁰ These words are shorthand for the standard definition of a sacrament as a *signum efficax gratiae* – “a sign which effects the grace it signifies”¹¹. Sacraments are sacred signs that point to God and actually bring about the effects of divine grace. Aquinas summarizes the results of this divine grace: it makes humans holy. Therefore, at a most basic level, the sacraments are the means of God’s continuing self-disclosure to humankind. Christ, of course is the summit of God’s self-disclosure and therefore, the sacraments continue to effect the redemption and sanctification – the ‘making holy’ that Christ brought about by his life, death and Resurrection.

Ryan’s words are instructive in underlining the divine initiative at the heart of the sacraments. The sacraments, though performed by the institutional Church and partaken in by all its faithful, are not strictly speaking the Church in action. Rather, the sacraments are best understood through “the medium of *gift*... an invitation to enter into relationship.”¹² When Christians speak of *receiving* the sacraments, this is the theological distinction being made. It is by such sacramental action that the Church and its members assent to the work God has begun in them and acknowledge their need for God’s ongoing intervention in their lives, for “sacraments are simultaneously the human response to God.”¹³ The action of God and the assent of the Christian. The gift of God and the acceptance of the Christian. These are the roles and this is the dynamic at play in the sacraments of the church.

In the sections that follow, this chapter will trace the development of sacramental theology through the history of the Church, in its Councils and in the work of some of its most influential thinkers. For the purposes of this work, three essential features of the sacramental theology of the Church will be extracted from this long history. As these features emerge, so too will the misconceptions they preclude. Determining what the sacraments are *not* is an

¹⁰ Fainche Ryan, *The Eucharist: What Do We Believe?* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2012), 14.

¹¹ This formulation has become a shorthand definition of the sacraments and is used in various theological and papal documents including John Paul II. “The Foundations of the Sacrament of Marriage” General Audience September 8, 1982, 4. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/audiences/1982/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19820908.pdf. John Paul II here describes the phrase as a “concise scholastic definition of a sacrament.”

¹² Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 214.

¹³ Ibid.

important part of clarifying what they truly *are*. The three essential elements of the sacramental theology of the Church as presented by this study are summarized as follows: the sacraments are the means by which God continues to effect for a dispossessed people the salvation won by Christ.

The first essential element of sacramental theology captured in this phrase is the divine initiative at the heart of the sacraments. Humans do not need to conjure or search for God's blessing. The power of God's presence is not contingent on our ability to find it: God is at hand and provides his blessing in the sacraments. This divine initiative also underlines the divine effectiveness of the sacraments. Because they are God in action, the sacraments do not merely remind us of God, they make us like God: they make us holy.

The second essential element of sacramental theology is the disposition of dispossession it presupposes in the Christian community. The choice of the Christian to assent to God's initiative is based on a recognition of need, a disposition of dispossession that acknowledges the necessity for God's continuing redemption and reparation in the brokenness of our lives. The sacraments are not a ceremonial irrelevance, they speak to the very essence of the Christian life. Thirdly, it is through Christ that this redemption is achieved. The narrative of God's intervention in the woundedness of our lives is not arbitrary. The sacraments retell the essential story of Christianity. They speak of Bethlehem, of the Cenacle, of Calvary and of the empty tomb. There is no other way for Christians to enter into relationship with God than through Christ. There is no other way that humans become holy - become like unto God - than through Christ. This is why Christ, himself the prototypical *signum efficax* of God's love, is the ultimate sacrament through whom all the other sacraments have their meaning.

This is the sacramental theology that will arise from the first half of this chapter. Each of the three elements outlined above are deeply intertwined. The Christological nature of sacraments will be the starting point for this study, for in his divinity and his humanity, Christ accounts for all that can be said about the sacraments. As God, he underscores the divine initiative at the heart of the Sacrament's effectiveness. As Man, his Passion and death speak of the dispossession that characterizes the sacramental life of the Church. From the study will emerge not as the arbitrary, irrelevant foray of the divine into the world, contingent on the efforts of a summoning Church. Rather, they are the means by which God continues to effect for a dispossessed people the salvation won by Christ.

Christ as Sacrament

The sacramental theology of the Church was a comparatively late-flowering one. Peter Lombard in the twelfth century was the first to confirm the number of formal sacraments as seven, which was subsequently enshrined in the teaching of the Church by the Council of Lyons (1272) and again in the Council of Trent in response to the challenges of contemporary Reformers. Session Seven of the Council aimed to discuss “Sacraments of the church, through which all true justice either begins, or being begun is increased, or being lost is repaired.”¹⁴ The context of the Reformation lent a polemical tone to the treatment of the sacraments in the Council of Trent, which, it is made clear in the Proem to Session Seven, is being conducted “in order to destroy the errors and to extirpate the heresies, which have appeared in these our days on the subject of the said most holy sacraments, as well those which have been revived from the heresies condemned of old by our Fathers, as also those newly invented, and which are exceedingly prejudicial to the purity of the Catholic Church, and to the salvation of souls.”¹⁵

Each of the thirteen Canons appearing under the first section: ‘On the sacraments in General’ follow the same pattern, beginning with the words ‘if one saith’ and finishing with the phrase ‘let him be anathema’. These Canons contain the central elements of the Church’s teaching on the sacraments, yet all of this teaching is delivered negativistically, concerned less with the construction of a flourishing sacramental theology than with ensuring orthodoxy through the suppression of heresy. The constraints of such a formula are evident in Canon Six, wherein the essential definition of a sacrament of as effective sign of God’s grace (*signum efficax gratiae*) is reaffirmed:

If any one saith, that the sacraments of the New Law do not contain the grace which they signify; or, that they do not confer that grace on those who do not place an obstacle thereunto; as though they were merely outward signs of grace or justice received through faith, and certain marks of the Christian profession, whereby believers are distinguished amongst men from unbelievers; let him be anathema.¹⁶

The Trent documents demonstrate the necessity for clarity that has long characterized the theology of the sacraments; some of the most contentious teachings in the Christian faith. Trent summarises and enshrines much of what is contained in Aquinas’ treatment of the

¹⁴ Council of Trent. Session 7, “On sacraments, 3 March, 1547.” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Trent to Vatican II. Vol.*, ed. Norman Tanner (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 12.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

sacraments, but conspicuous by its absence in the negativistic approach of the Council is the Christological emphasis.

The mid twentieth century saw a marked revival of interest in sacramental theology, captured in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which “stimulated the renovation of catholic sacramentary theology.”¹⁷ The Council’s document give increased attention to the Christological nature of the sacraments, through which the faithful “are united in a hidden and real way to Christ who suffered and was glorified.”¹⁸ This Christological focus was given more prominence, however, in relation to the sacramental role of the Church – the Body of Christ on earth. This ecclesial dimension of the sacraments is particular evident in *Lumen Gentium*, which refers at several points to the Church as a sign and sacrament of God in the world. In the very opening remarks of the document, this central point is emphasized:

Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature,(1) to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church. Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race...¹⁹

It was in the theology of some of the Council’s leading thinkers and their contemporaries that the Christological element of the sacraments was to achieve its full prominence. Karl Barth commented that Jesus’ humanity is “the first sacrament”²⁰ while Karl Rahner described Jesus as the “revelatory symbol” of the Father and the “primary sacrament” upon whom his entire sacramental theology was based.²¹ Edward Schillebeeckx defined Christ as the “primordial sacrament”²². Before Jesus, the Law and Israel acted as sacraments - sacred signs of God’s intimate closeness to his people. The life, passion and death of Jesus, God incarnate, supersedes these signs of God’s nearness. “What Torah was, Christ is; and what

¹⁷ Villar, J. R., “Faith and Sacraments in Aquinas and the Second Vatican Council: Current Perspectives”, *Angelicum* 92, no. 3 (2015), 379-380.

¹⁸ Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, 21 November, 1964,” in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1975), sec. 7 (hereafter cited as *LG*).

¹⁹ *LG*, sec. 1.

In section 48, the case is made even more clearly: “Christ, having been lifted up from the earth has drawn all to Himself. Rising from the dead He sent His life-giving Spirit upon His disciples and through Him has established His Body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation.”

²⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol. II* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), 54.

²¹ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Vol. 4*, trans. K. Smith (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 239.

²² Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 16.

Israel was, Christ is.”²³ What makes Jesus the ultimate sacrament, the ultimate sign and guarantor of holiness is that he not only points to God but by his Passion, Death and Resurrection he effects what he signifies; he makes holy. He fulfills what has gone before and guarantees what is to come. “What leads us to say that Jesus’ life is sacramental is a uniquely exhaustive way is that this life not only points to God but is the medium of divine action for judgement and renewal.”²⁴ Schillebeeckx provides the most evocative account of Christ as the *sine qua non* of sacramental theology:

the man Jesus, as the personal visible realisation of the divine grace of redemption, is *the* sacrament, the primordial sacrament, because this man, the Son of God himself, is intended by the Father to be in his humanity the only way to the actuality of redemption...human encounter with Jesus is therefore the sacrament of the encounter with God.²⁵

Not only does Christ act through the sacraments of the church, his actions are themselves sacraments:

Now because the inward power of Jesus’ will to redeem and of his human love is God’s own saving power realized in human form, the human saving acts of Jesus are the divine bestowal of grace itself realized in visible form; that is to say they cause what they signify; they are sacraments.²⁶

So closely does Schillebeeckx anchor his sacramental theology to the saving acts of Jesus that he considers “these special sacraments [of the Church] are personal acts of the risen Christ in ecclesial form.”²⁷ To illustrate what is at stake in such a Christological approach to sacramental theology, Schillebeeckx contrasts a top-down and bottom-up view of the sacraments. Viewed from below, as it were, the sacraments are understood primarily in terms of the community who receives them. They are ritual activity of a particular religious community guided by the Holy Spirit into a life in Christ. Viewing the sacraments from above, as it were, we see the sacramental action primarily in terms of God’s action. By this view the priest’s actions are understood as “a personal symbolic act of Christ through the institutional medium of the Church.”²⁸ Both of these perspectives draw out different aspects

²³ Williams, *Christian Theology*, 205.

²⁴ Williams, *Christian Theology*, 204.

²⁵ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 16.

²⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 17.

²⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 88-89.

²⁸ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 89.

of the same reality and must be held in counterpoise in a proper Christological understanding of the sacraments.

A top-down understanding of the sacraments does not diminish the importance of the unique relevance of the sacraments in the life of a Christian community. Understanding the divine initiative at the heart of the sacraments only underscores how radically the sacraments address themselves to the everyday rhythms of the Christian life. Sign-making is that most human occupation, an attempt to reshape and respond to the world around us. For Christians, God is the first word in the ongoing conversation of sign-making. The Logos was the first creative act that sets our human sign-making in progress. Christ not only points to God, he is God, and thus effects God's holiness in those he saves. He is primordial sacrament, an effective sign of God's grace who makes possible all sacramental action of the Church.

Just as the merciful acts of Jesus in his time on earth both signified and effected God's redemptive grace, the sacraments are Jesus' redemptive grace in visible, historical, ecclesial form today. It is not the Church, the community or the priest acting *per se*, but Christ in the sacraments through them. The sacraments are thus "concentrated meetings"²⁹ with God that both signify and effect God's blessing: they make humans holy – that, according to Aquinas, is their task.

In this context Rowan Williams reminds us of the divine initiative at the heart of the sacraments. He stresses that in the sacraments it is not the power of the priest or the Church acting *per se*, but Christ in them: "Our signs are created by what Christ creates – his own self as a gift of God."³⁰ Any sacramental theology that focuses on sacralised actions or objects cannot exist at the expense of an true appreciation of the sacralising actions of Christ in the sacrament. "It is not the fact of doing sacramental things that is special, humanly or religiously, but what the Church signifies in doing these things – the new covenant and new creation in the life, death and raising of Jesus. In these acts the Church 'makes sense' of itself, as other groups may do, and as individuals do; but its 'sense' is seen as dependent on the creative act of God in Christ."³¹

"The creative act of God in Christ"³² is a summary of how Williams understands the divine initiative at the heart of all sacramental theology. St. Bonaventure called Christ the "*ars*

²⁹ Ryan, *Eucharist*, 13.

³⁰ Williams, *Christian Theology*, 206.

³¹ Williams, *Christian Theology*, 205.

³² Williams, *Christian Theology*, 205.

Patris”³³, the Art of the Father. The efforts of every single human community to do that most human thing – to make sense of itself and make meaning with signs – is predicated on the Father’s creative act in Christ - the Logos, the Father’s first word in the conversation of human life and meaning. The Christian community, like any other, makes sense of itself with signs; signs which in the case of this particular community trace themselves very intentionally and deliberately back to its ultimate source of meaning, Christ. When Christians celebrate the Eucharist they recall that Christ, by his actions on Holy Thursday, “placed himself in the order of signs”³⁴ in the words of de la Taille. Christ here did not merely orient his disciples towards God in this moment but effected in them the holiness and restoration that was to come in his death and resurrection. Holy Thursday gave meaning to what was to come on Good Friday, just as Easter Sunday would give the ultimate meaning to the human life of Christians from then onwards. By his actions, Christ shows us what it is to be a *signum efficax gratiae*, to actually effect the redemptive grace of God towards which he points.

The Church’s disposition of dispossession

Intricately connected with the Christological element of the sacraments is the disposition of dispossession it speaks of in the Christian community. Williams is sceptical of a theology that views the sacraments in isolation from the death and resurrection of Jesus on which the Church’s life is based and through which it is continually sustained. He is equally suspicious of a theology that isolates the sacraments too far from the life of the Church. If the sacraments are extracted too far from the ordinary life of the Church in Christ, they risk becoming an arbitrary display of divine power. This spectre of arbitrariness hangs over much of Williams sacramental theology.³⁵ As Williams warns, if God only chooses to make his power *truly* known in these heightened moments of divine intervention, it calls into question the legitimacy of His accompanying presence in the everyday life of the Church. Such a view of the sacraments also threatens to devalue the religious life of the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Maurice de la Taille, *Mysterium Fidei: de augustissimo corporis et sanguinis Christi sacrificio atque sacramento, Elucidationes L in tres libros distinctae* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1921), 132.

³⁵ Williams, *Christian Theology*, 197: “Sacraments are perhaps harder to understand the more we isolate them as a set (let alone a pair) of unique actions prescribed by Jesus as guaranteed and effective signs of the new covenant. We are apt to feel something arbitrary about this... To put it another way, what makes the Christian sacraments unique is not so much something inherent in the doing of them, some ‘specialness’ in the action, but the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in his dying and rising.”

believer, whose ability to relate with God is reduced to the one-off moments when God chooses to bypass the deficiencies of our fallible human capacities. Challenging the idea that the sacraments are an unfortunate necessity required to penetrate the barren spiritual life of the believer, Williams emphasizes in his work how natural sign-making – and thus sacraments – are to the life of the human. “So far from signs (including language itself) being a regrettable necessity in view of our minds being sadly muffled up in bodies, they are intrinsic to our actual thinking and living as bodies.”³⁶

Humans make signs to make sense of the world, they make signs because they are human. This is just the same with the sacraments, according to Williams. Christians do not perform or receive the sacraments in order to escape their humanness, but because of their humanness. The sacraments are not intended to lift us to another world outside, but to work into sense the one we are already living. The key for Christian sign-making in the sacraments is that God has already provided the destination of this ‘working into sense’ – the goal of the sacraments is to open us up to the sense already made of our lives by the death and resurrection of Jesus: “The sacramental action of the believer is, at one level, a working into sense like any other; the difference is that this ‘working’ is done to open to us the sense already made by God as creator and redeemer.”³⁷

In this sense, sacraments relieve Christians of the need to do two things – to engage in either of which would be to misunderstand the role of the sacraments in the Christian life. Christians do not need to use their sign-making to arrive at the ultimate meaning of their life on earth. God has already done that in Christ.³⁸ All sacraments are an action of hope,³⁹ as Williams put it, and Christ has already vouchsafed our hope. The goal of Christians is to grow into life in that gift of hope, rather than to think we must create hope for ourselves by our own initiative as a Christian community.

Nor do Christians need to mistake their signs for what they signify. In other words, the holiness pointed to (and brought about) by the sacraments is more important than the holy words and objects used in the course of the sacraments themselves: “the primary concern should be for sacramental actions rather than an attempt to focus on ‘sacralized’ objects.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Williams, *Christian Theology*, 200.

³⁷ Williams, *Christian Theology*, 207.

³⁸ Thus, at Williams, *Christian Theology*, 205: “It is not the fact of doing sacramental things that is special, humanly or religiously, but what the Church signifies in doing these things – the new covenant and new creation in the life, death and raising of Jesus.”

³⁹ William, *Christian Theology*, 207: “All sign-making is the action of hope, the hope that this world may become other and that its experienced fragmentariness can be worked into sense.”

⁴⁰ Williams, *Christian Theology*, 206.

The sacraments are not an arbitrary rupture in the self-disclosure of God to his people, but a reiteration of his hope won for them in Christ in a way that is uniquely suited to their humanity. All hope for Christians lies in the fact that the fragility of their human life has been transfigured by the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, by which he made clear his consolation and compassion – his promise to be literally ‘with us in our aloneness, to ‘suffer with us’. Sacraments are not the means by which we escape, decry or ignore the vicissitudes of our humanness. As Williams comments, we come to the sacraments in all our humanness, our nakedness, our dispossession, our suffering, in order that we may be opened more fully to the grace gifted to us by God in Christ.

Williams outlines how the disposition of ‘need’ to which the Church is called by the sacraments reveals something of the very essence of the Christian community: a kind of disposition of dispossession at the heart of the Christian life. The dispossession of the Christian who receives the sacrament is based upon the utter dispossession of Christ who instituted the sacraments by relinquishing his divinity to become human, and relinquishing his human life to become present in the matter of bread and wine. There is a unique hope to the Christian life – a hope crystallized in the sacraments, but there is also an apart-ness to the Christian life that the sacraments call us to recognise afresh. To belong to a community that embraces its weakness in order to find its hope, that speaks of nakedness and need in order to find fulfilment, is one that is at odds in important ways to a secular society that measures its success by consumption and attainment. The Christian way of life is not chosen by the Christian, rather is chosen for them. Likewise, the sacraments that plot this life are not the work of the Christian but the work of God in their midst. The sacramental action of the Church is a reiteration – by God, through his faithful – of the nature and origin of all that makes the Christian life unique. Far from comforting us with a sense of complacent control, the sacraments are meant to remind the world of our radical dependency on God in a world constantly in need - and in reach of - his hope. As Williams summarises:

Sacramental practice seems to speak most clearly of loss, dependence and interdependence, solidarities we do not choose: none of them themes that are particularly welcome or audible in the social world we currently inhabit as secular subjects...[even in this modern world] let them still speak of nakedness, death, danger, materiality and stubborn promise.⁴¹

⁴¹ Williams, *Christian Theology*, 219, continues: “All the more important, then, to resist anything that trivializes or shrinks the symbolic range of our sacramental practice - baptism as essentially a mark of individual confession, the Eucharist as a celebration of achieved local human fellowship. They are too

Schillebeeckx speaks to something similar when he outlines the different emphasis the Western and Eastern Churches have placed on the sacraments. While the Eastern Church has focused on the divinisation at the heart of Christ's sacramentality: making humans like unto himself, the Western theological tradition has focused on the redemption Christ effects for humans. Schillebeeckx seeks to bridge this gap and to make clear the interplay of divinization and redemption signified and effected by Christ the sacrament. Just as Christ suffered and was glorified, so too the sacraments of the church acknowledge and provide for the humiliation and exaltation at the heart of the Christian life. For in order to share in Christ's glory Christians also share in his suffering. In aligning ourselves with Christ in the sacraments, in assenting to the divine gifts of grace, we acknowledge our needs for God's redemptive initiative in our lives. Responding to and participating in God's life in the sacraments thus invariably involves an element of dispossession as a Christian community by which we die to our former selves in order to be raised with Christ to a new life in him. Here lies the humility at the heart of sacramental theology: the acknowledgment that we need God's saving grace in our lives, and that it is by his initiative, not our own, that such restoration can be effected.⁴²

Sacraments thus offer a blueprint of the Christian response, of God's response, to the vicissitudes of human life. They acknowledge the vulnerability of humanity and yet point stubbornly to the enduring hope of life in Christ, the primordial sacrament.

Sacramentality, Aquinas and divine initiative

The idea of the sacraments as concentrated moments of holiness raises the question of a more general sacramental principle that would recognize the inherent holiness of the entire world by virtue of its Creation by God. In the Incarnation, Jesus "placed himself in the order of the signs",⁴³ and with that, gave worldly matter divine meaning. In this context, sacramental theology has been the means for theologians such as David Brown and artists such as David Jones to recognize in their creative activity the first creative act of God and

important as reminders, to believers and non-believers, of the need to put to death corrupt attachments to a false anthropology. Let them still speak of nakedness, death, danger, materiality and stubborn promise."

⁴² Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 226: "[S]elf-expropriation and self-sacrifice are the basis of our communion with God and ... only through the humiliation of life do we come to share in the exaltation of Christ. Through this very fact the 'wounds of nature' are healed. Suffering is not eliminated from the Christian situation, but it can be made an integral part of our living experience of God and may become the supreme factor in manifesting our attachment to the Father. Thus sacramental life gives birth to the new, integrated man, the Christian with his Christlike integrity."

⁴³ De la Taille, *Mysterium Fidei*, 132.

thus to extend a sacramentality to varied arenas such as painting, nature, and architecture. Brown's work focuses on the relationship between theology and the arts, throughout which he appeals to the idea of sacramentality as a kind of bridging concept between the two that can account for "the symbolic mediation of the divine in and through the material"⁴⁴ in disciplines as wide as architecture, music, painting and geography. In his *God and the Enchantment of Place*, he makes a case for the idea that "God can come sacramentally close to his world and vouchsafe experiences of himself through the material."⁴⁵

The Welsh poet and painter David Jones, inspired by the work of French philosopher Jacques Maritain, applied a similar line of thought to his own disciplines. Jones and Maritain identified that the material world contains a divine surplus of meaning that provided the artist with the opportunity, through their art, to reflect, alter, and transform the given material order into another form that reveals the inherent sacredness of the world. Jones describes his instinctive belief in the sacramentality of the material world in these terms:

a certain affection for the intimate creatureliness of things- a care for, and appreciation of the particular genius of places, men, trees, animals, and yet withal a pervading sense of metamorphosis and mutability. That trees are men walking. That words 'bind and loose' material things.⁴⁶

Jones' words challenge the theologian to reflect on the formal sacramental theologies of the Church and to find within them a response to the idea of a broader sacramentality that exists parallel to the formal sacraments of the church. Rowan Williams summarises the scepticism that can exist for what he calls "some general principle of the world as 'naturally' sacramental or epiphanic: a pot-pourri of Jung, Teilhard de Chardin and a certain kind of anthropology, sometimes invoked as a prelude to sacramental theology."⁴⁷ Sherry identifies the possibility that the sacramentality to which Brown, Jones and other appeal could create a scenario where the formal sacraments of the church are viewed as somehow "parasitic"⁴⁸, dependent for their meaning on a more generalized principle of sacramentality. If such a sacramentality is evoked and defined with excessive fluidity, this could in turn threaten the theological basis of the sacraments.

⁴⁴ David Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 88.

⁴⁵ Brown, *Enchantment*, 30.

⁴⁶ David Jones, letter to Jim Ede 1935.

⁴⁷ Williams, *Christian Theology*, 201.

⁴⁸ Patrick Sherry, "The Sacramentality of Things," *New Blackfriars* 89 (2008): 580.

Such a broad concept of sacramentality challenges theologians to reflect on the mysterious diversity of God's presence while acknowledging the powerful singularity of the formal sacraments of the church. As the next sections of this essay shows, the clear-eyed treatment of the sacraments in the work of Thomas Aquinas provides the Church with the surest guide in this question and safeguards against a situation where if everything is holy, nothing is holy.

As will become clear, Aquinas provides a theological counterpoint to broad ideas of sacramentality by clarifying in his work the implications of the divine initiative at the heart of the sacraments. As Aquinas demonstrates, God's initiative guarantees the effectiveness of the sacraments. Unlike a broad sacramentality that points to God, the divine initiative at the heart of the sacraments gives them the power to actually make humans holy. Exploring this distinction will be the key to establishing a fruitful dialogue between concepts of sacrament and sacramentality in theology and art in the rest of this study.

The sacraments of the church are not just unfortunate necessities. As Aquinas recognized, the sacraments provide humans with the tangible signs to grasp the most profound spiritual realities. Grace can be achieved outside of the sacraments, but most purely within them, for they are "proper mode of human encounter with God."⁴⁹ They are the idiom of God's continuing self-disclosure through the life of the Church, in which "our words become God's words, our language God's language."⁵⁰

Aquinas' sacramental theology formed the basis of much of the revival of sacramental theology that occurred around the time of the Second Vatican Council. His treatment of the sacraments in the *Summa* provides clarity on a number of issues, not least the etymological discrepancies that in Scripture saw the Latin *sacramentum* have meanings as diverse as oath⁵¹, mystery⁵², secret⁵³. Even in his own work, *sacramentum* seems only gradually to have been distinguished from the more generalised *mysterium* and to have taken on the meaning of a formal sacrament.⁵⁴ Aquinas operates from the crucial assertion that as human beings, we need visible, material signs in order to understand invisible, spiritual

⁴⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 14.

⁵⁰ Ryan, *Eucharist*, 14.

⁵¹ Deut. 6:33 (Vulg.)

⁵² Apoc. 1:20 (Vulg.)

⁵³ Tob. 12:7 (Vulg.)

⁵⁴ An example of the interchangeability is clear in the phrases *mysterium redemptionis* and *sacramentum redemptionis* at III *Sent.*, d. 25, q. 2, a. 2, sol. 1 ad 5 and 111 *Sent.*, sol. 2. Conversely, a clear case of the formalising of the word into what we recognise today as a Sacrament of the Church is seen in *ST*, III., q. 83, a. 4.

realities. Our bodies' sensory organs, capable of honing and interpreting signs, are thus naturally advantageous. He takes as a starting point the inherent usefulness of signs, especially in matters relating to God. All signs are natural to humans. Signs that point to God are especially fruitful. Signs that point to God and actually effect his grace are the most beneficial of all. These are the sacraments, and their effect is to make humans holy.

The formal sacraments of the church are not only "sacred secrets"⁵⁵ that point to God, they make people holy: "properly speaking a sacrament, as considered by us now, is defined as being the "sign of a holy thing so far as it makes men holy."⁵⁶ It is the effectiveness that distinguishes the formal sacraments from signs that merely point to God; the formal sacraments change us. Aquinas is similarly clear-minded in the cause of this power in the sacraments. It is Christ that causes the sacraments to have their power. Indeed, it is to Aquinas that Schillebeeckx, Rahner and others trace the Christological focus on their sacramental theologies. Sacraments are rooted in the historical reality of Christ's passion, which safeguards into the future the continued outpouring of God's grace in us through the sacraments. The sacraments point to the past and to the future of life in Christ. "a sacrament is a sign that is both a reminder of the past, i.e. the passion of Christ; and an indication of that which is effected in us by Christ's passion, i.e. grace; and a prognostic, that is, a foretelling of future glory."⁵⁷

As the second half of this chapter will demonstrate, Aquinas' sacramental theology provides crucial clarity on the relationship between sacramentality and the formal sacraments of the church. Aquinas allows for our human instinct for signs of the divine in the world. His expansive outlook accounts for humankind's ability to recognise and respond to what Maritain and Jones would identify as the sacred surplus of meaning in the material world around us. This is because Aquinas is certain that humans need to be provided with material signs to hone this instinct more and more, to arrive at the spiritual, the invisible, through the visible. For Aquinas, Christ is the ultimate fulfilment of this need. The sacraments are a continuation of God's provision for material signs that lead humans to the divine. These are

⁵⁵ *ST*, III., q. 60, a. 1, co. "Consequently, a thing may be called a "sacrament," either from having a certain hidden sanctity, and in this sense a sacrament is a "sacred secret"; or from having some relationship to this sanctity, which relationship may be that of a cause, or of a sign or of any other relation. But now we are speaking of sacraments in a special sense, as implying the habitude of sign: and in this way a sacrament is a kind of sign."

⁵⁶ *ST*, III., q. 60, a. 2, co.

⁵⁷ *ST*, III., q. 60, a. 3, co.

the ultimate sacred secrets which not only signify but effect God's grace – they make people holy.

Once we can confidently distinguish between the kinds of signs we are talking about – those that merely point to God and those that actually make us holy, we can conduct an open discourse about different kinds of sacramentality with less cause for suspicion, distortion or confusion. As the following discussion will make clear, Aquinas provides the clearest terminology and systematics to make possible a dynamic, fruitful and authentic conversation between theology and other disciplines. In the second half of this chapter, the work of artist and writer David Jones on sacramentality will be placed in conversation with the theological tradition Aquinas goes so far to shape. As has been noted, Aquinas' theological tradition eschews a contingent, irrelevant or arbitrary sacramentality, but rather is characterized by its divine initiative, its dispossession of disposition, and its Christological focus.

Section Two: The possibilities and challenges of sacramentality

The possibilities of sacramentality: David Jones' "Art and Sacrament"

In his 1955 essay "Art and Sacrament" David Jones makes clear that he speaks as an artist and does not presuppose any philosophical or theological authority on his part. Jones' concern is with Art, its claims and its struggles. Nonetheless, he writes as a Christian and in a way not dissimilar to Kavanagh, his Christian point of view exerts a major influence on his approach to understanding his artistic work. His essay highlights the possibilities and challenges of interweaving the artistic and the theological in the same way Kavanagh does in his statement that "a poet is a theologian"⁵⁸. Further, it gives a clear sense of what is at stake in the use of the term 'sacramental' to describe the work of any artist, poet-theologian or otherwise.

Indeed, Jones' primary concern for much of his essay is to flatten out the theological meaning of words like sacrament, sacred, religion and to apply them at the broadest possible level to his discussion of "man-the-artist"⁵⁹ as he puts it. His main contention is that the human, at the most basic fundamental level, is by nature an artist: a maker of signs, and by

⁵⁸ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

⁵⁹ Jones uses gendered language throughout the article in question.

extension, a “sacramentalist”⁶⁰. Art he defines by its “intransitiveness”⁶¹ – its essential gratuitousness. It is what distinguishes man from all other creatures, and which affords mankind a “godlikeness”⁶², a share in the without-endness of God, the Logos, whose gratuitous creation of the world was the first work of art that set the sign-making of man-the-artist in motion. All art, according to Jones, is “sacred”⁶³ because art is concerned with reality, with *esse*, which is inherently good, and thus sacred. All art is also religious, because in re-presenting its material into something new, it ‘binds together’ into a new totality.⁶⁴ Sign-making is the essence of art – the idea of one thing meaning or recalling something else in another form. Carving shapes on a cave, wearing a flower on your jacket, celebrating a liturgy with bread and wine, these are all “art-works”⁶⁵, acts of sign-making that fall under the broad usage of the term “sacramental”⁶⁶ for Jones.

Having established the anthropological case for man-the-artist at the level of human nature, Jones comes at the theology from behind, as it were. He asks why the sacraments of the church exist and anticipates a theological answer about the institution of the sacraments by Christ as an effective sign of his ongoing redemptive victory over death. As has been shown earlier in this chapter, Rowan Williams has argued that this theological understanding tells us something about the type of community a Christian belongs to: one that operates from a disposition of dispossession and opens itself to the initiative of God that continues to operate in all the areas of our lives. Jones, however, is more interested in what the sacraments say about the type of community we belong to as *humans*. He is not looking for a theological answer to his question. Rather, he takes a more anthropological approach that proceeds as if asking: ‘Yes, but why does Christ do this by making *signs*?’. Jones takes a broader, zoomed out-approach and asks why sign-making is the particular way Christians have always chosen to recall, celebrate and effect the ongoing promise of God in their lives. To answer his own question Jones returns to the main contention of his article: “because it is natural to [man] in virtue of his being an artist.”⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 155.

⁶¹ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 149.

⁶² Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 159.

⁶³ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 157.

⁶⁴ The etymology of the word ‘religion’ is unclear, but it is generally associated with the Latin *religare* ‘to bind’.

⁶⁵ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 163.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 165.

For Jones, sacramental activity does not just tell us what it is to be a Christian, but what it is to be human. To make signs is the most human activity possible: this is why Christ chose to continue his ongoing self-disclosure in the sacraments of the church: because all mankind is by nature under the sway of sign-making. As Jones puts it: “We are committed to body and by the same token we are committed to Ars, so to sign and sacrament.”⁶⁸ In making this point, Jones in fact draws on Aquinas to defend against the idea that signs and sacraments are merely an unfortunate necessity to aid our fallible bodies in their understanding of spiritual realities. Our bodies, as sensory organs, allow us to be our most natural selves: sign-makers. It is these signs and sacraments which permit us recognise and communicate our highest truths. Jones’ concern with sacramental theology is only secondary to his concern to establish that man at his deepest nature is a maker, an artist. The theological language of sacrament is imported primarily for its “surprising and far-reaching implications”⁶⁹ for his analysis of man-the-artist. He recognises that terminology such as sacrament and “sacramentalist”⁷⁰ generally have a “narrowing”⁷¹ effect and his attempts to rehabilitate these terms are primarily designed to serve a new understanding of art rather than theology.

This is understandable: the goal of his article was to articulate some of the challenges facing his own discipline. As an artist, the challenge he observed to his work was what he calls a “utile”⁷² conception of humankind in the post-war society he inhabited. A practical view of humankind that prioritised ‘usefulness’ seemed to deny Jones’ nature as a “sacramentalist” committed to the gratuitous freedom of sign-making. This would be the case for all humankind, but especially the professional artist. This danger of a merely utile vision of humankind also challenges the life of the Christian. It strikes at the heart of Christianity, says Jones, for Christians are most committed of all to the sacramental life. This goes some way to explaining the rationale for Jones’ unusual approach in his article. He did not need to enlist the sacramental theology of the Christian Church in his article on the challenges of being a post-war artist, but in doing so he was trying to work out his own identity as a Catholic and an artist and to discover what, if anything, those two descriptors had to do with

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 155.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

one another. His answer is sacrament: a joint concern amongst artists and Christians for humankind's inherent need and genius for sign-making.

Jones' approach is disarming; in approaching sacrament from an anthropological, rather than a theological point of view, it challenges the arguments and even the language taken for granted in the theological debate. In flattening out the terms at hand – art, sacred, sign, sacrament, religion – Jones invigorates them with a new breadth, but some of the depth and meaning of those terms is undoubtedly lost as a result. This is the price to be paid for an interdisciplinary dialogue between art and theology, the same kind that is at play in an analysis of Kavanagh's statement that "a poet is a theologian"⁷³. Kavanagh's statement, for example, is concerned primarily with what it is to be a poet. For Kavanagh, if theology (or whatever Kavanagh considered theology to be) could be of use in advancing his understanding of poetry, then it was to be welcomed. Any worthwhile addition to our understanding of theology as a result of such a comparison is only secondary - and may very likely be negligible.

A comparison between a poet and a theologian, or between the work of an artist and the sacraments of the church, is designed to challenge and invigorate us by its very existence. As such, the goal of an investigation into these provocative comparisons is mostly to expand our appreciation of what was meant by the comparison in the first place. In the case of Jones and Kavanagh, their work serves a further challenge: to sharpen theology's understanding of itself by the unlikely and invigorating avenues of reflection opened up by such interdisciplinary exchanges. It is not for theology to reconsider the truths established by its own discipline, but rather to rediscover the meaning and value of these truths when considered from a different angle or in a new context. This rings true in the case of Jones and his enlistment of the language of sacrament to explain his life and work as an artist. Jones' article raises several opportunities for reflection. The first concerns his seeming conflation of the terms sign and sacrament. In making his claim that "man is unavoidably a sacramentalist and his works are sacramental in character"⁷⁴ he traces the sign-making of humankind as far back as the first recognised works of 'art' in pre-historic caves. This is a time before the sacraments of the church existed. Thus Jones feels free to use the term "sacramental"⁷⁵ to describe such works of art with no reference to the Christian, theological

⁷³ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

⁷⁴ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 155.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

meaning of the word now understood to be its primary meaning. However, if the term ‘sacrament’ has only come to hold its primary meaning because of its religious and theological connotations through the history of the Christian faith, then it becomes difficult to ascertain what is left in the word when these connotations are stripped back as they are in Jones’ piece. If a sacrament is not a *signum efficax gratiae* (an effective sign of God’s grace), but rather just a *signum*, why not simply call it a sign? This is the common issue with what Jones calls “sacrament with a small s”⁷⁶. Without its ability to actually effect what it signifies (which in the theological tradition is made possible through God), a sacrament is merely a sign.

Even within the theological tradition, the Christian Churches have had sufficient difficulties reconciling exactly how a sacrament achieves its effectiveness,⁷⁷ so the idea of appealing to a sacramentalism outside of the theological or religious realm raises even more questions with fewer possible answers available. The answer Jones seems to offer about the effectiveness of “sacrament with a small s”⁷⁸ is the “godlikeness”⁷⁹ that is conferred by the sign-making of humans, the share in without-end-ness that comes from sharing in the gratuitous creative act first instituted by God. This, it must be noted, is qualitatively different from the effectiveness of the sacraments of the church. Whereas Jones connects (however obliquely) the effect of human sign-making with the gratuitous acts of the Creator God, the sacraments derive their effect as the continuation, in ecclesial form, of the saving acts of Jesus in his Incarnation, Passion, Death and Resurrection.

A further question raised by the broad anthropological approach of Jones is if all humankind are by their very nature “sacramentalists”⁸⁰, is there any meaning in describing any artist or their work as such? In the case of Patrick Kavanagh, what does it mean to call him a “sacramentalist” other than to acknowledge that he accepted his nature as man-the-artist? In his attempts to expand the “narrowing”⁸¹ sense of words like sacrament in his piece, Jones here seems to have stretched them beyond use. A possible addendum to Jones’ piece is that

⁷⁶ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 177.

⁷⁷ As McDermott, *Summa*, 546 relates in his commentary on the *Summa*, even Aquinas struggles with the details: “what [Aquinas] does not perhaps make equally clear is the way in which Christ’s substance *is* really present: as the new significance (to be grasped by faith) of what previously only signified bread. Thomas, we must remember, will not allow anything to take on multiple substantial forms.”

⁷⁸ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 177.

⁷⁹ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 159.

⁸⁰ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 155.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

in the case of Christian artist like Jones or Kavanagh, it is when they overtly associate the transformative without-end-ness effected by the sign-making of their art with the eternity that is God that their sign-making moves beyond a broad conception of sacramentalism towards something more meaningful.

The challenges of sacramentality

Indeed, by the end of his piece, the challenges arising for an overemphasis on such a broad-brush sacramentalism become clearer, and in the case of the theology at play, more problematic. Jones outlines the implications his anthropological approach has on the theology of the formal sacraments of the church (what he calls “sacrament with a capital S”⁸²). He pronounces that the formal sacraments of the church are reliant for their meaning on the idea of sacramentality (“sacrament with a small s”⁸³) – on what he has claimed as the natural state of mankind as artists, sign-makers, “sacramentalists”⁸⁴. He warns that if the world continues to be diminished by a utile conception of humankind, it will not only be artists such as himself that suffer, but the very possibility of “sacraments with a capital S”⁸⁵. This is because Jones sees the power of the formal sacraments as in some way rooted in and dependent on the sacramentalism of humankind’s nature.

Human beings, through no fault of their own, are [being] alienated from the mere notion of sacrament with a small ‘s’. Were this alienation to become complete, the sacraments of the church would lose meaning for people, they would have to be taken on authority or dismissed as an out-dated conception of man’s nature.⁸⁶

This is a natural conclusion to Jones’ approach. However, to suggest that the effectiveness of the sacraments are contingent somehow on the likelihood of their sign-making to be fully grasped by their recipients is deeply challenging to how the Church understands the sacraments. In the sacraments, the initiative is God’s, and all that is required is an openness, an assent to the gift of God’s ongoing redemption. On an intellectual level, Jones’ assertion coheres: the ability of the average person to understand the nature of how signs work makes the sacraments of the church more intelligible. But there is much to the sacraments of the

⁸² Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 177.

⁸³ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 177.

⁸⁴ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 155.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 177. He continues: “Because the Church is committed to ‘Sacraments’ with a capital S, she cannot escape a committal to sacrament with a small s, unless the sacramentalism of the Church is to be regarded as a peculiar and isolated phenomenon. We know that such a view is not to be entertained...”

church, indeed much to the Christian faith at large that does not rely for its effectiveness on being immediately or at all intelligible to the human mind.

To enlist theological ideas and language in an interdisciplinary study for the primary benefit of another discipline is reasonable. To make conclusions that are theological based on such a study is more hazardous, and risks overreaching. In this instance, the result is the possibility of the formal sacraments of the church appearing to be somehow parasitic on a broader idea of sacramentality. Aquinas provides the theological counterpoint, confirming this divine initiative at the heart of the sacraments. This divine initiative foreknows and safeguards against the sorts of threats Jones conjures to the sacraments:

sacraments are used in in man's worship of God and God's sanctification of men. Since human sanctification lies in God's power, man cannot decide what should be used for the purpose, that is for God to determine. So the sacraments of the New Law, which make men holy, use things God has decided on...⁸⁷

Jones gets to the nub of his queries on the effectiveness of the sacraments in a utile world when he attempts to reenvision and explain the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. His approach, as usual, is unorthodox and primarily anthropological. "Why, in the Cenacle, [were] certain signs instituted, or, as is said above, [why were] certain art-forms employed and their continuance commanded[?]"⁸⁸ Jones' answer to his own question is that it is "natural to him in virtue of his being an artist."⁸⁹ Tellingly, Aquinas' own discussion on the institution of the sacraments takes a similar starting point to Jones. Aquinas remarks: "they [the sacraments] suit man's nature; he comes to know the spiritual world that only mind can grasp by way of the physical world he perceives with his senses."⁹⁰

In other words, man's sign-making helps him communicate and grasp the highest truths that go beyond the physical, material world. Jones and Aquinas are in agreement on this point: that the physical body is not a prison to be escaped from, but a 'substantial advantage' in our search for truth (as Jones quotes approvingly from Aquinas). Sacraments suit the nature of humans in their interactions with Truth itself, God. Aquinas goes further than Jones, however, and is more explicit:

⁸⁷ *ST*, III, q. 60, a. 5, co.

⁸⁸ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 166.

⁸⁹ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 165.

⁹⁰ *ST*, III, q. 61, a. 1, co.

they also suit man's state after sin: he has subjected himself to an affection for the physical, and the remedies he needs must be applied to the place where the wound is. And finally, they suit man's leanings towards external activities, offering him salutary alternatives to superstitious observances and worship of idols.⁹¹

Jones places much value on the question of why Christianity ended up with signs as the means by which they worship and are sanctified by God. His answer – that God tailored the manner of his ongoing self-disclosure to humans to their created nature as sign-makers, is not incompatible with Aquinas' more theological answer. Aquinas makes the same point, but crucially, he adds that that God also acted to guard against the sinful nature of humans and to make explicit the central role of Christ in their salvation. In his essay, Jones sidesteps the theology in order to make an anthropological point: that humans are and always have been sign-makers. God's institution of the sacraments acts for Jones as proof of this. But as Aquinas' approach shows, there are several other factors at play in the institution of the sacraments. To sidestep them as Jones does leads to less well-rounded conclusions.

The final point of Jones' essay is an example of this: he claims that the power of the sacraments will simply fade away if man's sense of sacramentalism (of sign-making) withers in a society that disregards it. Aquinas' argument seems to address and account for this very concern. God instituted the sacraments exactly *because* He understood humankind's proclivity to misapprehend or even reject the source of their own salvation. Jones' elision of the key quality of the sacraments – that they make humans holy – means that he disregards some of the essential elements of sacramental theology outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Primarily, he disregards the divine initiative of the sacraments. He does this by overestimating what the Church or the priest acting *in persona Christi* is doing in the sacraments - performing certain rites and rituals with significant intent. What is far more important is what Christ is doing in the sacraments – making humans holy. It is in the latter that the sacraments achieve their true power, and it is God that guarantees and ensures this power, not strictly the intellect or nature of humans, “for whether a thing makes us holy or not depends not on its natural power, but on God's decision.”⁹² Indeed, Jones' outlook, which would rely on the instincts of humankind's natural sacramentalism to guarantee the power of the sacraments of the church, seems more like what Aquinas describes in the sacraments of the Old Testament, which have been fulfilled and superseded by Christ.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² *ST*, III, q. 60, a. 5, co.

In the period when men relied on the law that is in them by nature, interior instinct alone prompted them to worship God and choose what signs to use in their worship. Later, men had to be given a law from above: partly because the law in their nature had become obscured by their sins, and partly to make more explicit that it was the grace of Christ which was to make the whole race of mankind holy. So God decided what things men should use in their sacraments.⁹³

Jones, unlike Aquinas, underestimates the extent to which Christ is working in and through the sacraments on an ongoing basis. They were not fitted to the nature of humans at the beginning on a one-off basis and left to their own devices, to wither or prosper depending on the societal conditions prevalent at any one point in human history. If we accept, as Jones does, the idea that God had the divine wisdom to tailor the sacraments to the sign-making nature of humans, then it is not too much to allow, as Aquinas does, that God also has the ability to tailor them in other ways too that account for the threats and fallibilities Jones' seems concerned with. To make the sacraments contingent, as Jones does, on the ever-changing mores of humankind, is to fundamentally misunderstand the why and the how of their institution in the first place. In other words, Jones' interdisciplinary approach threatens to overstretch itself by drawing conclusions on a theological tradition he cannot account fully for in his work.

This is not to question the validity of “sacramentalism with a small s”⁹⁴ Jones describes in his piece. This sacramentalism is not far from what Aquinas recognises as the natural inclination of humans to seek and signify a spiritual reality beyond the physical. The analysis to which Jones' work has been subjected here is simply to make clear the responsibility that falls upon an interdisciplinary approach to account carefully for the language it uses and the conclusions it draws. In the case of Jones, or of Kavanagh to whom this wider thesis is devoted, the application of theological language must resist an arbitrary or contingent image of God's presence. Rather, to be sacramental, as the theology of the Church shows, is to assent with wonder to the ongoing self-disclosure of the God-made-man who continues to meet us in our place of need.

As Aquinas relates, the sacraments do not rely on the understanding, the sympathy or the instinct of humans to be effective; their power is ultimately guaranteed by their author, Christ: “Christ produces the interior effects of the sacraments both as God (the source of their effectiveness) and as man (earning that effectiveness, and acting as a tool of his

⁹³ *ST*, III, q. 60, a. 5, ad. 3.

⁹⁴ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 177.

godhead).”⁹⁵ Later in the same passage, Aquinas underscores the implications of this divine initiative at the heart of the sacraments: so powerful are they as tools of God’s will that their effect could be achieved, if desired by God, without the use of the sacramental signs at all:

Christ as God then has power of authorship in the sacraments, and as man principality of ministry: the sacraments operate by virtue and merit of his sufferings, attest to faith in him, are consecrated in his name, instituted by him, and he, if he wished, could confer their effect without using its external sacrament. His power of authorship of the sacraments God cannot share with any creature.⁹⁶

This passage underscores what the divine initiative at the heart of sacramental theology really means. It means that the sacraments are God in action and thus their power is divine. As the work of God, they actually effect God’s grace. Jones’ loose definition of sacramentalism with “a small s”⁹⁷ means his consideration of the sacraments of the church puts too much emphasis on their status as signs, and not enough on the grace that they effect. Aquinas’ underlines that it is the grace of Christ conferred by the sacraments that is most important, not the signs themselves that are but “instruments or tools”⁹⁸ moved by the primary agent, God. The interdisciplinary exchange prompted by Jones’ evocative work shows again in a new light the essence of the Church’s sacramental theology. Sacraments do not speak of a divinity that is arbitrary, contingent or irrelevant. Rather, they are the means by which God continues to effect for a dispossessed people the salvation won for them by Christ.

Transubstantiation in art and theology

Jones’ work causes one to reflect afresh on the true implications of sacramental theology for the life of the believer, particularly for a Christian artist. One of the most significant implications of describing art as sacramental is the relationship with transubstantiation. This work has already touched on the difficulty of defining exactly the sort of transformation achieved by a work of art that re-presents an object in order to signify a reality beyond its material appearance. Such sign-making has been called “sacramental”⁹⁹ in the work of Kavanagh and others, and it has been the cause of this chapter to investigate what meaning – poetic or theological – can actually derive from such descriptions. One possibility is that the transformation arising from a work of art could be said to take effect

⁹⁵ *ST*, III, q. 64, a. 3, co.

⁹⁶ *ST*, III, q. 64, a. 3, co.

⁹⁷ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 177.

⁹⁸ *ST*, III, q. 64, a. 3, co.

⁹⁹ Stack, *No Earthly Estate*, 17.

on the subject of the art itself. In this case, one thing – a swamp for example - is somehow changed by the line “God is down in the swamps and marshes”¹⁰⁰. The swamp in this instance is imbued with a godliness that was not inherent in it before. The second option is that the transformation effected by art acts primarily on the audience who consumes the artwork. If a reader encounters the above line of Kavanagh’s poetry, they could be said to be changed by the fact of having read it. Their view of swamps could be changed entirely, their view of God could be changed entirely. The reader will have been made different by their reception of the poem.¹⁰¹ Roger Pouivet speaks of something close to this when he describes how encountering true art hones the “aesthetic virtue”¹⁰² of the audience. Aesthetic virtue is in this case not an add-on to the existing virtues, but constituted of them, and is simply the name he gives to the combination of these existing moral, practical and theological virtues that are involved in appreciating an aesthetic experience, as in art. As with all the virtues, the development of our aesthetic virtues brings us closer to God – they order our desires towards the highest desire, God.

Works of art and our aesthetic life are linked to the divine—at least, I insist, in the best of cases. Our virtues order our sensitive and intellectual appetites to perfections in things. Perfection is ordered to that which is the cause of all perfection, the *perfect being* itself. That is why and how our aesthetic life is a form of desire for God.¹⁰³

The cultivation of a kind of “aesthetic virtue”¹⁰⁴ in their audience is thus a second kind of potentially ‘sacramental’ transformation achievable by a work of art. Tellingly, the sacramental theology of the Church supports both of the kinds of transformation mentioned above. All the sacraments have a transformative effect on their recipients at least comparable to what Pouivet says of aesthetic virtue. Sacraments make humans holy, therefore perfecting

¹⁰⁰ Patrick Kavanagh, “The One,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 292.

¹⁰¹ Interestingly, this is a claim Seamus Heaney makes in relation to the poetry of Kavanagh. In Seamus Heaney, “The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh,” *The Massachusetts Review* 28, no. 3 (1987): 380, Heaney quotes Rilke to summarise the effect of some of Kavanagh’s poems: “These poems, with their grievously earned simplicity, make you feel all over again that truth which the grievously earned simplicity, make you feel all over again that truth which the mind has become so adept at evading: “You must change your life.”

¹⁰² Roger Pouivet, “Art and the Desire for God: A Thomistic Perspective in Aesthetics,” *New Blackfriars* 100 (2019): 402.

¹⁰³ Pouivet, *Art and the Desire for God*, 407. Pouivet bases this on Aquinas’ 4th way (proof of God) at *ST*, I. 39. 8.co., where Aquinas the Good as “the graduation to be found in things”. All our appreciation of good or noble things is by their relation to the ultimate good which causes the goodness or nobility of all other things. To goodness and nobility Pouivet adds St. Thomas’ aesthetic principles radiance, proportion or harmony, integrity or perfection.

¹⁰⁴ Pouivet, *Art and the Desire for God*, 402.

them in a way similar to the life of virtue (but in a more complete way, as Aquinas clarifies¹⁰⁵).

But as Aquinas mentions, one of the things that makes the Eucharist the summit of the sacramental life and differentiates it from the other sacraments is that the visible material used to transform humans (into holiness) is itself transformed in the sacrament. The water of baptism or the chrism oil for anointing are merely applied to make humans holy, whereas ‘the eucharist consists in the very consecration of the material it uses.’¹⁰⁶ In the sacrament of the eucharist, the material used in the sacrament is transformed as well as the recipient of the sacrament. A separate term – transubstantiation, is necessary to capture the totality of the transformation described with extreme care by Aquinas: ‘after bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ.’¹⁰⁷

This extra dimension of depth in the Eucharist has appealed to artists like Jones who see something sacramental in the artist’s work. Not only does their art change their audience, but in the process of creating his art Jones is insistent that more is at play than a mere rearranging of forms or imitation of appearances. Rather, what occurs is a “making”¹⁰⁸ – the creation of something entirely new on its own grounds, with its own new gratuitous integrity. This integrity is unrelated to any external agenda from the artist or their society. In fact, the artist should withdraw in the process of making and follow only what is demanded by the good of the work. The integrity of the work should also be unrelated to how realistically it captures another reality or experience. The form or inspiration in which the artwork began recedes in the process of the artist’s making and is utterly transformed into the new reality of the finished piece. This utter transformation, in which both the maker and the material recedes in the wake of a new thing created, is designed in some way to reveal what Jones would recognise as the excess of meaning in the material world. The role of the artist, amongst other roles, is to bring forth this sacred excess meaning by the transformation effected by “making”¹⁰⁹. So firm is Jones’ belief in the integrity of the artwork produced by the making of the artist that he uses the transubstantiation that occurs in the celebration of the Eucharist as an analogy. The belief of Catholics (such as Jones) in the real presence of

¹⁰⁵ *ST*, III, q. 62, a. 2, ad. 2: “The grace of the virtues and gifts disposes the substance and powers of the soul well enough in regard to the general structure of its activities, but the grace of the sacraments serves certain special effects needed in a Christian life. The virtues and gifts are enough to eliminate present and future vices and sins, inasmuch as they restrain a man from sinning. But in the respect of past sins which, though finished as actions, have left a liability for punishment behind, the sacraments offer man special remedies.”

¹⁰⁶ *ST*, III, q. 73, a. 1, ad. 3.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *ST*, III, q. 75, a. 8.

¹⁰⁸ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 172.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Christ in the bread and wine is taken by Jones as an inspiration, even an encouragement for artists who see more than mere imitation or representation in their artwork, but a real presence of a similar kind to the Eucharist. “For the painter might say to himself: ‘This is not a representation of a mountain, it is “mountain” under the form of paint.’ Indeed, unless he says this unconsciously or consciously he will not be a painter worth a candle.”¹¹⁰

Jones is keen to stress throughout his “Art and Sacrament” that he uses the theological example of transubstantiation as analogy only. As a work of sign-making and art-work, the Last Supper (and the sacrament that memorialises it) are acceptable material for a reflection on the nature of the artistic enterprise, Jones argues. Rowan Williams has acknowledged the concerns that arise from the extension of the language of transubstantiation to the kind of transformation effected by the “making”¹¹¹ of art.¹¹² Williams is largely sympathetic to the breadth of ambition in Jones’ interdisciplinary approach, and concludes that any diminution of the theology is superficial, and in the end worthwhile for the invigoration it confers to Jones’ spirited vision:

the caution against taking the image [of transubstantiation] uncritically is a useful one. But Jones is not, I think, talking about rendering *qualities* into other media; he is trying to make a larger claim. Something like the whole active presence of the object is being re-presented by the artist – not simply the *reproduction* of aspects of its appearance (since the artwork may not in fact be significantly concerned with reproducing ‘qualities’)... it is not that the sacramental is being reduced to the level of one discrete object ‘signifying’ another, but that the artistic work is being accorded a deeper metaphysical status.¹¹³

This last sentence is the key to judging the worth of the sort of sacramentality claimed by Jones and applied to artists such as Patrick Kavanagh. Williams concludes that borrowing and analogising the language and theology of the formal sacraments of the church is worthwhile in expressing the inherent sacredness of art; it clarifies more than it obscures. According art a deeper metaphysical status cannot come at the cost of theological precision, however.

¹¹⁰ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 170. This level of conviction is strikingly similar to that of the God-language of Kavanagh’s poetry, where similes using ‘like’ are abandoned for bold, almost startling metaphoric pronouncements such as in Kavanagh, “The One,” 282: “God is down in the swamps and marshes”.

¹¹¹ *Epoch and Artist*, 172.

¹¹² Jonathan Miles, *Backgrounds to David Jones: A Study in Sources and Drafts* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990), 21 is the dissenting example given. For Miles, the metaphor of transubstantiation “express[es] something that is so much less than it suggests. It threatens to reduce the power of the Eucharist to the ‘the Protestant idea of the significant relation between bread and body.’”

¹¹³ Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 62.

In the specific case of extending the concept of transubstantiation to the transformation enacted by art, Aquinas seems to rule the prospect out. Once again, Aquinas injects an element of surety that clarifies what is left obscure by the give and take of the interdisciplinary exchange. In his treatment of the sacrament of Eucharist, Aquinas explains the exact nature of transubstantiation, a new word and concept that is necessary to account for the unique and supernatural conversion of the whole substance of the bread and wine into the whole substance of the body and blood of Christ. This differs from other kinds of transformation that are not supernatural, but natural.¹¹⁴

But this conversion is not like any natural change, and only God has the power to bring it about. The activity of created agents is always directed at actualizing some defined thing, and since what defines actual things is their forms, no natural or created agent can do anything else but give a new form to something; so that all changes in accordance with the laws of nature can be called transformations. God however is unlimited in his actuality. So he can act on the whole substance of existing things. He can not only bring about conversions of form, in which one form replaces another in a subject, but conversions of the whole existent thing, in which the whole substance of one thing converts into the whole substance of another. And this is what he does in his divine power in the sacrament.¹¹⁵

This passage is conclusive in ruling out the language of transubstantiation when expressing the transformation effected by an artist: a ‘natural or created agent’ in the language of Aquinas. The key difference is between form and substance. In transformation, only the former changes, in transubstantiation, only the latter. Aquinas is alert and sympathetic to the similarities between natural change and transubstantiation: he allows later that the two share a “certain order: after this, that. In this sacrament, after the substance of bread - the body of Christ. In natural change, after black - white, or after air - fire. The two extremes never coexist.”¹¹⁶

In the end, however, Aquinas’ insistence on the immutability of matter (or ‘subject’ as he also calls it) means that he cannot allow for the use of the language transubstantiation in a human context. His openness to discussing the similarities between transformation and

¹¹⁴ Air into fire is the example given by Aquinas at *ST*, III, q.75, a. 3, ad. 1.

¹¹⁵ *ST*, III, q.74, a. 4, co.

¹¹⁶ *ST*, III, q.74, a. 8, co: Aquinas here also compares transubstantiation and transformation to a third process: creation. Creation also shares a certain order: after non-existence existence. Creation is less relevant in this instance because creation (*ex nihilo*) is reserved only for God, so is by definition not available to the artist. What an artist might incline to call ‘creation’ (as they might call their work a kind of ‘transubstantiation’) would really be the kind of transformation Aquinas describes above. Only God can create matter or alter its substance. Humans can alter its form with significative intent, but cannot create or alter it.

transubstantiation, however, is encouraging to the interdisciplinary dialogues that seek, by analogy, to draw out the nature of the deeply meaningful ‘transformation’ at play in the work of artists. Such artistic transformation is the closest humankind gets to the supernatural work of God in the Eucharist.

Conclusion: ‘knowing what is at stake’

In this final concluding section, this chapter will draw together and carefully assess the implications of the interdisciplinary study it has undertaken into Sacrament and sacramentality in theology and art. As this chapter has observed, in order to fruitfully explore the possibilities and challenges in applying a kind of sacramentality to the exploits of the artist, it was crucial to establish a kind of theological groundwork that anchored the discussion. By investigating the sacramental theology of the Church in its documents and in the work of some of its major thinkers, this chapter began by establishing three essential elements of the why and how of the sacraments of the church, captured in the observation that sacraments are the means by which God continues to effect for a dispossessed people the salvation won by Christ. This understanding safeguarded against a distortion, common in historical and contemporary discussions, that portray the sacraments as somehow arbitrary, contingent, or irrelevant.

This clarity on the nature of the sacramental theology of the Church served to establish the boundaries of the interdisciplinary dialogue that developed between art and theology, primarily in the work of David Jones. The work of Thomas Aquinas emerged as a key anchor to the discussion and ensured against conclusions that threatened to overtake and diminish the exchange at hand. Inspired by the breadth of Aquinas’ approach, this study treated Jones’ daring analogy between the sacramental theology of the church and the life of artist-“sacramentalist” in the spirit of Sherry’s observation that “we can both honour the development of the traditional sacramental theology of the Church and at the same time welcome modern discussions of the wider sacramentality of things, provided that we realize what we are doing and know what is at stake.”¹¹⁷

Aquinas’ influence is writ large through the entire history of Christian sacramental theology, from the Council of Trent to the theologians whose Christological focus allowed the Church to understand itself and its sacraments afresh in the Second Vatican Council. In this chapter,

¹¹⁷ Sherry, *Enchantment*, 589.

his work set the stage for an application of the sacramental theology of the Church, by analogy at the least, to the life and work of the artist. In the course of the exchange, the metaphysical breadth of the sacraments stretched the imagination of the artist David Jones to reconceive what it was possible for artists to achieve in the course of the creative transformation at the heart of their work. In the process of responding to Jones' bold claims, the theology of the sacraments themselves benefitted from a kind of reinvigoration.

What emerged from our study of the sacraments is that God's presence in the world is not an arbitrary one, removed beyond our understanding and unconcerned with our daily lives. The why and how of God-with-us is at hand in the sacraments – "concentrated meetings"¹¹⁸ with the divine. The sacraments speak to the disposition of dispossession in the Christian community. Christians need God to heal their brokenness and give them redemption. It is Christ of course who effects this redemption, who has already done so and who offers the gift of his continuing healing presence through the sacraments at the most significant moments in our lives. The sacraments tell the believer that they do not need to conjure God or find him of their own accord. He is with us, he is at hand, all that is required is an assenting response to the saving presence of Jesus offered to us in the sacraments.

In this situation, what the sacraments speak to most of all is a certain character of the Christian life and community. If Christ is the ultimate word in God's self-disclosure to humankind, the sacraments are the means by which the conversation continues. What Christ's life announced, the sacraments continue to proclaim. The possibilities of the Incarnation, the desolation of Calvary and the hope of Easter Sunday are all contained and communicated by the sacraments. This is why Rowan Williams speaks of a sacramental life of the Church that continues to speak of brokenness, nakedness, dispossession, need. If sacramental theology forgoes this starting point, it will offer a pale account of the effect of Christ's coming into the world. It would be to forego Calvary and to discount the salvation Christ won on the cross. Aquinas makes a similar point when he directs that a sacrament, properly understood as such, must always point first to the cause of the holiness it produces in humans: the suffering of Christ at Calvary:

A sacrament properly so-called is some sign of our being made holy, and that involves the cause that makes us holy (Christ's sufferings)". Only when the cause of the holiness a sacrament effects is understood can the nature and end of that holiness be fully grasped in all its joy: "the sacraments are signs of all three [the cause, the

¹¹⁸ Ryan, *Eucharist*, 13.

nature, and the ultimate goal of our holiness]: commemoration Christ's past sufferings, demonstrating the grace those sufferings are presently producing in us, and foretelling our future glory.¹¹⁹

The Christian continues to need the salvation of Christ – this is the mindset invited by the sacraments. When this is the disposition of the Christian, the joy of Easter Sunday – communicated afresh through the sacraments, truly pervades their life. It is only by facing the woes of Calvary that Christ's resurrection achieves its full meaning – because Good Friday *means* Easter Sunday. Likewise, only through the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ does the Incarnation truly appear as it is. The material world as we know it is utterly altered by a God who entered into it in order to achieve victory even over death itself. This permits us to recognise, even in the cycles of life and death that pervade the natural material world, a deathlessness, a certain without-end-ness conferred by the God who became human and conquered the limits of human weakness, fault and death. This share in the eternity of God is what is promised to the Christian in the sacraments. They are a reminder that the limits of this human world have been made arbitrary and temporary by the victory of Christ, a victory we remember, celebrate, and share in as Christians in the sacraments. As Aquinas relates: “it is Christ's sufferings that give [the sacraments] their efficacy, and which they apply to men.”¹²⁰ Freed from fear and the physical constraints of this mortal life, we can come to recognise with joy and wonder the divinity with which the human world is shot through. Living in the sacraments, we become alert to the sacredness inherent in the material order on account of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection.

This is all to underline that an appeal to a general sacramentality is pale if it confines itself to an arbitrary sacredness in the material order based loosely on the presence of the God in the world. To enlist Christ's Incarnation would not be enough to account for a general sacramentality or blessedness in the world. God is in the sunsets and the trees, the relationships and the joys of human life. But God is also in the empty spaces of the world – the disappointments, the death, the suffering. Recognising the possibility that the world could be ‘holy’ at all immediately raises the question of where God is in these less obvious corners of human existence on earth, and only a full account of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection on earth give the totality of the Christian response to that question. The sacraments speak of this totality. As Aquinas directs, the sacraments serve two chief

¹¹⁹ *ST*, III, q. 60, a.3, co.

¹²⁰ *ST*, III, q. 61, a.1, ad. 3.

purposes, to redeem humans for their sins and to strengthen them for worship of God. Faith in the suffering of Christ makes possible the first, the resurrection makes possible the second. “So the power of the sacraments to remove sin chiefly derives from faith in Christ’s sufferings. The resurrection of Christ causes men to be set right again, in as much as that leads to a new life through grace; Christ’s sufferings cause it inasmuch as it starts with forgiveness of our faults.”¹²¹ A true sacramentality will honour both the brokenness and the blessedness of the human condition on earth.

If indeed the sacraments conjure afresh the essence of the Christian promise, wonder is the attitude with which the Church and the believer should approach these encounters with the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ. A sacramental outlook, whether in life or in art or in religious life, is simply one that is attuned to the ongoing promise of Christ at work in the world. The sacraments are a reminder to stay awake and not to fall into a slumber of entitlement or ennui. They are the means by which every week in the life of the Church is imbued with the theo-drama of Holy Week.

To live with true Christian wonder would be to recognise the sudden newness contained within the sacraments, each of which are received on every occasion as if for the first time, as if for the last time, as if for the only time. Likewise, to live ‘sacramentally’ would not be possible without a sense of wonder, a sense of openness to the possibility of what Christ continues to achieve and gift to us in our place of need. This is why wonder and sacrament have been the animating themes of this study into Patrick Kavanagh’s Christian point of view as poet-theologian, for the two require one another and flow into one another in the life of any Christian believer, poet or otherwise. Kavanagh dwells in his poetry on the nature of the transformation effected in the creative act. He seems to conclude that the power of the poetic gaze is to “snatch out of time the passionate transitory”¹²²: to effect something of the without-endness of the eternal onto the ephemeral things of the world. Of course, for a Christian writer like Kavanagh these concepts take on a deeper significance. The eternity conjured by the poetic gaze is rooted in the eternal God who creates and shapes all things in His image. Kavanagh makes it clear that the kind of transformation brought about by poetry is best understood in the context of Christianity. Bringing out the God in things is often the way Kavanagh chooses to summarise and eulogise the sacramental effect of poetry. For

¹²¹ *ST*, III, q. 62, a. 5, ad. 2-3.

¹²² Patrick Kavanagh, “The Hospital,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 280.

“God is down in the swamps and marshes”¹²³. In these out-of-the-way places we find the setting for Kavanagh’s sacramental poetry, where “beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God/ Was breathing His love by a cut-away bog”¹²⁴.

Kavanagh’s upbringing in the Catholic faith, rooted in his study of the O’Reilly catechism, would have given him an awareness of the role and nature of the sacraments in the Christian life. It is unreasonable to suggest that as deep-thinking a Catholic as Kavanagh, whose faith ran through so much of his life, would not have recognised the claim the sacraments had upon his own poetic vocation. Indeed, in the sacramental life of the Church, Christ is the first and ultimate sacrament, from whom all the formal sacraments flow and in whom they have their meaning. It is the priest who acts in *persona Christi* and allows for the celebration and reception of the sacraments among the people. Throughout his work, Kavanagh seems to envisage for himself the kind of apartness reserved for the priest in his own society. In the context of the eucharist, the central sacrament of the Church, the priest acts as a kind of sacrificer, who literally “makes holy”¹²⁵ the offerings of the people by his actions in the person of Christ. The priest is a sacrificer in another sense. In following the example of Jesus, the sacrificial lamb of God, the priest sacrifices their own life in service of the people and of God. The priest, as Christ, withdraws from life in order to preserve a kind of purity and to effect a kind of redemption. This motif seems to appeal to Kavanagh at several points in his life and work as he grapples with what it means to be a poet. As Agnew notes, “[Kavanagh] enjoyed being a Christ-figure and felt an almost unhealthy security in being crucified.”¹²⁶ If the poet is a theologian for Kavanagh, at important moments the poet is also a priestly figure, set apart from the world in order to making things holy by his own self-sacrifice and poetic action. The nature and implications of the priest as another model for Kavanagh the poet-theologian will be examined in more detail later in this work, but at this point it suffices to acknowledge its relevance for the choice of sacrament as a lens to understand the theology of Kavanagh’s work. The poet, as the priest, is caught up in making things other than they are, in conferring a kind of eternity, and by analogy, Godliness, unto them. The sacrament of the Eucharist, in which Christians acknowledge and receive the reality of God made man and man made matter, is the ultimate paradigm for the sacramental

¹²³ Kavanagh, “The One,” 282.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ From the Latin *sacra* meaning “holy things” and *facio* meaning “I make/do”.

¹²⁶ Una Agnew, *A Buttonhole in Heaven? The mystical imagination of Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: Columba, 2019), 170.

activity of the poet Kavanagh. The transubstantiation so inherent to his life as a Christian underwrites the kind of poetic transformation Kavanagh effects as a writer who raises to importance the commonplace experiences of life by the light of his artistic effort.

Indeed, there is no better way for theology to share itself with the world than through its sacramental theology. The sacraments are the idiom of the Christian life; they allow the Christian community to make sense of itself and to express its most fundamental truths as it encounters “God in action”¹²⁷ in its midst.

By its sacramental action, the Church acknowledges what it is and what it can be because of Christ. It is naked, dispossessed, wounded, continually in need of the restoration only found in God’s gift of grace in Christ. The sacraments are also our human response to the gift of redemption that draw us closer to the possibility of life in Christ, where, in the words of Ryan, “our words become God's words, our language God's language.”¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Ryan, *Eucharist*, 14.

¹²⁸ Ryan, *Eucharist*, 14.

Chapter Four: sacrament and sacramentality in Patrick Kavanagh

Introduction: From sacrament to sacramentality

Chapter three of this thesis accounted for the choice of Sacrament as the second theo-poetic category under which to examine Patrick Kavanagh's claim that "a poet is a theologian"¹. In the course of so doing, it argued for an understanding of sacramental theology that was defined by three factors: divine initiative at the root of the sacraments, a disposition of dispossession in the community that receives them, and a Christological focus that speaks to the blessedness and brokenness of the human condition. Together, these factors distinguished a sacramental theology summarized as follows: the sacraments are the means by which God continues to effect for a dispossessed people the salvation won by Christ. This definition was itself an expansion on the traditional formula of the Church that characterizes a Sacrament as a *signum efficax gratiae* – "an effective sign of God's grace."² This established formulation, supplemented by the expanded definition provided for in Chapter Three, became the basis of an interdisciplinary study in the latter parts of Chapter Three into the concept of sacramentality in theology and art. The study proceeded carefully to ascertain what kind of relationship Art could have with the sacraments of the church as outlined by the discipline of theology. The challenge of such an approach was the potential that, in borrowing or analogizing from the discipline of theology, the artistic tradition could misrepresent or devalue the complexity of sacramental theology. This challenge was particularly prominent in the case of transubstantiation, which Welsh artist David Jones took as an analogy for the artist's re-presenting of the material word by their creative act. An interrogation of Jones' ambitious vision of the artist as by nature a "sacramentalist"³ harnessed Aquinas' sacramental theology to allow for the possibility of a fruitful and mindful conversation between art and theology around the area of sacramentality. Aquinas' theology, it was argued, underscored the effectiveness of the sacraments: first and foremost, sacraments make humans holy. The extent to which a piece of art could effect as well as signify – becoming *efficax* as well as merely a *signum* – became a key concern of any

¹ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Prose* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1967), 22.

² This phrase over time became a theological formula for understanding the sacraments. As summarised in Jarosław Kupczak, *Gift and Communion: John Paul II's Theology of the Body* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 91: "The development of the theology of the sacrament, whose milestones are marked by the reflections of Tertulian, St. Augustine, St. Isidore of Seville, and St. Thomas Aquinas, established the understanding of a sacrament as "an effective sign of grace" (*signum efficax gratiae Christi*)."

³ David Jones, *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber, 1959), 155.

interdisciplinary conversation on sacramentality. Patrick Kavanagh's work was introduced alongside Jones at the end of the chapter in a bid to orientate this debate around the Irish poet's work and to explore the extent to which the theology of Kavanagh's poetry could inform, and be informed by, the dynamic exploration of sacramentality begun in Chapter Three. Both Jones and Kavanagh, it was argued, shared a belief that the gratuity of God's self-disclosure in Creation – and supremely in Christ (the *Ars Patris*) – represented a kind of validation and inspiration for the creative act of the artist. Though Kavanagh does not use Jones' language of sacrament to explain his work, the methods of his theology seem to draw on the concept of sacramentality and have been credited with a "sacramental" impulse by various commentators such as Quinn, Agnew, and Stack.⁴

In the course of this Chapter Four the sacramentality of Kavanagh's poetry and theology will be investigated with the true depth it requires. As this thesis has argued, the prospect of a meaningful theology at work in the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh is too important to be dismissed, explained, or elided without due care and investigation. In like spirit, the sacramental theology of the Church is too significant and complex to be deployed in an interdisciplinary conversation about sacramentality without careful consideration and context. As this chapter will demonstrate, in the case of Kavanagh, the fruits of such a measured and consistent approach are substantial: sacramentality holds the key to understanding the rich theological vein in the content and intent of Kavanagh's entire corpus.

In the first half of the chapter, Kavanagh's comments and convictions about the nature of poetry will be examined. As an artist, Kavanagh often prefers to 'show' rather than to 'tell' his audience what he believes; his poetry performs his innermost feelings and beliefs. However, in the early stages of this chapter, this work will focus on the moments, rare but significant, when Kavanagh (and Peter his brother, confidant, and "sacred keeper"⁵) discuss candidly the manifesto that underlay all his work. As this thesis has argued, this manifesto, also called his "statement"⁶ or "point of view"⁷ by Kavanagh, is distinguished by the poet's deeply-felt Christianity. The moments when Kavanagh and his brother discuss (outside of

⁴ Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: Born-again Romantic* (New York: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), 194, Una Agnew, *A Buttonhole in Heaven? The mystical imagination of Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: Columba, 2019), 243, Tom Stack, *No Earthly Estate: God and Patrick Kavanagh: an anthology* (Dublin, Columba Press, 2002), 17.

⁵ Peter Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper: a biography of Patrick Kavanagh* (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1979), passim.

⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 25.

⁷ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 22.

poems) the nature of this point of view shed crucial light on the concern, the process and the importance of Kavanagh the poet-theologian. This point of view, as will be argued in this chapter, bears the essential hallmarks of sacramentality. In other words, Kavanagh's work, as understood and expressed at its deepest level by the author himself, is concerned with signifying God's presence and demonstrating its effect.

Having established – by the measure of Kavanagh's own convictions – the sacramentality of his poetry and theology at this initial level, the second half of this chapter will draw primarily on what Kavanagh *shows* us about the nature of his poetry and theology in the course of his poems. Particular focus will be given to three of Kavanagh's longer poems yet to be considered in the course of this thesis – “The Great Hunger”, “Lough Derg” and “Why Sorrow?”. These extensive pieces – over 600 lines each – are three of his longest compositions. They give a unique insight into how Kavanagh's distinctive point of view was forged at a time of defining transformation in his life. Each was undertaken in the early 1940s when Kavanagh, soon after a turbulent move from his Monaghan farm to Dublin city, was reflecting critically on the societal, aesthetic and religious conditions of his times. These poems are crucial to this study for the dour tone in which Kavanagh lays bare the challenges posed by these conditions to his “profound and holy” point of view.⁸ Moments of grace punctuate the three pieces and hint at Kavanagh's deep convictions, but a kind of bleak anti-sacramentality pervades these poems - designed to travesty a society that feared and suffocated any vision that would dare to find meaning, poetry, and God beyond the confines of a narrow consensus.

Later in his life, the exuberant, emphatic praise poetry of his Canal Bank rebirth in the second half of the 1950s acted as a counterpoint to this austere anti-sacramentality. In crucial later poems such as “The Hospital” and “Canal Bank Walk” Kavanagh exhibits a freedom to practise his sacramentality head-on, identifying (without the need for satire or travesty) the redemptive gift of God “feeding the gaping need of [his] senses”.⁹ This celebrated period of sacramentality in Kavanagh's later life and work finds its truest context in the three long poems to be studied in this chapter. In the final stages of this thesis, the diversity of Kavanagh approaches will be accounted for. Despite his move from a dour, critical anti-

⁸ ‘Profound and holy’ are words used by Patrick's brother Peter to describe Kavanagh's outlook on poetry and life – his “point of view”. They appear first in Patrick's poem “Auditors In”, a key poem during which Kavanagh takes stock of his life and poetry in 1951.

⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, “Canal Bank Walk,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 294.

sacramentality in his earlier poetry to an exuberant, care-free sacramentality of the everyday in his later work, this Chapter will argue that it is continuity rather than discontinuity that marks out the sacramentality at the heart of Kavanagh's work as a poet-theologian.¹⁰ These step-turns in his work are merely different ways of communicating the same 'point of view'. As will be argued, even as his methods vary, the same sacramental concern for poetry as a sign of God's transformative presence in the world remains the still centre of his work and the theology it communicates. As will be argued, the intent and the content of Kavanagh's work as a poet-theologian is consistent and considered. Kavanagh's writings, it will be shown, are truly sacramental for their recognition of God's initiative and the disposition of dispossession at the heart of the Christian life: Kavanagh exhibits a trusting dependence on God's guiding presence in his writing, even amidst the darkest times of his life.

Section One: Poetry as a sign of God

This chapter will begin its exploration of 'sacramentality' in Kavanagh's work by approaching the theological definition of a Sacrament in its broadest terms: a *signum efficax gratiae* or an effective sign of grace. Beginning our analysis in this way will serve to establish the case for a more in-depth study of sacramentality in Kavanagh's work throughout the rest of the chapter. At question in this section is whether Kavanagh's work acts in some way as a sign of God's presence. This in turn will raise the question in later sections of this thesis as to what effect, if any, the presence of God in his poetry might have for Kavanagh. In other words: what could it mean to say that Kavanagh's work points to God? David Jones' work, outlined in Chapter Three of this thesis, is a fruitful starting point for this consideration. Jones argues that all true art is sacred and religious and in some sense predicated upon, and validated by, the creative action of God in the world and in Christ. All true artists, indeed all humans are thus "sacramentalists"¹¹ who by their very nature make

¹⁰ As Quinn has remarked in Quinn, *Born-again Romantic*, 396 Kavanagh himself parsed (and simplified) his life in writing with the help of the Canal Bank "myth" – the idea that he and his poetry were entirely reborn in 1955 towards the end of his career on the banks of the Grand Canal. The truth is more complicated: the undoubted transformation in his later work is signalled at during several earlier stages in his writings. There is more consistency in his approach than Kavanagh gives credit for in his espousal of the 'Canal Bank myth' in later retrospectives on his life. Quinn locates this consistency in the gradual development of what she calls (p.397) Kavanagh's "aesthetic philosophy". This thesis will differ from Quinn in arguing that it is in his essential "point of view" that Kavanagh's consistency is most pointed. The consistency of his Christian point of view, that takes a theological approach to poetry is perhaps best appreciated in the sacramentality exhibited across his poetry and theology.

¹¹ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 155.

signs to appeal to concepts beyond the material. The sign-making of humankind is anchored in Christ, the Logos, the ultimate sign and sign-maker, the ultimate “sacramentalist”. So for Jones, the question of whether Kavanagh’s work points to God and is thus sacramental in the broadest sense is already answered, even if Kavanagh never mentioned or acknowledged God in his writings. By its *poiesis* – its creative act – Kavanagh’s sacramentality at this broad level is guaranteed.

George Steiner in his *Real Presences* builds a similar line of thought to Jones, but is more explicit in the theological proposition that underlies any claims to a kind of universal sacramentality in art. Steiner argues that all intelligible communication between humans – between word and the world – is based on a wager on meaning, a wager that is fundamentally transcendent, even theological, in nature. The idea that there is ‘anything there’ in what we say, any real meaning that can’t be deconstructed by a nihilistic theory of linguistics or philosophy, finds its roots in what Steiner calls a “Logos-model”.¹² In essence, this model posits that we can trust the meaning we signify with language because we can trust the meaning God signifies in Christ: “A semantics, a poetics of correspondence, of decipherability and truth-values arrived at across time and consensus, are strictly inseparable from the postulate of a theological-metaphysical transcendence. Thus, the origin of the axiom of meaning and of the God-concept is a shared one.”¹³

Human correspondence, language and meaning-exchange find their summit, for Steiner, in art. And so art is the theatre in which his “Logos-model”¹⁴ functions with most effect. Thus in a similar way to Jones, Steiner argues that God is the ultimate guarantor of the meaning communicated by art. The self-communication of God in the world, in His words, and most emphatically in Christ, the Logos, make possible the idea of a ‘real presence’ behind the language and sign-making of humans ever since. The same theory that would deconstruct the idea of art, the idea of meaningful and intelligible communication between humans, would logically deny the existence or possibility of God. Both, according to Steiner, are based on the one “Logos-model”¹⁵. Because Jesus communicates reliably the meaning of God, words and signs and language can be also trusted to communicate meaning. This model, by establishing the relation between Christ (the Word) and the world, ensures the relationship between the word and the world: the idea that there is something actually

¹² George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 119.

¹³ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 223.

¹⁴ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 119.

¹⁵ Ibid.

‘there’ in what the sign-maker, the “sacramentalist”¹⁶, the artist produces. Steiner, like Kavanagh, does not use the language of sacrament in his work as prominently as Jones. However, Steiner’s clarity on the theological rootedness of art echoes Kavanagh’s claims about the poet-theologian. Taken together, Jones and Steiner suggest that sacramentality can provide a rubric to access the theology at play in Kavanagh’s work. Steiner wonders aloud how else, without reference to the transcendent, artists can capture the other-ness of their work:

... in a moment of history where the frankly theological is so largely held in derision... where a rationality modelled, naively, on that of the sciences and of technology prevails, where agnosticism, if not a consequent atheism, is the norm of approved discourse, it is immensely difficult for an artist to find words for his making, for the “vibrations of the primal” which quicken his work.¹⁷

Kavanagh makes a strikingly similar observation in his “Poetry and Pietism”, written in 1953 alongside his brother Peter as part of his self-published newspaper ‘Kavanagh’s Weekly’.

Whatever be the reason, it appears to me that we cannot go on much longer without finding an underlying faith upon which to build our world of letters.

Because of this absence of faith, the anger of men like O’Connor and O’Casey is worthless and even pitiful. The Catholic says that he has the answer, and it *is* an answer. But the Age of Reason denies it. We want to go down prostrate and cry our belief, but our reason refuses.

Out of the Age of Reason comes the work of Joyce, Eliot and Picasso, the art that is pastiche, an attempt to create excitement from the manipulation of means. We have no end, no purpose. The real trouble with the world today is that it wants to believe in God and cannot.

Sartre has illustrated this dilemma in his work. The end is sex, any kind of physical satisfaction, and despair.

The world today is full of Pilates, asking the question which is always cynical: What is Truth? And every man who has in him something of Christ will reply, ‘I am’, before he is led off – to starvation.¹⁸

¹⁶ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 155.

¹⁷ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 223.

¹⁸ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 245-246.

Kavanagh here makes clear the connection in his understanding between religious faith and the *poiesis* of art. An absence of faith leads to art with ‘no end, no purpose’ beyond a kind of righteous arrogance, frivolous play, or sinister self-indulgence. In diagnosing the problem as he sees it, Kavanagh provides his own answer to the question posed by Steiner about the vanishing means left available to artists in a world falling out of touch with God. In the absence of a God that inspires and guarantees the creative process, artists rely increasingly on themselves – their own abilities and priorities in their sign-making. Enumerating the downfalls with such an approach as he does here, Kavanagh gives an insight – in reverse – of what the creative process would look like for an artist who *did* accept the innate human desire to ‘believe in God’. The creative process would not spring from anger, conduct itself with deceit and issue forth in self-satisfaction. Rather, Kavanagh’s artist, marked by his Christian, sacramental ‘point of view’ withdraws in the process of making and acts as a conduit for the divine initiative of God who acts in and through his truest work. To the extent that the artist remains present in this process, it is with a sense of respect, humility, and wonder. Kavanagh recognises the difficulties of living a life with this sense of abandon to God: like Christ, the Christian will experience the brokenness as often as the blessedness of life – “led off to starvation” for professing a faith so at odds with the mores of the times. Crucially however, Kavanagh in the passage above recognises the *need* for this kind of faith in the course of his making, whatever the cost. This gives his outlook on poetry a truly sacramental character: an acceptance of the need for God’s initiative, with Christ as its ultimate model.

The divine “flash” of Kavanagh’s poetry

The above arguments of Jones and Steiner further our understanding of the sacramentality of Patrick Kavanagh’s work in this broad sense; the idea that Kavanagh in some way understood the meaning of his own work as a poet – whatever he wrote – to be rooted in and guaranteed by God. It is not the concern of this thesis to ascribe retrospectively to Kavanagh’s work beliefs and methodologies that he would not recognise and did not practice. However, the evidence we do have to hand gives a sense that Kavanagh understood his work to be a sign of God’s presence in the world; the divine was a guiding presence without which his poetry would not have been effective or even possible. His brother Peter relates how, from his earliest years writing verse in their childhood home, Patrick would summon Peter as his chief poetic critic to assess the value of what he had just written. The value was measured, even at this early stage, in strikingly theological terms:

And what he wanted me to tell him was: Had it got the flash. That is to say, had it got some overtone in it of the Divinity. If it hadn't got the flash it was verse and he would tear it up or dump it in a wooden chest nearby. For him poetry was concerned with man's relation to God. He wrote later: Is verse an entertainment only/ Or is it a profound and holy/ Faith... This was to be the theme in all his writing. A sense of morality. An intense rectitude.¹⁹

This is a crucial statement in relating the broad sacramentality of Jones and Steiner to Kavanagh's understanding of the poet-theologian. Peter's words here attest to the belief Patrick Kavanagh had in the divine origination of his poetic impulse: 'Man's relation to God' was 'the theme in all his writing'. This suggests that Kavanagh's religiosity, his sacramentality, his theology is not merely a trope, a stylistic choice or an affectation. Neither is it one theme amongst many, a lens Kavanagh interposes to capture certain moments, feelings or concepts. These words of Peter are a maximalist statement akin to Patrick's own pronouncement that "a poet is a theologian"²⁰. There is no qualification or explanation offered by Peter, his words speak to the same taken-for-grantedness that Patrick exhibits when he discusses the divine. Even when religious language is not used, the divine lies at the heartbeat of everything Kavanagh writes, because as he understands it, everything he writes originates from and bears the essential mark ("the flash"²¹) of the divine. This is one of the greatest pitfalls of scholarship on Kavanagh's theology: that it has been too strictly confined to the moments when Kavanagh ventures to name explicitly the God that initiates and guarantees his work. A more holistic reading of Kavanagh's work recognises the role of the divine in everything he writes. Based on the words of Peter and of Patrick himself, it could be observed that God 'mints' every true work of Kavanagh: inspiring its creation, ensuring its uniqueness, and – by the divine mark it leaves – protecting it from counterfeit.

The above words of his brother strengthen the case for a broad sacramentality in Kavanagh's work that understood his writing as a sign of God's presence. The word 'Faith'²² used to describe the poetic act is particularly instructive, pointing as it does to a kind of trust in God as the guarantor not only of life, happiness, and salvation (as the Christian faith holds), but further, of the meaning of art. To engage in art, in the poetic act, for Kavanagh, is an act of

¹⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Edition*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (New York: Kavanagh Hand Press Press, 2005), 400-401. This edition was a special edition hand-printed in New York by Kavanagh's brother Peter. It has a set of notes on each poem at the end of the book. The notes of this special edition are occasionally quoted by this study and will be indicated in the footnotes.

²⁰ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

²¹ Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Edition*, 400.

²² Peter Kavanagh is here quoting from "Auditors In", a poem composed by Patrick in 1951 that took in hand to review and renew his poetic vocation: "Is verse an entertainment only?/ Or is it a profound and holy/ Faith that cries the inner history/ Of the failure of man's mission?"

Faith, an act of trust in the God from whom all his poetry springs if it is to have any real meaning at all. As Peter Kavanagh relates, if it did not have the divine imprimatur of God on it, then Patrick's work was merely 'verse', thrown aside as somehow lacking. The 'rectitude' and 'morality' that Peter recognises in his brother's approach to his poetry are the markers of a deep faithfulness to this 'sacramentality' of the poetic act. 'Sacramentality' is not a word that either of the brothers use, but Kavanagh's reverence for the poetic act, as outlined by his brother Peter above, speaks to a poet who understood that the sacred responsibility of the poet working as a sign of God in the world. Kavanagh's reverential approach to his work is thus redolent of a sacramental outlook. He intuited that it was not merely his own work he was submitting for assessment to his brother. In recognising the divine initiative that minted his truest work, Kavanagh was aware that his poetry was a sign of God's presence working in and through him. Kavanagh withdraws in the process of his *poiesis* to allow God's "flash"²³ to do its work.

A second occurrence of the term "flash"²⁴ gets to the heart of its role in the sacramentality of Kavanagh's point of view as poet-theologian. Kavanagh's use of the term in one high-profile instance confirms and expands tellingly on the account of his brother that the "flash"²⁵ is the divine inspiration and guarantee of the poet's work. The instance in question came during a public law case of libel taken by Kavanagh against *The Leader* in 1954. The case would prove ruinous for Kavanagh and accounts of the trial published each day in the national media were followed with much public fascination. In the passage below, Kavanagh is the subject of a cross-examination by barrister John Costello:

Quoting what Mr Kavanagh had written on different occasions about truth, Mr Costello came to this passage: 'The world is full of Pilates asking the question which is always cynical, "what is truth?" And every man who has in him something of Christ will reply, "I am truth".'

Mr Kavanagh – I don't see that I should disagree with that. I hope we all have something of Christ in us.

Mr Costello – I believe we have.

Mr Costello asked if it was not a legitimate comment on the passages from Mr Kavanagh's writings that he had quoted, that the witness regarded himself as the ultimate truth. Mr Kavanagh said he did not.

²³ Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Edition*, 400

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Mr Costello – But another person might take the view from the article that it is literary criticism?

Mr Kavanagh – Of course, that is so, but it is also pure Thomism.

Mr Costello – What is that?

Mr Kavanagh – It comes from St. Thomas Aquinas. When I said I was truth, I want to explain that to you. Thomas Aquinas speaks not of reason, but of the Divine Intelligence – the flash – and that is the flash I am talking about – the truth. He says you don't arrive at it through true reasoning.²⁶

Here Kavanagh expands on the meaning of the “flash”²⁷, associating it with “truth”²⁸ and “Divine Intelligence”²⁹. The essential meaning of the term is consistent in the usage of both Peter and Patrick Kavanagh. In both cases, the “flash” has something to do with inspiration; with the origination of something new. God is involved either in the creation of poetry or in the grasping of truth; neither is truly possible without God Who is the measure of all created things and all truth. Secondly, the “flash” seems reliant on the initiative of God. Kavanagh shows himself to have an awareness of the “flash”, a reliance on its divine inspiration, and even a share in its holy presence. But crucially, he does not have the power to summon it at will. The “flash” may or may not appear in the poetry of his own hand; he relies on the discernment of his brother to help determine whether he has opened himself up to receive its gift. As Patrick himself relates above, the flash of divine illumination, of truth itself, cannot be conjured by “true reasoning”³⁰, by the initiative of humankind.

A final important element of the “flash” here is its Christological nature. The context for the above conversation was Kavanagh's own assertion that Christ is the ultimate measure of all truth claims, including his own as a writer. Under questioning, he undertakes to explain that the “truth”³¹ which Christ personifies is the same as that communicated in the “flash”. He uses the terms almost interchangeably, with the “flash” here approaching pneumatic qualities.

Overall, the image created by the words of Kavanagh and his brother Peter on the “flash” is deeply sacramental in nature. Kavanagh approaches the working of the “flash” in

²⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 195.

²⁷ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 195.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

poetry as the believer is called to approach the presence of God in the sacraments of the church: with a sense of need, a trust in the initiative of God, and a belief in Christ. In this context the “flash” can be said to represent in some way the role of the Holy Spirit that descends upon the believer in receipt of the sacraments and effects God’s grace. As we have seen, Peter observed that his brother understood his poetry as concerned chiefly with “man’s relation to God.”³² This view of poetry is striking for its sacramental character. As Chapter Three argued, if Christ is the perfection of God’s self-disclosure to humankind, the sacraments of the church are the means by which that conversation continues. The sacraments – like Kavanagh’s poetry – are thus also concerned chiefly with humankind’s relation to God.

What Steiner calls the “Logos-model”³³ and what Jones would use the language of sacrament to describe, Kavanagh understood more instinctively: the stakes in poetry are theological. His belief in God and his belief in poetry amounted to the same thing, for as he understood it, the latter derived its claims to truth and meaning from the other. Once again his brother Peter captures this sense of poetry rooted in God when he writes elsewhere: “for him [Patrick] God and poetry were the same thing and it would be most unthinkable for him to insult the poetic fire, his most sacred possession and the reason for his being.”³⁴

Here once again we get an insight into how Kavanagh understood his poetry sacramentally as a sign that pointed to God’s divine presence. So closely did poetry point to God that the two are identical in Kavanagh’s mind. This observation from Peter helps to clarify why it is that Kavanagh revered the role of the poet so highly. His was not merely an appreciation of the aesthetic skill, the societal influence or the artistic wisdom of the poet. He believed that in the poetic act, the poet dealt in the very business of God, collaborated in a very knowing way with the creative act of God. Reverence is indeed the right word to use for his feeling towards the poet and the poetic act, for he conceived of these things entirely in religious, theological terms. This sheds new light on his understanding of the poet as a theologian. This was not merely a provocation, but a logical conclusion to his belief in poetry itself as a holy sign of God’s presence. Kavanagh has a theological understanding of poetry, intricately

³² Patrick Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Edition*, 400-401.

³³ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 119.

³⁴ Peter Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper: a biography of Patrick Kavanagh* (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1979), 10.

caught up in the will of God, the gift of God, the ongoing creative act of God; dependent for its meaning on the measure of God's life – the “flash”³⁵ that is in it.

To think about poetry like this, as Steiner observes, is to recognize that the stakes of art are, at their root, theological. To suggest that Kavanagh's theology is not systematic is to risk overlooking this profound theological assumption at the very heart of his entire poetic enterprise: “Why? is God”³⁶ as Kavanagh declared. This again is not a throwaway comment, but a restatement of the same fundamental assumption: God is the reason, the guarantor, the source, and the goal of all life, and in Kavanagh's particular case, of his writing. This is the case not merely in the poems Kavanagh decides to imbue with religious language or themes. Rather, Kavanagh recognizes that none of his writings would be possible, could have meaning, outside of their relation with God. Within his own work, Kavanagh is remarkably consistent in this point of view. As his brother Peter relates:

“Patrick had not got a ‘cause’ in the vulgar sense of the word. What he had was a point of view - seeing the world from the upper slopes of Parnassus. Whenever he got the chance he would re-assert this point of view, or as he called it, his statement. It was always the same: that poetry is not entertainment but a profound and holy faith, the equivalent of prayer.”³⁷

This study has sought to demonstrate that this point of view is Christian in character. Peter's words provide further evidence for this. Further, it can be said that this “point of view”³⁸ is not merely Christian, it is theological. The grounding of Kavanagh's point of view – that poetry derives its meaning from God or not at all – is what Jones and Steiner would recognize as sacramental. Thus, as the second half of this thesis has argued, sacramental theology is the most suitable context in which to understand the theological elements of Kavanagh's work. Kavanagh's convictions are at home with Steiner's “Logos-model”³⁹ that sees in all art a theological wager on the existence of God.

Before observing how Kavanagh's individual poems draw out the sacramentality of particular objects, experiences or places, it has been crucial to begin by zooming out and recognizing the ‘holiness’ inherent in the poetic act *per se* for Kavanagh. This broadens our appreciation of Kavanagh's “point of view”,⁴⁰ which, rooted in a reliance on the

³⁵ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 195.

³⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 26.

³⁷ Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper*, 323.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 119.

⁴⁰ Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper*, 323.

guaranteeing presence of God in art, is sacramental, indeed theological at its root. To extract and collate individual fragments of religious language in Kavanagh's poetry, without first recognizing the deeply considered and consistent point of view that unites them, would produce a shallow assessment of the theology of Kavanagh's work.

The recurrence of terms like "faith"⁴¹ in descriptions of Kavanagh's point of view is significant in drawing out the sense of reliance which is at the heart of sacramental theology. To conceive that one's creative act points to God and acts as a sign of God's presence, the poet must believe that this kind of divine involvement is both possible and necessary. Peter's comments on the nature of his brother's point of view suggest that Patrick went even further. He trusted that God's intervention in his artistic *poiesis* was necessary, possible, and utterly desirable. It was the 'Why?' of his life and work. As the anecdote of his brother Peter shows, God was also the 'How' of Kavanagh's *poiesis*; if God's "flash"⁴² was not involved in the poetic process, it was not truly valid.

As was argued in Chapter Three, this is the same mindset of reliance and faith to which the sacraments of the church call the believer. They must acknowledge first their need for God and then open themselves to God's initiative in their lives. Only by first recognising that one needs God does one truly receive the healing gift of God's presence through Christ in the sacraments. As this first section has shown, Kavanagh's unique point of view considered his poetry sacramentally in the broadest sense: pointing to the divine as a sign of God's holy presence. The insights of his brother Peter go further, and suggest that in other, more specific ways, Kavanagh's point of view as a poet-theologian was marked by a Faith – a trusting disposition and openness to God – that is redolent of the sacramental life of the believer. In the rest of this chapter, this study will analyze further the extent to which Kavanagh invests his poetry with such a sacramental outlook: a reliance on God's divine initiative and the espousal of a disposition of dispossession.

Chapter Three established a sacramental theology that could make possible the fruitful extension of the language of sacrament to the discipline of art. As part of this conversation, Rowan Williams made clear that the sacramental theology of the Church guided the believer away from certain misconceptions that would distort their understanding of the sacraments and of their faith at large. As Williams advised, Christians do not need to

⁴¹ Kavanagh, "Auditors In," 245.

⁴² Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 195.

use their sign-making to arrive at the ultimate meaning of their life on earth; God has already done that in Christ.⁴³ The goal of Christians is to grow into life in that gift of hope, rather than to think they must create hope for themselves by their own initiative as a Christian community. Kavanagh throughout his life returns to his faith in God to ground him when his attempts at creating his own hope and meaning have inevitably run aground. Kavanagh desired success of a more conventional kind too: the respect of his society, the financial means to live securely, companionship to nurture his heart. Kavanagh's pursuit of these kinds of assurances met largely with failure, and through intuition or a kind of hard-won wisdom Kavanagh came to view these pursuits in a wider context: "'Why?' is God."⁴⁴ As Williams acknowledges, this reliance on God, this woundedness is inherent in the life Christians are called to by the sacraments.⁴⁵ This disposition is of course anathema to a society accustomed to measuring success by consumption and attainment. Kavanagh realised something similar – that his own society would always be indifferent to the dispossession inherent in his sacramental outlook on poetry – with its reliance on the "flash"⁴⁶ of Christ's divine truth for meaning, purpose, and consolation. "The world is full of Pilates asking the question which is always cynical, 'what is truth?'".⁴⁷ Kavanagh's sacramental belief in the divine origin of his poetry provides him with an answer to this question. For him, poetry was concerned with truth, and the highest truth was God. As such, poetry would always act sacramentally: as a sign of God's presence leading him back to God in the face of the life's tribulations.

Section Two: 'Anti-Sacramentality' in Kavanagh

The trilogy of "The Great Hunger", "Lough Derg" and "Why Sorrow?"

⁴³ Williams, *Christian Theology*, 205: "It is not the fact of doing sacramental things that is special, humanly or religiously, but what the Church signifies in doing these things – the new covenant and new creation in the life, death and raising of Jesus."

⁴⁴ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 152 is another instance of this quote in a slightly different context: There is wonderful freedom for the spirit in the world but we must beware of demanding the ultimate answer. 'Why?' is God."

⁴⁵ Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 149 explains the idea of a wounded writer: "one that senses the partiality and incompleteness of their own work, who is obedient to their demands and integrity of their own work." Kavanagh reliance on the divine "flash" in his work could be said to closely correspond to Williams' definition of "woundedness".

⁴⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 195.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

This chapter has argued for a broad sacramentality in Kavanagh's work based on what he and his confidante Peter Kavanagh told us about the 'point of view' that underlay all of his writing. This 'point of view', it has been shown throughout this thesis, is shaped fundamentally by Patrick's Christian faith. But in the opening section of this chapter, this study went further, arguing that the Christian 'point of view' underlying the work of Kavanagh the poet-theologian is sacramental in nature. It was argued that Kavanagh understood his work as a sign of God's presence, minted by a divine "flash"⁴⁸ that inspired and guaranteed what was true in Kavanagh's work. This section of the present chapter will take up the question of sacramentality in Kavanagh from a different angle - by what he 'shows' his audience in the course of three of his longest and most influential poems. These poems were all undertaken during a period of reflection and redirection in his poetry and theology in the early 1940s. As will be demonstrated, these three poems share much in common - not least their chronology - but at this point their selection for analysis in this chapter should also explain and account for the varying contexts in which they were produced by Kavanagh. "The Great Hunger", the first of the poems to be examined in this chapter, is arguably Kavanagh's most widely accredited work. Though today it has reached a wider international audience than perhaps any other of Kavanagh's works, its initial reputation and dissemination were hindered by the moderate scandal generated by some of its content matter. Kavanagh himself made loud attempts to resist the popular acclaim the work later achieved, dismissing the socio-realism of the poem - depicting as it does the struggles of a bachelor farmer in the Irish countryside - as overly self-involved. In stark contrast, neither "Lough Derg" nor "Why Sorrow?" were fully published in Kavanagh's lifetime owing to doubts the poet had about their quality and suitability. Only Peter Kavanagh's decision to arrange, edit and publish the two pieces - first undertaken close to the time of "The Great Hunger" - after his brother's death ensured that the important contribution they make to Patrick's corpus can be fully appreciated. This contribution is most fully appreciated when the two formerly unpublished poems are read alongside the more well-known piece. Taken as a whole, the three shed a light on the exact kind of sacramentality emerging in Kavanagh's work at a defining period in his development as a poet-theologian. Though his methods changed over time, the point of view that came to define Kavanagh's entire output as poet-theologian was forged in this defining period of writing in the early 1940s.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The period during 1941 when Kavanagh produced these three long poems came shortly after his fateful move from his native Monaghan to the streets of Dublin city. A catalyst for Kavanagh's poetry up to this point had been the mysticism of his mentor George Russell (AE), who encouraged the younger poet to train his verse into a kind of 'peasant prayer' that revered God in the rural environment to which Kavanagh was so accustomed.⁴⁹ "The Great Hunger", "Lough Derg" and "Why Sorrow?" can be read together as a kind of reaction against the naïve image of peasantry, poetry and piety conveyed in this early work. Indeed, Kavanagh would later identify the impulse behind these works as an over-reaction: an overreach into a kind of prescriptive agenda beyond what is possible or desirable for the poet-theologian.

Whether or not we share Kavanagh's self-assessment on the whole, this chapter will identify in these poems a sacramentality that is undoubtedly less straightforward than the peasant prayer of Kavanagh's earlier work. Indeed, this chapter will argue that Kavanagh's writing in these poems is distinguished by a kind of anti-sacramentality that travesties the expectations and assumptions of his society. These assumptions were political and cultural in nature, but also religious, even theological in nature. Kavanagh would later vilify the "anti-life heresy"⁵⁰ imposed on the Irish by the dour Jansenism imported into its religious life. In these poems, Kavanagh lays bare the damage done by the adoption of an image of God and a religiosity dominated by fear rather than love. As such, these three poems give a crucial insight into the point of view of the poet-theologian at this important turning-point in his life and work.

Kavanagh had an instinct of what God was and what a relationship with that God should look like. Kavanagh's theology, as his brother Peter observed later, was built on the premise that "God is love, so why fear him?"⁵¹ His God was "the God of Life, the God of the grass, of the sun".⁵² However, as these poems make clear, the society of his time seemed to suffocate Kavanagh's instinct. He shows exactly what this suffocation looked like in "The Great Hunger", "Lough Derg" and "Why Sorrow?". His belief in poetry as concerned with

⁴⁹ Quinn, *Born-again Romantic*, 10 describes AE as "mystic and intellectual... a visionary, his 'heart drunk with a beauty' that his 'eyes could never see', and his poetry was preoccupied with the creation of a dream world." AE was, according to Quinn (p.13) "a literary father figure to Kavanagh, the first editor of a quality journal to have encouraged and published him."

⁵⁰ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 257. Jansenism was a religious movement of the 17th and 18th century initiated by Cornelius Jansen which placed emphasis on the damage caused to humanity by original sin.

⁵¹ Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Edition*, 448.

⁵² Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 151.

the divine “flash”⁵³ in humanity meant that he felt the need to challenge this suffocating theological orthodoxy in the course of his writings. He did so in these works by exposing the anti-life fallacy that underlay it and the piteous results it engendered in its chief victims, the ordinary people of Ireland. The grim orthodoxy of his day was not purely theological: it was societal, cultural, artistic. Its organisers and implementors were not merely bishops and pious curates, but politicians and patrons and that sizeable body of the public who had taken its tenets to heart. But its religious and theological dimension was especially dangerous in misdirecting the destinies of human souls.

The assurance we see in his later poems, where he confidently identifies God in statements of stark unlike symbolism, is not yet fully developed in these poems. He began with the pious mysticism of his patron George Russell, casting his poetic work as a peasant prayer. This sequence of three long poems represents a new direction where he rejects pious platitudes and identifies the suffocating complex imposed on Irish society and spirituality. His response here in these pieces is to travesty what he calls the “anti-life heresy”⁵⁴ of Irish life, its mores and its religiosity. As Kavanagh shows, there is a still centre at the heart of the traditional beliefs and practices of the people, but Kavanagh is also concerned to reveal the grotesque and absurd realities of life in the Ireland of his day. Later, he will maintain his convictions but change his methods. In his later career, he will demonstrate the absurdities of this stifled society by counterpointing it against the emphatic expression of his own poetic imagination. However, the theological conviction that runs through all his work – built on the image of a loving God that discloses himself sacramentally to his people – begins in the trilogy of long poems undertaken at the beginning of his time in Dublin.

The Great Hunger

More than a decade after writing “The Great Hunger”, Kavanagh summarised the frustrated hopes that lay at the heart of his relationship with his native country.

There should be a virtue in religion and men who purport to hold a transcendent belief in the Communion of Saints, the Resurrection of the Dead, etc, [they] should be wild with a spirit of imaginative adventure and love of life. There is something of that in the country but it is either blotted out by the tradition of society or grows out of its faith and hope into what makes our political and business leaders. Judged in that light it cannot be too deeply founded.⁵⁵

⁵³ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 195.

⁵⁴ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 257

⁵⁵ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 155.

These are the frustrations that lie at the heart of “The Great Hunger”: social, political, spiritual. They come to define the rural farming community in which Patrick Maguire, Kavanagh’s pseudo-autobiographical protagonist wastes away whatever life and love and spirit is in him in service of the ‘clay’ that shapes his landscape, and, by the end of the poem, his destiny. From the very first line of the poem, the stifling mentality and morality represented by life in the rural countryside is heightened to religious pitch: “Clay is the word and clay is the flesh”.⁵⁶ Kavanagh is ruthless in exposing the many pitfalls imposed upon the rural Irish by this kind of tyranny of the clay that would prioritise the fertility of a field over the flourishing of human existence. Maguire makes a “field his bride”⁵⁷ and “lives that his little fields may stay fertile when his own body/ Is spread under two coulter crossed in/ Christ’s name.”⁵⁸ Maguire and his sister live a life that is sexually, personally and spiritually stunted as they lose the “imaginative adventure and love of life” that Kavanagh envisages for a truly alive Christian.

Life dried in the veins of these women and men:
The grey and grief and unlove,
The bones in the backs of their hands,
And the chapel pressing its low ceiling over them.
Sometimes they did laugh and see the sunlight,
A narrow slice of divine instruction.⁵⁹

In the darkest moments of the poem, it is apparent that the societal conditions in Maguire’s rural community have robbed him of the possibility of a wife and children, the respect of his own family, and a well-adjusted sense of self. The greatest outrage of this pitiful scene, however, is the spiritual deprivation imposed on Maguire by the unimaginative religious landscape of the time. Kavanagh paints a picture of this stunted religious environment in moments where signs of God – of life and of love and nature – are repeatedly misconstrued by the bachelor farmer as dangerous and sinful.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ In Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Edition*, 448, Peter Kavanagh acknowledges the intention of his brother’s first line here to conjure the complex theological statement at the opening of John’s Gospel.

⁵⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 81.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” 92.

⁶⁰ Kavanagh makes clear the role of Love – in all its forms, at the centre of his own theology when he wrote in Kavanagh, “Graftonia”, *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, June 7, 1952: “It is about time that people inquired if love-making can be carried on within ‘the border of the Ten Commandments’ as interpreted by Irish confessors. One would like to ask a theologian if it can. I am strongly of the opinion that part of the reasons for the

The dragging step of a ploughman going home through the guttery
 Headlands under an April-watery moon.
 Religion, the fields and the fear of the Lord
 And Ignorance giving him the coward's blow;
 He dare not rise to pluck the fantasies
 From the fruited Tree of Life. He bowed his head
 And saw a wet weed twined around his toe.⁶¹

Kavanagh rages inwardly at the conditions imposed on the likes of Maguire by a society that would rather imagine the communities of rural Ireland as idealized icons of chastity, purity, and piety.

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.
 His heart is pure,
 His mind is clear,
 He can talk to God as Moses and Isaiah talked –
 The peasant who is only one remove from the beasts he drives.
 The travellers stop their cares to gape over the green bank into
 his fields: -⁶²

This image, as Kavanagh can testify from personal experience, is at its heart cynical, ignorant and insulting, both to the individuals and the religion at hand.⁶³ He travesties this patronizing point of view towards the end of the poem, by which times its shortfalls have been made all too clear.

But the peasant in his little acres is tied
 To a mother's womb by the wind-toughened naval-cord
 Like a goat tethered to the stump of a tree –
 He circles around and around wondering why it should be.
 No crash,
 No drama.
 That was how his life happened.

present conditions in rural Ireland comes from a moral – so called – code that makes love and life impossible. If the impulse for life was properly strong it would burst these so-called moral walls as it has done in the past and wherever society is healthy... Mauriac says that sexual love is part of divine love, and, of course, he is right.”

⁶¹ Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” 87.

⁶² Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” 100.

⁶³ Seamus Heaney, “Strangeness and Beauty”, *Guardian*, January 1, 2005 writing in an article in the *Guardian* on 1st January 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jan/01/poetry> called the poem an ‘anti-pastoral’ for its travesty of the myth of the Irish countryside: “First, he wrote his anti-pastoral masterpiece, “The Great Hunger”, a poem that throws up language as dark-webbed and cold-breathed as the clay the potato-digger kicks up in its opening lines.”

No mad hooves galloping in the sky,
 But the weak, washy way of true tragedy –
 A sick horse nosing around the meadow for a clean place to die.⁶⁴

The tyranny of the clay in these rural communities makes it almost impossible for the inhabitants to live sacramentally: that is, to recognise signs of God's presence around them and to live with an openness to their need for these moments of divine initiative in the ups and downs of their lives. In one crucial sequence, Kavanagh gets right at the heart of the importance of such a sacramental outlook to his point of view as a poet-theologian. In the passage below, Kavanagh identifies one of the symptoms of the spiritual atrophy that has developed in Maguire: his inability to recognise and open himself to God's self-disclosure in the small moments of grace that God offers in "the bits and pieces of Everyday"⁶⁵. Maguire's kind of religion is overly concerned with perfection, with the ideal, and is ultimately "too beautifully perfect to use... too sharp to sit on... too hard to carve."⁶⁶ The problem in Maguire's approach to religion is with his sacramental theology. As Kavanagh relates in this rare passage, Maguire misreads the how and why of Christ's self-offering in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. This passage is a remarkable instance of theology from Kavanagh in which he sketches the relationship between Sacrament and sacramentality with a lyricism and lightness of touch that captures his 'point of view' as a poet-theologian as closely as any other:

Health and wealth and love he too dreamed of in May
 As he sat on the railway slope and watched the children of the place
 Picking up a primrose here and a daisy there –
 They were picking up life's truth singly. But he dreamt of the
 Absolute envased bouquet –
 All or nothing. And it was nothing. For God is not all
 In one place, complete and labelled like a case in a railway store
 Till Hope comes in and takes it on his shoulder –
 O Christ, that is what you have done for us:
 In a crumb of bread the whole mystery is.

He read the symbol too sharply and turned
 From the five simple doors of sense
 To the door whose combination lock has puzzled
 Philosopher and priest and common dunce.

⁶⁴ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 101.

⁶⁵ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 88

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Men build their heavens as they build their circles
 Of friends. God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday –
 A kiss here and a laugh again, and sometimes tears,
 A pearl necklace round the neck of poverty.

He sat on the railway slope and watched the evening,
 Too beautifully perfect to use,
 And his three wishes were three stones too sharp to sit on,
 Too hard to carve. Three frozen idols of a speechless muse.⁶⁷

In this passage Kavanagh forgoes the dour tone of critique that characterizes much of “The Great Hunger”. Instead, he conjures a moment of quiet grace that allows his own theology to shine through the malaise in which Maguire exists. This passage is Kavanagh’s sacramentality in action: innocuous flowers and gestures are raised to importance and are recognised as radiant signs of the God of life and of love. The effect of these signs – these “bits and pieces of Everyday”⁶⁸ – is to transform moments of brokenness into moments of blessedness: to act as a “pearl necklace around the neck of poverty.”⁶⁹

What is perhaps most striking about this passage, however, is the balance Kavanagh seeks to strike between these informal instances of sacramentality and the formal sacraments of the church from which they derive their ultimate meaning – “the crumb of bread [in which] the whole mystery is”.⁷⁰ As this thesis has argued, for any fruitful dialectic of sacramentality to take place between theology and art, both disciplines must respect the terms of the other. In essence, for a ‘sacramentality’ in art to have any real meaning at all, it must bear some relation, however analogous or tangential, to the essential characteristics of sacramental theology. The danger that presents itself for any artist, but particularly for a self-professed ‘poet-theologian’ operating from the position that “God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday”⁷¹, is that the profundity at the heart of sacramental theology could be diluted in the course of its deployment in a more general schema of sacramentality. Indeed, this danger arises in this very passage, where Kavanagh appears to criticize Maguire’s faith – particularly his understanding of the Sacrament of Eucharist – for the manner in which it

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” 88.

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

restrains his senses from appreciating God's divine presence in other settings: "He read the symbol too sharply and turned/ From the five simple doors of sense."⁷²

Kavanagh here is not threatening the parity of esteem between the Formal sacraments and a more informal sacramentality. In fact, he is trying to ensure such a parity is established in the first place. Tellingly, in the above passage, Kavanagh's punctuates his lyric with a profession of faith in the mystery of Christ's holy presence in the Eucharist: "O Christ, that is what you have done for us:/ In a crumb of bread the whole mystery is."⁷³ Just as an ill-defined sacramentality runs the risk of distortion, a sacramental theology that confines itself too strictly runs the risk of denying the wonder and the breadth of God's continuous self-disclosure in the world. Kavanagh is seeking to correct the latter in Maguire, whose faith is not so much defined by its concern for the Sacrament of the Eucharist but, as the entirety of "The Great Hunger" makes clear, by its consistent lack of the convicted imagination necessary to keep it alive. Indeed, only a few sequences earlier Maguire attends Mass but seems, at its close, to have missed the opportunity it offered the congregation – "hungry for life"⁷⁴ – to truly raise themselves out of their spiritual starvation for more than a fleeting moment. By the end of the Mass Maguire returns to his accustomed torpor: "He rubbed the dust off his knees with his palm, and then/ Coughed the prayer phlegm up from his throat and signed: Amen."⁷⁵

Kavanagh's critique of Maguire is at least partly autobiographical. The poet believes in the dignity of life in the countryside and is deeply committed to the idea that the ordinary person, in rural Monaghan or urban Dublin, can attune themselves to the many small signs of God in the midst of their lives. The sense of frustrated hope that drives "The Great Hunger" rests on Kavanagh's ability to travesty Maguire's existence in one passage and to transfigure it with a shock of grace in the next. Kavanagh is able to diagnose with dour certainty the brand of morality that denies Maguire access to sacramental encounters with the God of life and love and nature. "Religion's walls expand to the push of nature. Morality yields/ To sense – but not in little tillage fields."⁷⁶ Kavanagh's theology was crafted out of a rejection of the exact conditions that have made Maguire as he is.⁷⁷ The nature of his rejection is not purely

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 86.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 89.

⁷⁷ In Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Edition*, 424 Peter Kavanagh clarifies that the character of Maguire is not exactly autobiographical, but a composite rooted in the hometown

critical, however. In rare occasions, Kavanagh credits Maguire with the imaginative flash that transcends his situation.

Yet sometimes when the sun comes through a gap
 These men know God the Father in a tree:
 The Holy Spirit is the rising sap,
 And Christ will be the green leaves that will come
 At Easter from the sealed and guarded tomb.⁷⁸

This striking Trinitarian metaphor captures Kavanagh's own sacramental theology at play – the tree in a field acting as a sign of the dynamic interrelation of the Triune God. By focalising it through the eyes of Maguire and his men Kavanagh also makes a wider point. Kavanagh reminds his audience that the kind of sacramentality favoured by the poet-theologian is marked by its accessibility. This sort of sacramentality lies within the intuition of even the most ordinary human.

This kind of intuitive, accessible sacramentality, coming almost as an aside in the course of the otherwise bleak narrative, need not be misinterpreted as a theologically uncouth. The sacramentality that Kavanagh favours as a poet-theologian is indeed marked by the innocuous off-hand, the unexpected everyday. This kind of sacramentality acts for Kavanagh as a corrective force in pursuit of a balanced outlook on religion and life. Kavanagh is not advocating God “in the bits and pieces of Everyday”⁷⁹ for its own sake necessarily, but as a reaction against a theological landscape he came to realise, from personal experience, was in need of condemnation and correction. Whether or not we agree with Kavanagh's diagnosis, his methods should not be miscast as a freewheeling indulgence in the religious imagination. His flourishes of sacramentality – opening himself and the reader up to our need for the divine initiative of God in the vicissitudes of everyday life – are set-pieces of carefully considered theology and skilfully crafted poetry.

Kavanagh's style seems to smuggle moments of unlikely insight into his poems as an afterthought. These seemingly unlikely moments of sacramental grace in “The Great Hunger” are not accidental, however. They are an intentional counterweight to the

community Kavanagh knew so well: “It is often asked on whom the character of Maguire was based. He was based on a number of local characters including Patrick himself. But more than anyone else, he was based on the Campbell brothers – Dan and Joe. It happened this way. When riding to school in Carrickmacross every morning I passed the Campbell house. Often I would see both Dan and Joe out in the field on their knees weeding potatoes even in the rain. Neither of them was married. I used these brothers as an example to Patrick in an argument on what it would be like to go back to working the land. Would he fare any better?”

⁷⁸ Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” 84.

⁷⁹ Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” 88.

prevailing mores that Kavanagh so passionately rejected in the religion of his time. Against the overbearing seriousness and pessimism of the prevailing theology – the “grey, the grief, the unlove”⁸⁰ of “The Great Hunger”, Kavanagh sought to balance moments of grace and levity. If the “low ceiling”⁸¹ of the Church pressed the life out of the people’s religious sensibilities in “The Great Hunger”, Kavanagh wanted to create openings where the light of life, of love, of God, could enter in. It is through a ‘gap’ in the tree that Maguire is uplifted by the sign of the Triune God in a tree. Similarly, moments of love and laughter are a “a narrow slice of divine instruction”⁸².

As Agnew has argued, Kavanagh tends towards such small apertures to offer a glimpse of the divine.⁸³ If theology came to represent in his time a structure that was at times overbearing to Kavanagh and his society, he does not seek to do away with it entirely. His priority is corrective rather than destructive. The amendments he advises – and it is these amendments that makes up his theology – are considered and consistent.

They are considered in the sense that they spring from a well-defined objective: to allow the God of life, of love and of Nature in where the strictures of a Irish society had shut this image of the divine out. His theological priorities are also consistent in that they follow the same method: finding God ‘in the gaps’ as it were – in the small apertures of grace that answer our need for God’s initiative in the blessedness and brokenness of life. Using language and moods of misdirection, gaiety and detachment Kavanagh consistently shows that signs of God were to be found exactly where they would not be expected by the terms of the overly formalized religion of the time.

This section has argued that these moments of hard-won insight bear the marks of true sacramentality. They rely on God, not on the poet-theologian, for their impact. The initiative of God is what creates these moments of grace, an intuitive and assenting openness is all that is required in response to this gift. Further, the sacramentality of Kavanagh carries

⁸⁰ Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” 92.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Agnew, *Buttonhole*, 208: “He frequently denies himself access to brightness, except in the smallest measure: the slit, the chink, the tiniest aperture.” In the poem “A Christmas Childhood” Kavanagh’s child-poet crystallizes a moment of divine wonder: “The light between the ricks of hay and straw/ Was through a hole in Heaven’s gable”. In the poem “From Failure Up” Kavanagh ponders in a moment of desolation whether he can grow some flower of consolation to wear as “a buttonhole in heaven.”⁸³ In his poem “To Hell with Common Sense” Kavanagh proclaims his belief in the idea of wisdom achieved through “the hole in reason’s ceiling”. In “Advent”, Kavanagh recognises the reasoning behind this outlook: “We have tested and tasted too much – lover-, / Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder”. The ‘gap’ and the ‘narrow slice’ enlisted in “The Great Hunger” are two more additions to Agnew’s apertures of divine grace.

within it a disposition of dispossession that is key to the sacramental tradition. Kavanagh consistently reveals himself as a dispossessed writer in the course of his sacramental encounters with God, which occur in “The Great Hunger” as often with ‘tears’ as they do with a ‘kiss’ or a ‘laugh’. Christ is the decisive paradigm for this woundedness, and Kavanagh recognises that for all the signs of God available in “the bits and pieces of Everyday”⁸⁴, Christ is the ultimate sacrament who has achieved the only final answer to the woundedness of humankind: “O Christ, that is what you have done for us:/ In a crumb of bread the whole mystery is.”⁸⁵ Those who deflate or deflect from the importance of Kavanagh’s theology by calling it unsystematic are confusing the medium with the message, and failing to appreciate the context in which Kavanagh was working. Poetry is not designed to be systematic: that is part of the very reason it appeals to Kavanagh in delivering a challenge to what he considered the overly rigid religious structures of his day.

This analysis of “The Great Hunger” has argued that Kavanagh’s ‘unsystematic’ approach was deliberately adopted in response to the very brand of over-systematized religion Kavanagh was seeking to critique. The medium of poetry is quite obviously less systematic than the catechisms of the institutional Church or the argumentation of formal theology, but to confine our analysis of Kavanagh the poet-theologian to such observations would be to remain at the surface level. Kavanagh’s medium is the small gap, the off-hand, the “narrow slice of divine instruction”⁸⁶ not because he doesn’t invest his theology with consideration or have an understanding of his material, but precisely because this was what he saw missing in the religion of his time. By this reading, his medium becomes part of his message. He models the kind of attentive, assenting, wounded sacramentality he believes would expand and improve the theological structures available in his day. Kavanagh’s message is considered and consistent, springing from a Christian ‘point of view’ he made no effort to hide across his entire career. As this chapter has argued, sacramentality is the key to understanding this point of view of Kavanagh the poet-theologian. “The Great Hunger” is particularly valuable in laying bare the roots of Kavanagh’s considered and consistent theology. The ‘why’ of Kavanagh’s considered approach lies in the suffocating socio-religious landscape he travesties throughout the poem. His poetry over the next three decades continued to offer a corrective that would rebalance this overbearing formality. The ‘how’ of his theology of the commonplace – so consistent throughout his entire corpus – is also

⁸⁴ Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” 88.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” 88.

traced in important ways to “The Great Hunger”. The postulate that “God is in the bits of pieces of Everyday”⁸⁷ is a manifesto of his entire body of writing. As this chapter has argued thus far, this is a sacramental proposition. The analysis of this chapter has taken this keystone of Kavanagh’s thought in its proper context. “God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday”⁸⁸ is not a throwaway remark but is the conclusion of a notably discerning reflection by Kavanagh on the relationship between the formal sacraments and a more informal sacramentality.

As was clarified, Kavanagh’s off-hand, ‘in the gaps’ sacramentality is not a zero-sum proposition. Kavanagh recognises the need for the formal institutions and theologies that underpin the Christian faith. The informal sacramentality he models is offered as a necessary corrective to the body of revelation and tradition that Kavanagh was so familiar with as a Christian of his time. Crucially, Kavanagh’s sacramentality, for all its dynamic individuality, is well at home in the Christian tradition of sacramental theology. His work bears the three elements of sacramental theology outlined in detail in Chapter Three as essential to a meaningful and fruitful relation between the sacraments and sacramentality. In this context, the work of this chapter thus far has been to show that the idea of Kavanagh the poet-theologian, shaped so lastingly in the course of “The Great Hunger”, is no threat to the integrity of the Christian tradition, but a valuable and discerning contribution to its self-understanding.

Lough Derg

“Lough Derg” takes a broader angle on the confined religiosity of Kavanagh’s time, considering its effects on a cast of pilgrim penitents rather than a central character such as Patrick Maguire. Kavanagh was convinced to travel to the ancient pilgrimage site of Lough Derg in 1943 on the insistence of his brother Peter in order to capture the essence of the site in poetic form. As Peter relates: “This poem has a similar genesis to “The Great Hunger” – to get a view of country living from another angle, from the pious angle.”⁸⁹ The pessimism of “The Great Hunger” is recognisable throughout the work, but there is more ambivalence and uncertainty in Kavanagh here. His ability to relate to the character of Maguire as bachelor farmer gave his critique a certain confidence. He spoke with the authority of experience, exposing the anti-life fallacies that constrained Irish society and spirituality in

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Edition*, 425-426.

his time. In “Lough Derg” he reports only as a kind of “half-pilgrim”,⁹⁰ one apart from the earnest pilgrims consumed by their own affairs and devotions. He is concerned not to trespass too far or too critically into their experience, which he conveys in sonnet vignettes that carry in them Lough Derg’s absurd mix of pity, piety and poetry. Kavanagh the ‘half-pilgrim’ does not follow the anonymous masses but looks on with an uneasy detachment, feeling for them and with them. These pilgrims are the victim of “God’s delight in disillusionment”⁹¹, the restrictive religiosity offered by the Irish Church. As in “The Great Hunger”, moments of unexpected grace strike through the dark atmosphere in the poem. The ancient power of Lough Derg and the earthy humanity of the pilgrims that travel there seem to resist the constraints of this darkness with a stubborn wisdom.

In the opening lines of the piece, Kavanagh paints a vivid picture of the exact effects of the narrow piety inflicted on the pilgrims at Lough Derg by the strictures of their religious upbringing. The consistency with “The Great Hunger” is striking: the most serious affliction effecting the unfortunate penitents is their inability to recognise signs of God’s presence in their midst. As in “The Great Hunger”, these signs are characterised by fear and mistaken as sin:

They come to Lough Derg to fast and pray and beg
With all the bitterness of nonentities, and the envy
Of the inarticulate when dealing with an artist.
Their hands push closed the doors that God holds open.
Love-sunlit is an enchanter in June’s hours
And flowers and light. These to shopkeepers and small lawyers
Are heresies up beauty’s sleeve.⁹²

Kavanagh contrasts the blindness of the stricken penitents with the vision of the artist, who is intuitively open to “the door that God holds open”⁹³ in nature, beauty and love. This phrase captures exactly what is happening in moments of sacramentality for Kavanagh: in ‘opening the door’, God takes the initiative in revealing the divine presence that hides in all things. By closing the door on God through a fearful ignorance, the believer declines the signs offered by God and fails to recognise their need for the gifts offered to them. Once again,

⁹⁰ Patrick Kavanagh, “Lough Derg,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 107.

⁹¹ Kavanagh, “Lough Derg,” 124.

⁹² Kavanagh, “Lough Derg,” 105.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

Kavanagh envisages God's self-disclosure through a small aperture offering light into the darkness of life.

Kavanagh's opening to "Lough Derg" calls into question how much sympathy he has for a collection of penitents he characterizes as "inarticulate"⁹⁴ and "nonentities"⁹⁵. Far from willing their salvation, Kavanagh seems to cast doubt on whether these pilgrims are suitable or even deserving of the sort of graced vision natural to the artist. This reflects the ambivalence of Kavanagh in relation to the poem, which he completed in three short weeks upon returning to Dublin but never published in his lifetime.⁹⁶ His brother Peter offers the reasons: "Patrick was unsure of the poem. [He] was hesitating because he feared that he had intruded on the souls of honest pilgrims – had perhaps sinned... Even I had qualms about published it for reasons similar to Patrick."⁹⁷ As in "The Great Hunger", Kavanagh approaches moments of delicacy with discerning humility. In the case of "The Great Hunger", he interposed a profession of faith in Christ's holy presence in the Eucharist to safeguard his work. Likewise in "Lough Derg" these same layers of the poet-theologian are revealed. In the course of the poem, Kavanagh appeals to God to ensure the integrity of his enterprise:

There were hundreds of them tripping one another
Upon the pilgrim way (O God of Truth,
Keep him who tells this story straight,
Let no cheap insincerity shape his mouth).⁹⁸

Kavanagh resolves his ambivalence by the end of the poem, resisting a cynical appraisal of the pilgrim's simple piety and instead seeing poetry in their prayer.

This was the banal
Beggary that God heard. Was he bored
As men are with the poor? Christ Lord
Hears in the voices of the meanly poor
Homeric utterances, poetry sweeping through.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ It first appeared four years after Patrick's death, in his brother Peter's 1971 collection *November Haggard*. As Peter relates in Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Edition*, 427, soon "two young literary pups read the poem on the Irish radio, breaking my copyright and making me wonder if I had been right in publishing it."

⁹⁷ Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh Centenary Edition*, 426.

⁹⁸ Kavanagh, "Lough Derg," 110.

⁹⁹ Kavanagh, "Lough Derg," 121.

Through a series of vignettes and asides, Kavanagh takes stock of the variety of belief and unbelief visible on the island. His frustration is directed most pointedly at those who close the door on God's signs not through ignorance, but through a pride and assurance that suffocates the ancient and mysterious beauty of Christianity that Lough Derg still preserves. These are the "smug too-faithful"¹⁰⁰ who drive Kavanagh to boredom and despair with "the piety that hangs like a fool's, unthought,/ This certainty in men"¹⁰¹. Typical of this narrow-minded surety is a pilgrim named Robert, whose self-confident faith in himself and in God is precisely what prevents him from discovering either.

He talked to the girls as a pedant professor
Talking in a university
The delicate precise immediacy
That sees a flower half a foot away
He could not learn.¹⁰²

As was the case with "The Great Hunger", Kavanagh shows his suspicion of any kind of faith that is too deliberate, rigid, or prescriptive. The methods and message of Kavanagh's point of view as a poet-theologian are designed largely to counteract the overbearing stricture of the religious landscape he observed in Ireland in his lifetime. His portrayal of off-hand, unexpected moments of divine self-disclosure in his poetry are designed to coax the reader into a more sacramental outlook: an openness to the gift of God's presence in the life and love and nature around them. As in "The Great Hunger", "Lough Derg" is replete with moments of anti-sacramentality, where signs of God's divine initiative are conjured only to be rejected by the narrow-minded outlook of the protagonists. In moments such as these, Kavanagh advances the need for a kind of open-minded sacramentality by travestying the status quo and exposing the imbalance and contradictions of its fearful pietism. An instance where Robert struggles against the tenets of his own "smug too-faithful"¹⁰³ approach is particularly instructive. It is the most prominent occasion in his poetry that Kavanagh identifies Jansenism in particular as the cause of the 'anti-life heresy' he despairs of in Irish society and religion. Moreover, in this valuable passage Kavanagh makes clear exactly how the pessimism of Jansenism strangles the instinct for sacramentality at the heart of the ordinary believer:

¹⁰⁰ Kavanagh, "Lough Derg," 105.

¹⁰¹ Kavanagh, "Lough Derg," 118.

¹⁰² Kavanagh, "Lough Derg," 113.

¹⁰³ Kavanagh, "Lough Derg," 105.

Robert sat looking over the lake
 Seeing the green islands that were his morning hope
 And his evening despair.
 The sharp knife of Jansen
 Cuts all the green branches.
 Not sunlight comes in
 But the hot-iron sin,
 Branding the shame
 Of a beast in the Name
 Of Christ on the breast
 Of a child of the West.
 It was this he had read.¹⁰⁴

As Kavanagh observes, the Jansenism of Irish religious education had taught the likes of Robert to associate the greenness and fecundity of life and love and nature with ‘hot-iron sin’ and ‘shame’. In the passage that follows, Kavanagh uses the gentle metaphor of a tree – so common in his moments of sacramentality – to hint at the unsustainability of an approach that seeks to restrict humankind’s instinct for love and life in the world around them.

All day long he was smitten
 By this foul legend written
 In the fields, in the skies,
 In the sanctuaries.
 But now the green tree
 Of humanity
 Was leafing again,
 Forgiveness of sin.
 A shading hand over
 The brow of the Lover.¹⁰⁵

Kavanagh here suggests that even the most ardent disciple of the dour piety of Irish society in 1943 is able to sense the necessity for a theology that takes the focus away from sin and fear. What is required is a move towards a vision of humanity’s relationship with the divine that allows the love and life of God to enter the darkness of the world through chinks of everyday grace.

¹⁰⁴ Kavanagh, “Lough Derg,” 122.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

In the end Kavanagh finishes his poem with a measure of qualified hope in the possibility of such a rebalancing. As the pilgrims return to the routine of their everyday lives, some had been changed by the ancient wisdom of Lough Derg and had come to terms with the possibility of a faith less rooted in pessimism.

By Monaghan and Cavan and Dundalk
By Bundoran and by Omagh the pilgrims went;
And three sad people had found the key to the lock
Of God's delight in disillusionment.¹⁰⁶

The final line of the poem is reminiscent of the closing words of "The Great Hunger" in which Maguire "Screams the apocalypse of clay/ In every corner of this land."¹⁰⁷ Both these closing phrases are emblematic. The "apocalypse of the clay"¹⁰⁸ is Kavanagh's shorthand for the tyrannous theology of the clay that dominates "The Great Hunger" and characterizes all that is wrong with the society it captures and the faith it suffocates. In like manner, "God's delight in disillusionment"¹⁰⁹ is Kavanagh's dour summation of the atrophied pietism promoted in the religious landscape of his day. In both poems Kavanagh seeks to travesty these dominant and damaging mentalities primarily by giving full voice to their contradictions and shortcomings. In both poems Kavanagh also begins to formulate a methodology that will remain a consistent part of his work as a poet-theologian in the decades that follow. In small moments of opportunism, he models the kind of open-minded sacramentality that would act as a corrective to the unbalanced religious stricture of his time. These moments of theological suggestion often appear as an aside, and are designed to allow the light of God's divine initiative to enter through the most unexpected apertures into the darkness of the faithful's need. In both poems, these moments are often characterized by a kind of anti-sacramentality: instances where the odds against Kavanagh's point of view as a poet-theologian are made all too clear. Even as the conclusion to "Lough Derg" allows for a slightly larger degree of hope than the end of "The Great Hunger", the "lock"¹¹⁰ on the religious imagination of Irish faithful remains largely intact despite the unlikely "key"¹¹¹ discovered by three fortunate pilgrims.

¹⁰⁶ Kavanagh, "Lough Derg," 124.

¹⁰⁷ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 104.

¹⁰⁸ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 104.

¹⁰⁹ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 124.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

As has been argued, what remains in spite of the challenging conditions is the considered and consistent approach taken by Kavanagh. In both poems Kavanagh's concern is not to overthrow the faith he holds so dear, but to rebalance it away from what he considers a damaging strain of pessimism in Irish religious life. The sincerity of his intentions is made clear by his prominent and humble professions of faith in the course of both poems. As his brother Peter related: "it would be most unthinkable for him to insult the poetic fire, his most sacred possession and the reason for his being."¹¹² For Patrick the poet-theologian, the sacramentality of his poetry remains the means by which he comes to know and love his God.

Why Sorrow?

"Why Sorrow?" is what Peter Kavanagh calls the "final part of the trilogy – this time Patrick observes the parish from the point of view of an intelligent priest."¹¹³ This work was arranged, edited and published for the first time by Peter several years after Kavanagh's death, owing to the fact that Kavanagh was never quite satisfied with the nature of the piece. The exact nature of his dissatisfaction with the piece is key to any analysis of "Why Sorrow?" As Peter relates, Kavanagh "battled for years with this poem and without success",¹¹⁴ publishing pieces of it across various publications throughout his writing career. Part of the reason Kavanagh may have agonised over the poem, and why it remains an important key to understanding the methods and message of his point of view as a poet-theologian is his belief in the parochial – the mindset and material of the parish. The parish was the highest subject a writer could take for his writing, according to Kavanagh:

The parochial mentality... is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilisations are built on parochialism... To be parochial a man needs the right kind of sensitive courage and the right kind of sensitive humility. Parochialism is universal; it deals with the fundamentals.¹¹⁵

In the story of "Why Sorrow?" – in which a parish priest struggles with the temptations of the mind and the world – lay the potential for a more fundamental exploration of the obstacles to faith that presented themselves to even the most devoted and sensitive soul in Kavanagh's time. The obstacles are familiar from "The Great Hunger" and "Lough Derg":

¹¹² Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper*, 10.

¹¹³ Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Edition*, 427.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 282-283.

a religious mentality that restricts the imagination and finds the root of sin and shame in humanity's natural impulse towards life, love and nature.

"Why Sorrow?" takes this point up even more deliberately. Life in a rural parish stifles the sensibilities of even the most subtle and grounded soul in Fr. Mat. There is a pronounced theology exhibited throughout this work in the anguished deliberations of Fr. Mat. It is a theology that eschews the beauty and gaiety of the earth in favour of the life of sober wisdom in Christ. This dichotomy crushes the poetic sensitivity of Fr. Mat who faces this contrived theological dilemma with grim attempts at faithfulness. The guilt, despair and resignation of Fr. Mat is that which is visited upon every sensitive soul that yearns for a more life-giving theological landscape. This work amounts to a commentary on the theological assumptions of Kavanagh's day. As Peter Kavanagh observes of the poem: "Could a poet survive in this environment?"¹¹⁶

Herein lies the autobiographical kernel of this work. Kavanagh seems to relate to Fr. Mat's complex identity as one of the people yet somehow apart from them. This autobiographical streak helps explain the difficulties Kavanagh experiences in writing the poem and underlines the continuing importance of the work for an understanding of Kavanagh's point of view. At times, it seems as if Fr. Mat is the very essence of the community he serves:

Him the old-time priest who took life as it came,
Looked into the hearts of his people, covered their shame
With the white cloak of Grace. Attended the sick
Gave Christ and then talked with Paddy and Mick
Of the work of the seasons.¹¹⁷

His embeddedness amongst the people gives to Fr. Mat his very meaning, but also begets a kind of identity crisis throughout the poem. As the poem progress, Fr. Mat struggles as he becomes increasingly preoccupied with temptations that lure him away from a life of service to his community. His fierce sense of duty in the face of temptation is seemingly personified in the image of a suffering Christ. But this sense of duty – and this figure of Christ – is the very thing that compounds the isolation and shame he feels when his mind wanders from the care of his flock. Fr. Mat grapples with temptations that are largely intellectual: seeing beauty in the natural world:

Fr Mat came slowly walking, stopping to

¹¹⁶ Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Edition*, 427.

¹¹⁷ Kavanagh, "Lough Derg," 169.

Stare through gaps at ancient Ireland sweeping
 In again with all its unbaptised beauty:
 The calm evening
 The whitethorn blossoms,
 The smells from ditches that were not Christian
 That dancer that dances in the heart of men cried:
 Look! I have shown this to you before –
 The rags of living surprised
 The joy of things you cannot forget.¹¹⁸

Fr Mat's scruples warn him to beware any appreciation of the world that is not strictly Christian in nature. The broad intellect of Fr. Mat seems to yearn for a more holistic outlook on the world, but his natural instinct is cast in the poem as a sin, a capitulation to "Apollo's unbaptised pagan who can show/ To simple eyes what Christian's never know."¹¹⁹ Fr. Mat's scruples urge him to beware "the evil spell in all poetry"¹²⁰.

"Why Sorrow?" presents a similar kind of anti-sacramentality as "The Great Hunger" and "Lough Derg" but lacks the sort of resolution hinted at in those works. These two poems threaten to overpower the reader at times with the bleakness of the picture at hand but both leave the door open to moments of divine illumination striking through unlikely apertures of grace. These moments provide Kavanagh with a counterpoint to the dour religious atmosphere he conjures and become a means to expose and ultimately travesty the shortcomings of the religious climate he depicts. These apertures of grace ultimately give Kavanagh a foothold in the narrative of "The Great Hunger" and "Lough Derg". They allow for the possibility of another point of view, one built on sacramentality, an openness to the human need for moments of divine self-disclosure in the vicissitudes of everyday life.

"Why Sorrow?" lacks the same sense of possibility. The poem paints a vivid picture of this woundedness in Fr. Mat – of his need for signs of God amidst the ups and downs of everyday life. However, the poem consistently denies its protagonist the openness required to recognise and assent to God's initiative at work all over his life. Not only does Fr. Mat miss the signs of God's presence in the blessedness and brokenness of the world around him, he misinterprets and consequently rejects as sinful these very moments of divine self-disclosure. Such is the total dominance of this anti-sacramentality in the poem that Christ, the ultimate paradigm of the sacramental life, is miscast as a kind of gatekeeper of the

¹¹⁸ Kavanagh, "Why Sorrow?," 174.

¹¹⁹ Kavanagh, "Why Sorrow?," 167.

¹²⁰ Kavanagh, "Why Sorrow?," 173.

Marvellous as the wafer consecrate
 Each morning with words that are blots in the book of my
 fate”¹²³

“Life’s leavened bread”¹²⁴ is a striking shorthand for Kavanagh’s sacramental outlook on life. Partaking in such bread allows people to relish the mysteries and joys of everyday life. These experiences are “marvellous as the wafer consecrate”¹²⁵ – they have the same ability to communicate God’s self-disclose, if only they can be recognised and appreciated as such. Fr. Mat fails to commit to this point of view. Indeed, Kavanagh here exhibits how an instinct for “Life’s leavened bread”¹²⁶ can be stifled into regret and shame by an unbalanced theological outlook. The pitfall of Fr. Mat’s outlook is its ‘either/or’ fallacy: the idea that the faithful must choose between the world or Christ: between “Life’s leavened bread”¹²⁷ or the “wafer consecrate”¹²⁸. It goes without saying that Kavanagh’s point of view as a poet-theologian rejects this false dichotomy. His theological outlook is marked most commonly by the ‘both/and’ attitude of his sacramentality. The appreciation of the formal sacraments can be enhanced – not threatened – by an appreciation of God’s signature in other more unexpected settings. However, the generosity of intellect that nurtures this ‘both/and’ approach to sacramentality is conspicuously absent in “Why Sorrow?”. Fr. Mat’s outlook is so far distorted by the prevailing mores of his time that the moments of grace allowed even to the barren imagination of Patrick Maguire in “The Great Hunger” are outside its grasp. All that is left to the audience is to watch with discomfort the results of this distortion play out, without the sense of possibility that accompanies even the darkest moments of “The Great Hunger” and “Lough Derg”. Throughout the poem, the either/or approach of Fr. Mat is placed centre stage. Fr. Mat’s ability to recognise beauty is measured only by the degree to which this beauty threatens the tenets of his Christian faith.

Oh the screaming children on the greening ridges
 The trees that were before the Cross was sawn
 Were worthy to be worshipped. Come draw your wages
 In evening silver, in pure gold at dawn.

Fr Mat looked down at a coltsfoot blossom

¹²³ Kavanagh, “Why Sorrow?,” 168.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Kavanagh, “Why Sorrow?,” 168.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

And loved it more than ever he loved the Sacrament –
 For here was the symbol of an old joy.
 Success – the earth cheers Christ human not divine.¹²⁹

This passage makes clear that in the conditions of Fr. Mat's religious landscape, sacramentality is in strict competition with the sacraments of the church. In this passage, Kavanagh identifies clearly the problem at hand in such a landscape: that an instinct for life and for beauty is consistently cast as problematic to a conventional religious faith. What is striking in this poem is Kavanagh's inability to puncture the pessimism of Fr. Mat and his theological outlook. Throughout the poem sacramentality fulfils – without irony or travesty – the suspicions conjured by the dour religious landscape of Kavanagh's day. By the end of the poem there is no resolution, only a kind of unnerving ellipsis arising from Fr. Mat's decision to follow the narrow path Christ led him on throughout the poem.

So one dull day he knelt and struck his breast
 And denied the sun and the earth. And Jesus Christ
 Turned him round in his path.¹³⁰

It is difficult to easily account for the status of "Why Sorrow?" as a kind of lacuna in the sacramentality that characterizes Kavanagh's point of view as a poet-theologian. It is as if the interrogative atmosphere of the title is never fully lifted from the poem, and no answer is provided to the question posed by Kavanagh to its protagonist. It is likeliest that Kavanagh never fully resolved the questions the poem posed to himself. "The Great Hunger" and "Lough Derg" were pieces of extraordinary literary daring that pushed past the artistic and theological boundaries of Irish society. Further, they reshaped and challenged Kavanagh's own self-understanding. While he was no longer content with the naivete of his earlier peasant prayers, he was not yet at liberty to be reposed in the care-free abandon of his later canal-bank period. It is in these three poems more than anywhere else that Kavanagh undertakes what Seamus Heaney's recognises as one of his defining achievements: "wresting an idiom bare-handed out of a literary nowhere."¹³¹ In these poems Kavanagh is simultaneously wresting a point of view as a poet-theologian from a theological nowhere, one completely at odds with the religious establishment of his day and utterly ahead of its time. Kavanagh largely dismissed "The Great Hunger" and never published the other two

¹²⁹ Kavanagh, "Why Sorrow?," 173.

¹³⁰ Kavanagh, "Why Sorrow?," 182,

¹³¹ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), 116.

long poems considered in this chapter. In “Why Sorrow?” we get a glimpse of the precariousness and self-doubt that go along with such a process of violent creativity. In a piece entitled “The Parish and the Universe” Kavanagh himself acknowledged the courage necessary to keep his nerve in following his intuition for the parish at the centre of the literary world.

Advising people not to be ashamed of having the courage of their remote parish, is not free from many dangers. There is always that element of bravado which takes pleasure in the notion that the potato-patch is the ultimate. To be parochial a man needs the right kind of sensitive courage and the right kind of sensitive humility.¹³²

It is this conviction in the parochial vision that is at play in “Why Sorrow?”, the work of Kavanagh that is most obviously concerned with the life of the parish. There is a sense in which Kavanagh loses faith in this conviction in this poem, loses the sense of bravado and certainty that propelled “The Great Hunger” and even the more unsteady “Lough Derg”. Peter Kavanagh attributes his brother Patrick’s failure to complete the poem to the fact that “he eventually realised that Salamanca Barney¹³³ was not the intellectual he had imagined and could not be accepted as representing the poetic point of view. But he was a better model than anyone else around.”¹³⁴

“Why Sorrow?” is important not so much for what is in it, but for what it not in it. The dour pessimism that afflicts the sensitive soul of Fr. Mat is reminiscent of the anti-sacramentality that pervades “The Great Hunger” and “Lough Derg”. However, it is the absence of any compelling attempt at travesty, and most tellingly, the denial of any apertures of divine grace, that mark out this poem as unique in Kavanagh’s oeuvre. The fact that he could not bring to bear on the poem the hallmarks of his sacramental outlook underlines the level of burden Kavanagh took upon himself as a poet-theologian fundamentally at odds with the mores of his society. The failure of “Why Sorrow?” is a timely reminder of the level of responsibility Kavanagh took upon himself in challenging these mores.

What is perhaps even more significant in understanding the anomalous status of “Why Sorrow?” is the ill-fit at the heart of the poem’s very conceptual framework. Peter Kavanagh

¹³² Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 283.

¹³³ This was a nickname given to Kavanagh’s local parish priest, Canon Bernard [Barney] Maguire, owing to his stint as a Professor in the Irish College in Salamanca, Spain.

¹³⁴ Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh: Centenary Editino*, 427.

suggests it was Canon Maguire (portrayed as ‘Fr. Mat’) who did not fit the role as representative of “the poetic point of view”¹³⁵. It is just as likely, however, that it was Kavanagh who did not fit the role of priest cast upon him by the pseudo-autobiographical nature of the poem. Kavanagh could recognise in the figure of the priest certain similarities with the poet-theologian: a fierce sense of duty, a wounded sense of sacrifice that set them both apart, an intuition for the divine at the still centre of life’s vagaries.¹³⁶ However much pressure Kavanagh as a poet-theologian felt from “the chapel pressing its low ceiling over [him]” in the dour religious environment of his day, envisaging himself in the role of the priest would implicate Kavanagh to an altogether different degree in ‘the anti-life heresy’ he recognised in the Church of his day. As a poet-theologian this sense of duty ensured his sacramentality never sought anything other than a rebalancing of the faith he held dear. Kavanagh clearly found this rebalancing harder to achieve with Fr. Mat as its mouthpiece. However similar the poet-theologian and the priest appear on the surface, the sense of hierarchy, formality, and power inherent in the figure of the priest (no matter how intellectual or sensitive) ultimately sits uneasily with Kavanagh’s own point of view. Kavanagh searched widely for ways to capture the sense of duty and apartness he envisioned for the poet-theologian in society, but the analogy of the priest-poet runs somewhat aground in “Why Sorrow?”, and is given less prominence in Kavanagh self-identity from this point onwards in his oeuvre.

More consequential for the future of Kavanagh’s point of view are the Christological elements of this poem. Agnew has acknowledged that when his works are considered as a whole, “there is no consistent Christocentric thrust to Kavanagh’s work”.¹³⁷ This trilogy of poems analyzed in this chapter are an exception to Agnew’s remark. Indeed, “Why Sorrow?” represents the high-point of Kavanagh Christological concern. Except for a handful of brief moments, his later poems seem to eschew the Christological, at least to the same extent that it appeared in the dour anti-sacramentality of “Why Sorrow?”. The God of love and of Creation is the image of the divine that Kavanagh most favours in the rest of his oeuvre. The commitment of the priest to live and to act *in persona Christi* was one that Kavanagh struggled to get the measure of to his own satisfaction in “Why Sorrow?”. It is likely that

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper*, 214 later spoke of the “the priestly nature of the poet’s function”, and Agnew even makes the suggestion that “observing the priest at close range perhaps gave him his first idea of the poet as theologian.” in Una Agnew, “Patrick Kavanagh: Early Religious/ Devotional Influences On His Work,” *The Clogher Record* 15, no.1 (1994): 66.

¹³⁷ Una Agnew, “Patrick Kavanagh and Hopkins: A Strange Combination” (lecture, Hopkins Festival, 2007).

Kavanagh's uncomfortable experience writing this poem contributed to the Christ-shy approach of his later work. In two poems written shortly after this trilogy of long poems, Kavanagh seems to provide the conclusive image of Christ that finally reconciles the pessimism of "Why Sorrow?" and signals the resting point of Kavanagh's Christology for the most part in his writing. In "Possessing Eden" Kavanagh confidently identifies Christ in flourishing images of nature reminiscent of Fr. Mat's worst scruples: "Christ and his angels are around/ In primroses, in daisies, in the east wind."¹³⁸ Speaking here only as poet-theologian, Kavanagh has regained the authority that comes from authenticity. Kavanagh wrote "Advent" as a direct response to the self-involvement he came to regret in his writing of "The Great Hunger". In it, he prays for a kind of poetic penance that will rid him of delusions of ego, reason or knowledge. Instead, the poem pursues Kavanagh's now trademark sacramentality with a sense of renewed wonder: "We have thrown into the dust-bin the clay-minted wages/ Of pleasure, knowledge, and the conscious hour/ And Christ comes with a January flower."¹³⁹

The power of this final line can only be appreciated when it resounds against the more problematic brand of Christology that had gone immediately before it in Kavanagh's trilogy of long poems. That Kavanagh never felt the need to revisit or even mention to any serious degree the Christology that featured so prominently in these early formative works speaks to the measure of meaning he invested in the image, in the possibility, of Christ in a January flower. This was to be the image Kavanagh would leave with his audience to correct the dour and anomalous Christology conjured by "Why Sorrow?".

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the trilogy of long poems Kavanagh undertook in the early years of his time in Dublin capture a burst of violent creativity that came to definitively shape Kavanagh's point of view as poet-theologian. Despite Kavanagh's own misgivings about each of the three poems, this chapter has demonstrated how the concept of sacramentality that would become so central to the method and message of his work first emerged in these poems as the means to counter the suffocating religious conditions Kavanagh identified in his own time and place. This chapter also argued for a measure of

¹³⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, "Possessing Eden," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 128.

¹³⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, "Advent," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 125.

consideration and consistency in Kavanagh's approach hitherto absent in analyses of his standing as a poet-theologian. Sacramentality emerged as the means to gather the seemingly disparate, contradictory strands of Kavanagh theologizing into a more coherent whole. The problems Kavanagh identified in the religious attitudes of his day seemed to revolve around the question of where God could be found by the Christian believer. As Chapter Three and Four have carefully exhibited, this question of God's self-disclosure centres on a well-ordered appreciation of sacramental theology. Sacramental theology takes Christ as the definitive sign of God's presence, the ultimate Word in God's self-disclosure to humanity. Sacraments are the means by which this relationship with God continues in Christ. They are God's gifts that make holy the believer, who is called to recognise afresh their need for Christ's presence in the brokenness and blessedness of life. Kavanagh identifies in the Church of his day a strict approach to sacramental theology that sees Christ as a kind of gatekeeper of humanity's relationship with God. By Kavanagh's more expansive point of view, Christ is the ultimate facilitator of our relationship with God, which can be nurtured by recognising signs of his divine initiative breaking into the world through apertures of grace and fulfilling our needs in the "bits and pieces of Everyday"¹⁴⁰. This attitude is captured in the term sacramentality. Chapter Three outlined the condition necessary for such an attitude to compliment – rather than threaten – the essential elements of the formal sacramental theology of the Church. Kavanagh's sacramentality, it has been argued, fits comfortably within the formulation devised in Chapter Three to summarise these essential elements: that sacraments are the means by which God continues to effect for a dispossessed people the salvation won by Christ. If anything, Kavanagh expands the range of God's divine initiative by his emphasis on sacramentality. In the words of Hopkins, a poet held dear by both Kavanagh brothers, "Christ plays in ten thousand places"¹⁴¹ when the believer is open to His presence as Kavanagh advises. As was demonstrated in this chapter, Kavanagh is a quintessentially dispossessed writer, who imbues even his more emphatic, celebratory work with a kind of woundedness: the light of God's presence enters most evocatively through chance apertures of grace that illuminate the darkness of humanity's need. Notwithstanding the difficulties he had in resolving the unfinished "Why Sorrow?", Kavanagh's Christology situates Christ comfortably within his sacramental outlook. The emphasis the Church placed on Christ's presence in the formal sacraments does not tempt Kavanagh into an 'either/or'

¹⁴⁰ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 88.

¹⁴¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Inversnaid" in *The Prose and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Baltimore: Penguin, 1958).

approach to sacramentality. Christ can be honoured by a profession of faith in the Blessed Sacrament as well as in the “green leaves that will come” from the budding tree in a field.

All of these facets of Kavanagh’s sacramentality are first visible in the trilogy of long poems studied in this chapter. As has been argued, they are visible most in the ‘either/or’ anti-sacramentality of Irish religion that Kavanagh depicts with the searing realism of experience in order to travesty and reform it. These poems offer a kind of theological negative: the true image of Kavanagh’s point of view as a poet-theologian has been definitively captured, but is only glimpsed in these three poems until it is fully developed in the rest of his oeuvre.

In the final section of this thesis, this study work will chart how the methods and message of Kavanagh’s point of view, first enshrined in the three long poems of his early career, are given full voice in a selection of ‘manifesto poems’ that mark important milestones in Kavanagh journey as a poet-theologian. This process will underline the essential unity in the diversity of Kavanagh’s approach: a considered and consistent theology that places sacramentality at the heart of the Christian life.

Chapter Five: Sacramentality in Kavanagh

Introduction

The aim of this chapter will be to determine the extent to which the sacramentality so central to Kavanagh's long poems at the beginning of his career in the early 1940s extends into his corpus over the following two and a half decades. The identification of a continuity in his sacramentality, and thus in his theology, is complicated by the tumultuous life and career of Kavanagh, who undertook to change his approach as a writer several times to meet with the personal, financial, and poetic challenges he consistently faced. In broad terms, the decade after the long poems of the early 1940s was characterized by a more satirical, polemical tenor in his work that revolted against the failures he met with as a generally underappreciated country poet in Dublin. Kavanagh would later summarise this as a period during which "[I] ploughed my way through complexities and anger, hatred and ill-will towards the faults of man."¹ This stage in his writing gradually gave way over the following decade to a more reflective approach that culminated in the late 1950s in the care-free abandon of Kavanagh's seminal canal poetry. Kavanagh himself presented a more condensed – and dramatic – assessment of his life's work in 1962, where he disregarded large swathes of his earlier work (most notably "The Great Hunger") in an attempt to underline how pivotal his 1955 rebirth on the banks of the canal had been for the course of his poetry.² Quinn concludes that Kavanagh's "canal myth"³ obscures the complex trajectory of his work, which she charts over the course of his career in key "manifesto poems"⁴ that annunciate and reorientate his essential approach as a writer. This chapter will analyse three such works of Kavanagh – the novel *Tarry Flynn* and the poems "Advent", and "Canal Bank Walk" – in a bid to determine what level of theological continuity exists beneath the tumultuous conditions of Kavanagh's life and the simplifying attempts he made to

¹ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Prose* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1967), 22.

² Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 21: "And so in this moment [his 1955 rebirth on the canal] of great daring I became a poet. Except for brief moments in my very early years I had not been a poet. The poems in *A Soul for Sale* are not poetry and neither is "The Great Hunger". There are some queer and terrible things in "The Great Hunger", but it lacks the nobility and repose of poetry."

³ Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: Born-again Romantic* (New York: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), 396-397. Quinn summarises: "To acquiesce in Kavanagh's Canal myth involves not only colluding with a mistakenly inflated estimate of [certain] early poems; it also results in a false simplification of the erratic course of his literary development as we know it... [Kavanagh's] Canal poetics was not, as he represented it, a new departure or a recovery of an early mode, but a continuation of his recent aesthetic philosophy."

⁴ Quinn, *Born-again Romantic*, 194 argues that these poems serve to consistently redirect Kavanagh's work "away from documentary realism, topicality, satire or anger, and towards celebration, uncontaminated innocence, sacramental vision or transcendentalism."

mythologize it. *Tarry Flynn*, a pseudo-biographical novel set in the 1930s and published in 1948 after several rounds of editing, is a valuable companion piece to the long poems of the 1940s. Despite a more comedic tenor to the work, its forays into religious terrain reveal many of the same contradictions that characterized “The Great Hunger”, “Lough Derg”, and “Why Sorrow?”, most notably a complex ambivalence in the Christology of the title character. The struggles of Tarry to reconcile his own flourishing spiritual intuition with the seemingly dour figure of Christ echo the long poems of the early 1940s and speak to an unease in Kavanagh that the pseudo-autobiographical novel traces to the very beginnings of his life as a burgeoning poet-farmer in the rural Ireland of the 1930s. If *Tarry Flynn* is a continuation of Kavanagh’s attempts to unravel the contradictions at the heart of his Irish Catholicism, “Advent” and “Canal Bank Walk” convey most evocatively the resolution Kavanagh comes upon. Separated by well over a decade, the two poems act as crucial marker points in plotting a trajectory of continuity in his work. Written as a kind of poetic response to of the long poems of the 1940s, “Advent” announces Kavanagh’s vocation as a poet-theologian in its fullest form for the first time. “Canal Bank Walk”, published fifteen years later, marks the first time Kavanagh makes good on this vocation. “Canal Bank Walk” is the fulfilment of the ambitions first proposed in “Advent”. Together, they are the alpha and omega points in Kavanagh’s life as poet-theologian.

Tarry Flynn

One of the most significant companion pieces to the long poems undertaken by Kavanagh in the early 1940s is the novel *Tarry Flynn*, begun in 1942 and finally published in 1948 after several rounds of editing. This pseudo-autobiographical work depicts the life of the title character living and working on a rural Cavan farm in the 1930s. This work is particularly important because of the picture its title character gives of Kavanagh himself: it shows the difficulties a younger Kavanagh-like figure encountered in developing his own sacramental vision in the rural conditions of 1930s Ireland. The three long poems of the early 1940s show a confident and combative sacramentality that challenges the theological conditions of his time. Here in *Tarry Flynn*, a kind of prequel to these poems, this sacramentality is still in gestation. Far from confident, it is plagued by the temptation, doubt and distraction that occupy the mind of a young farmer-poet.

In some ways *Tarry Flynn* is more true to the doubts and contradictions that Kavanagh himself would have encountered in his development as a poet-theologian. The novel was

published six years after the long poems of the early forties were undertaken but was first begun in 1942 and in content matter is designed to represent a younger, Kavanagh-like figure only coming to terms with the claims of his fitful faith to his outlook on life.

Patrick Maguire the bachelor farmer of “The Great Hunger” was an example of what Kavanagh’s life in Monaghan *could* have been but never was. “Lough Derg” is an account of a journey he undertook as only a “half-pilgrim”⁵. “Why Sorrow?” was plagued by Kavanagh’s realisation that its parish priest protagonist was an ultimately unsuitable mouthpiece for Kavanagh’s poetic point of view. The character of Tarry Flynn, by contrast, is undeniably Kavanagh. This makes the probing ambivalence and contradictions of its religious content all the more valuable: this is Kavanagh the poet-theologian shown while still in his developmental phase.

Kavanagh called *Tarry Flynn* “the only authentic account of life as it was lived in Ireland this century” whose vein of “uproarious comedy” denied it the popular acclaim it warranted.⁶ Whether we accept Kavanagh’s claim, it is undeniable that the novel is a complex and important companion piece for the earlier long poems of Kavanagh. Through the character of Tarry Flynn, Kavanagh confirms what these earlier long poems suggested: that the sacramental breadth of the poet’s theology was formed gradually and uneasily, in the first place as a corrective to the dour religious conditions that did little to account for Kavanagh’s innate sense of wonder and appreciation of the natural world. Kavanagh’s sacramentality, which would later flourish with a sense of carefree and celebratory confidence, first emerged as a resolution of the tension Kavanagh felt between the life he knew in God and the life he experienced in the world around him. The close autobiographical streak in *Tarry Flynn* confirms how antagonistic and fitful this resolution could be in its early stages, as Kavanagh only began to grow into his role as a poet-theologian.

As his longer poems of the early 1940s showed, Kavanagh’s sacramental vision allowed him to locate God in “the bits and pieces of Everyday.”⁷ This was not merely a matter of personal faith, it was a theological proposition in its own right, delivered to a dour religious landscape considered by Kavanagh to be in need of such a corrective. Kavanagh intuited that his

⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, “Lough Derg,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 107.

⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 13.

⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, “The Great Hunger,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 88.

sacramentality placed a “kink”⁸ in him and left him at odds with the religious mores of his time. For example, his early long poems demonstrate an ambivalent Christology that seems at different times to reverence, re-envision and reject the role of Christ in the Christian life. This tension comes to the fore in the early pages of *Tarry Flynn*, where the title character’s vibrant appreciation of nature is contrasted with the lifelessness of his religious faith:

The headlands and the hedges were so fresh and wonderful, so gay with the dawn of the world. Tarry never tired looking at these ordinary things as he tired of the Mass and of religion. In a dim way he felt that he was not a Christian. In the god of Poetry he found a God more important to him than Christ. His god had never accepted Christ.⁹

The young Kavanagh represented by Tarry Flynn has yet to find an understanding of life that accommodates the seemingly dour figure of Christ. Instead, a simplistic duality prevails. His poetic appreciation of nature seems to trump the truth claimed by religion, and specifically by Christ. Later in the work Tarry reflects on the impact of his idiosyncratic belief system. Earlier in the novel he is confident enough to dismiss the claims Christ makes on his life, but in this later passage Tarry is less willing to do so. He senses an ‘aridity’ in his relationships with others and himself that the ‘god of poetry’ alone could not remedy:

There was a defect in him which these secluded fields developed: he was not in love with his neighbours; their lives meant little to him, and though off his own bat he was a very fine thinker and observer he had only one pair of eyes and ears and one mind. Had he loved his neighbours he would have the eyes, ears and minds of all these, for love takes possession.

Christ was the sum of the wisdom of all the men for whom He died, which was the race of Man.

He loved the fields and the birds and trees, stones and weeds and through these he could learn a great deal – but hardly enough. He saw the centre as a poet sees, but this introversion was leading to aridity.¹⁰

Towards the end of the novel Kavanagh’s title character is beginning to doubt the worth of an outlook on the world that is not rooted in the blessedness and brokenness of Christ’s life. Tarry Flynn senses an unease in himself, but cannot rid himself of a dualistic way of thinking

⁸ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 230.

⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1949), 14.

¹⁰ Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn*, 133.

where the ultimate meaning claimed by Christ is somehow in competition with that found in the simple truths of nature and art:

A man who had seen the ecstatic light of Life in stones, on the hills, in leaves of cabbages and weeds was not bound by the pity of Christ.

Or was he?

If he were, how much that was great in literature and art would be lost. He justified himself by the highest examples he knew of.¹¹

In the character of Tarry Flynn, Kavanagh shows the difficulties in squaring the life-giving light he finds in nature and in art with the solemn figure of Christ whose death is inextricably linked for him with the darkness of humankind's sin. This accommodation is more easily made with the figure of God the Father, whose status as Creator lends itself more naturally to Flynn's (and Kavanagh's) experiences in the gentle rhythms of the natural world. The character of Tarry Flynn is most spiritually in tune with himself and with God when he tends to the quiet business of life on the farm: "All day he sprayed the potatoes, and nothing was happening except his being. Being was enough, it was the worship of God."¹²

In the end, Tarry's moments of richest religious insight come when the 'life' he recognises in the world around him seems to disclose the divine life of its Creator. Considering his sisters, Flynn escapes his usual cynicism for just long enough to see in the quiet faithfulness of their lives a testament to the ongoing presence of God in their midst:

When Tarry forgot himself sufficiently to let his natural sympathy flow, he saw them as three souls as new and wonderful as individual souls always are.

They surely had their dreams, too. Beneath the conventional cliché which they wore as a defence the bleeding reality of intense life poured its red-hot stream of feeling.

Aggie was the most religious-minded, but all of them had strong faith. In the struggle it was hard contemplating the luxurious ecstasy of God in the fields or on the Altar. Yet they did. Their real devoutness, though they did not know it, was in their faith in life.¹³

Kavanagh makes the important claim here that 'faith in life' is the real marker of a faith in God. This is particularly significant in light of Kavanagh's later critique of the "anti-life"¹⁴

¹¹ Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn*, 235.

¹² Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn*, 164.

¹³ Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn*, 85.

¹⁴ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 257.

mentality that pervaded the Church and its theology in his lifetime. Here, Tarry Flynn seems to intuit a simple yet profound theological proposition: that the luminous presence God is accessible near at hand. God is just as easily recognised “in the fields or on the altar”. By gentle attentiveness in the ordinary cadences of life, the believer can place themselves in tune with this divine meaning in their lives.

In one of the novel’s most vivid examples of Kavanagh’s budding religious sensibility, Tarry Flynn recognises the presence of the Holy Spirit in the fields around him:

The Holy Ghost was taking the Bedlam of the little fields and making it into a song, a simple song which he could understand. And he saw the Holy Spirit on the hills. With the cynical side of himself, he realized that there was nothing unusual about the landscape. And yet what he imagined was hardly self-deception. The totality of the scene about him was a miracle. There might be something of self-deception in his imagination of the general landscape but there was none in his observation of the little flowers and weeds. These had God’s message in them.¹⁵

Flynn then goes home to “try out his ideas on his mother” for “often, as now, he only said outlandish things to his mother to test them. Anything that stood up to her test would stand up to anything.”¹⁶ In this passage, Kavanagh shows how a version of his younger self shaped his own sacramental vision. His mother reacts with incredulity, but Tarry shows the kind of stubborn self-assurance that would later become the hallmark of Kavanagh’s own sacramentality:

What was that you said about the Holy something?’

‘I said the Holy Spirit was in the fields.’

‘Lord protect everyone’s rearing,’ she said with a twinkle that was half humorous and half terror in her eye. She knew that there was no madness on her side of the house — that was one sure five — but —

‘Is it something to do with the Catholic religion you mean?’

‘It has to do with every religion; it’s beauty in Nature,’ he said solemnly but also dispassionately.

It was a mad remark but it was said by a very sane man.¹⁷

¹⁵ Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn*, 40.

¹⁶ Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn*, 40.

¹⁷ Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn*, 41.

In moments like these Kavanagh draws back the curtain on his own development as a poet-theologian. In the three long poems of the early 1940s, Kavanagh's sacramentality emerged as a corrective to the suffocating religious conditions he sought to expose in order to reform. In *Tarry Flynn*, Kavanagh's concern is not overtly religious or theological. Kavanagh is an older writer, and with "The Great Hunger", "Lough Derg" and "Why Sorrow?" behind him, he has moved on to a new phase in his career. *Tarry Flynn* places comedy, rather than travesty, back at the heart of Kavanagh's writing. However, the novel also acts as a prequel to the three long poems of the early 1940s. It exposes the same contradictions at the heart of Irish Catholicism that occupied Kavanagh's attention as a writer throughout his career. *Tarry Flynn* shows how a younger Kavanagh grappled with his own religious and artistic sensibilities and fitfully developed a sacramental vision of his own in response to these contradictions. As has been shown, this sacramental vision was not yet fully formed in *Tarry Flynn*: the figure of Christ was not yet fully incorporated into the sacramental vision of the young farmer poet. God the Creator and the Holy Spirit were more fruitful images of the divine for Kavanagh's budding sacramentality. The ambivalent Christology of *Tarry Flynn* is an important marker point on any trajectory of continuity in Kavanagh's work as a poet-theologian. The doubts Tarry Flynn had about the figure of Christ can be taken to represent Kavanagh's own as he came to terms with his religious outlook as a poet farmer in the 1930s. Kavanagh's complex Christology comes to the fore in the three long poems of the early 1940s. The extent to which Kavanagh can associate Christ with the light of life – as well as the darkness of suffering and sin – becomes perhaps the defining question of his relationship with sacramentality and his own standing as a poet-theologian. *Tarry Flynn* shows the seeds of this struggle. The three long poems of the 1940s show it partly answered by Kavanagh's own heartfelt professions of faith in Christ amidst a dour religious landscape. Ultimately, "Advent" is the work that get closest to resolving Kavanagh's complex Christology. Written very shortly after "The Great Hunger", it is considered as a kind of poetic response to the violent energy of that long poem. In important ways, it is also a theological response to the possibilities and challenges raised by Kavanagh's unique sacramental vision.

"Advent" and the poet-theologian

"Advent" was first published in Christmas week 1942. It has already been the subject of analysis in Chapter Two of this thesis for its concern with wonder as a state of mind particularly conducive to experiences both poetic and religious. In this section it will be analysed from a different angle: for what it reveals about the development of Kavanagh's

sacramentality immediately after the completion of his long trilogy of poems at the beginning of the 1940s. Quinn has identified in “Advent” a thematic and methodological revolt against “The Great Hunger” in particular:

While both “The Great Hunger” and “Lough Derg” represent a fall from the state of childlike imaginative grace espoused in “Advent”, the poem reads specifically like an early recantation of “The Great Hunger” in its rejection of ‘pleasure, knowledge and the conscious hour’, a trinity of values lauded in that poem.¹⁸

These themes are what Kavanagh dismisses as “clay-minted wages”¹⁹ by the end of “Advent”, which hereafter will be rejected and “thrown into the dust bin”.²⁰ Clay was the symbol of the social, personal and spiritual deprivation endured by Patrick Maguire in “The Great Hunger”, and Quinn is right to identify an effort from Kavanagh to shake himself loose from the didactic and polemical trappings of the long poems of the early 1940s. At the outset of the poem, Kavanagh acknowledges the excesses of his previous approach (“we have tasted and tested too much, lover”²¹) and embraces the penitential practices of “Advent” to repurify his poetry with a child-like innocence that finds the stuff of wonder, not travesty, in the everyday scenes of his rural upbringing. As Quinn notes,²² the change of direction aimed for in “Advent” is captured in contrasting images positioned side by side: “penance” bringing “luxury”, “newness” revealed “in every stale thing”, “prophetic astonishment” contained “in tedious talking”, “old stables where Time begins”.²³ The poem ends with one final instance where unlikely images are drawn together to capture the sense of new direction aimed at by “Advent”: “And Christ comes with a January flower.”²⁴ The switch to the present tense heightens the sense of rupture between what has been up to this point and what will be now in the aftermath of “Advent”. The details of this final image are of striking importance not only to Kavanagh’s poetic reorientation, but to the sacramental vision that he had showcased in the three long poems immediately preceding “Advent”. Quinn’s analysis of the poem revolves around the question of rupture: she identifies Kavanagh intention to break with the polemic approach of the recent past while also pointing out:

¹⁸ Quinn, *Born-again Romantic*, 193.

¹⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, “Advent,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 125.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Quinn, *Born-again Romantic*, 192.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

His resolve to reform his poetics rarely succeeds and, certainly, 'Advent' does not serve as a reliable signpost pointing out the direction his writings will take for the remainder of the 1940s. Ahead lies a decade in which Kavanagh will not only continue his project of writing Catholic Ireland, but will gradually assume the role of embattled artist, vehement cultural critic and inveterate self-promoter.²⁵

Kavanagh's bid to reject the briars of socio-realism and return to a child-like state of innocence run aground during a decade ahead where the political, cultural and social powerbrokers continue to show themselves unwilling or unable to accept Kavanagh as a poet worth of serious credit. Kavanagh, for his part, rages against the rejection he encounters and rebels against the 'character' of a cantankerous peasant poet assigned to him. However earnest the wish expressed in "Advent", time reveals that Kavanagh did not return to writing poetry merely 'wherever life pours ordinary plenty.'

There is an important sense, however, in which "Advent" does succeed in its bid to provide a resolution to Kavanagh's self-understanding. This poem gives as clear a crystallisation of Kavanagh's sacramentality as anything in his oeuvre. In it are contained the three essential elements of divine agency, human need and Christ's agency. The entire poem is characterized by Kavanagh's recognition of his own woundedness: he has "tasted and tested too much",²⁶ seen life "through a chink too wide",²⁷ perished at the hand of "knowledge he stole but could not use".²⁸ Tellingly, Kavanagh envisions his poetic excess in religious terms. His brokenness threatens not only his career but his "soul".²⁹ Kavanagh realises that one of the greatest threats to his vocation as poet-theologian is claiming or seeking too much knowledge of God's mysterious initiative in his life. "Please/ God we shall not ask for reason's payment/ The why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges/ Nor analyse God's breath in common statement."³⁰ The final line of the poem confirms that the nature of Kavanagh's regeneration will be not merely poetic but religious, not only human but divine in nature. The language of this final line is remarkable for the confidence of its tone.

The ambivalent complexity of Kavanagh's Christology had been showcased in three long poems of the early 1940s and confirmed by the prequel *Tarry Flynn* that captured the fitful

²⁵ Quinn, *Born-again Romantic*, 194.

²⁶ Kavanagh, "Advent," 125.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

bursts of religious imagination of the young farmer in the 1930s. Kavanagh revered the figure of Christ but the dour trappings of his religious upbringing had loaded Christ with associations of sin that did not always sit easily with Kavanagh's joyful, life-filled sacramentality. Christ was cast as often as a threat to Kavanagh's sacramental vision than as its realisation. Here in "Advent", however, Christ unambiguously fulfils the hope promised by Kavanagh's sacramentality. The ability to confidently identify Christ in a simple image of nature without caveat, qualification or warning is a significant development in Kavanagh's sacramentality from the long poems of the early 1940s or from Tarry Flynn. It suggests that Kavanagh had gone some way to overcoming and outgrowing the most damaging associations of his religious landscape. He no longer felt the need to air his doubts about the relevance of Christ to his religious outlook, or to rage against what he disagreed with in the religious conditions of his time. Here in "Advent" Kavanagh showcases a new confidence in his own religious intuition that had been missing up until then and which would come to increasingly define his work as a poet-theologian. Placing this sacramental, Christological image at the climax of a key manifesto poem in his oeuvre was a statement in itself from Kavanagh. Whether or not the poetic aspirations signalled at in the poem came to pass, this turn towards a more confident assertion of his sacramental vision represents a major point of achievement in his trajectory as a poet-theologian.

Kavanagh's dramatic insistence on his rebirth as a poet in 1955 on the banks of the grand canal in Dublin has been treated with a degree of caution by this study, but in an important way it is true. In his mature years Seamus Heaney summarised the winding and arduous journey of a life in poetry as essentially tripartite: "getting started, keeping going, getting started again."³¹ Kavanagh himself touched on much the same idea when he declared towards the end of his own life in poetry that: "There are two kinds of simplicity, the simplicity of going away and the simplicity of return. The last is the ultimate in sophistication."³² In the case of both poets, the implication is that the final stage is the most difficult and also the most rewarding. Kavanagh's canal rebirth is merely a different way of describing the same thing. After recovering from romantic, financial and medical traumas, Kavanagh by 1955 felt liberated from many of the cares he felt had placed obstacles in the way of his best writing. He continued: "In the final simplicity we don't care whether we

³¹ Denis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 207. He references this quote in relation to Kavanagh, who he credits with particular importance in the initial stage of "getting going".

³² Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 13.

appear foolish or not. We talk of things that earlier would embarrass. We are satisfied with being ourselves, however small.”³³ In the next sentence he begins to recite “Canal Bank Walk”, the poem that perhaps more than any captures the sense of care-free abandon that characterizes the final most fruitful period of his life in poetry. It has been said that most poets spend their life trying to write one poem. There is a sense in which “Canal Bank Walk” is the poem towards which all Kavanagh’s poetic journey had been leading. From as early as Christmas 1942 in “Advent” he had resolved to set his work on a trajectory of carefree wonder that transformed and was transformed by the ordinary things of life into something worthy of poetry and even of God. The travails of life and the concomitant appeal of satire dominated much of the intervening years between the annunciation of this credo in “Advent” in late 1942 and its reiteration and realisation in another manifesto poem, “Canal Bank Walk” in 1958. In the years that separated these two defining poems Kavanagh reorientated himself gradually through searing self-examination in poems like “Prelude”:

But satire is unfruitful prayer
Only wild shoots of pity there,
And you must go inland and be
Lost in compassion’s ecstasy,
Where suffering soars in summer air—
The millstone has become a star.³⁴

This new ‘inland’ setting for Kavanagh’s poetry was dominated by love, described in another defining piece of introspection at the turn of the 1950s as “the placeless heaven under all our noses.”³⁵

“Canal Bank Walk”: the fulfilment of “Advent”

This is the setting for “Canal Bank Walk”, a deeply sacramental poem that takes up the call of “Advent” to find the stuff of God and of poetry “wherever life pours ordinary plenty.”³⁶ This is one of the features that links these two manifesto poems so closely: finding poetry means finding God in both instances. In “Advent” Kavanagh’s poetic reorientation is implanted with the theological lifeforce of the Incarnation. Kavanagh understood the stakes at hand. The birth of the Christ-child offers Christians a daring and enduring hope against the vicissitudes of life and the darkness of human sin. Kavanagh did not need to cast his

³³ Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, 13.

³⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, “Prelude,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 275.

³⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, “Auditors In,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 245.

³⁶ Kavanagh, “Advent,” 125.

poetic reorientation after the three long poems of the early 1940s in theological language, but in doing so, he testified that his convicted faith accounted for all of the suffering, the mistakes, and the surprises that his life in poetry could summon upon him. Near the end of his life, Kavanagh wondered aloud in a poem entitled “Winter in Leeds” whether his lack of a personal ‘mythology’ had deprived him of the sustenance and structure necessary to fulfil his destiny as a poet:

So there it is my friends. What am I to do
With the void growing more awful every hour?
I lacked a classical discipline. I grew
Uncultivated and now the soil turns sour,
Needs to be revived by a power not my own,
Heroes enormous who do astounding deeds
Out of this world.³⁷

Sympathising with Kavanagh’s dilemma as a poet, Brendan Kennelly commented later:

It is the dilemma of a poet who finds himself without a mythology. In the end, the internal world of the self needs the structure of myth to sustain it in poetry. Kavanagh never bothered to create a mythology. Indeed, the very purity of his comic vision means that the number of poems he wrote is fairly limited. He wrote about a dozen great poems. Yeats, on the other hand, sustained by a mythology gleaned from countless sources, wrote great poems in abundance. Like the body, the imagination occasionally flags; myth is a revivifying food.³⁸

This study suggests that the story of Christianity was the surrogate ‘mythology’ that Kavanagh used to parse his life and sustain its momentum in times of difficulty and possibility. In the crucibles of his life, Christianity was the “vivifying food” that allowed Kavanagh to make sense of his poetic journey, to recover from its innumerable setbacks, and to grow again – most pointedly into the gracious repose of compassion and ‘not-caring’. “Canal Bank Walk” is the climax of this Christian ‘mythology’ at work in his life, where he resolves to “Grow with nature again as before I grew.” Like “Advent”, this poem is quintessentially sacramental: acknowledging as it does the ‘gaping need’ of his humanity.

³⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, “Winter in Leeds,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 335. This poem is also known in other editions as “A Personal Problem”.

³⁸ Brendan Kennelly, “Patrick Kavanagh,” *Ariel* 1, no. 3 (1970): 14.

Kavanagh trusts in the assurance of God's divine initiative ("the will of God"³⁹) disclosing itself in his life through the most unlikely and transformative signs:

The bright stick trapped, the breeze adding a third
Party to the couple kissing on an old seat,
And a bird gathering materials for the nest for the Word
Eloquently new and abandoned to its delirious beat.⁴⁰

These last two lines testify to the newly invigorated Christology of Kavanagh in this phase of his life. The closing salvo of "Advent" had resolved the complex and ambivalent role of Christ in much of Kavanagh's previous work by its confident declaration that "Christ comes with a January flower."⁴¹ Now, in this companion piece of sacramental self-missioning, Kavanagh turns to the figure of Christ the 'Word' to capture the new life he feels running through his poetry. As in the case of "Advent", it seems that major moments in Kavanagh's poetic life can only be accounted for with the language and profundity of the Christian faith. Such is the scale of his rebirth that the Word (a clever proxy for Kavanagh's poetic *and* religious purpose) is now "eloquently new and abandoned to its delirious beat."⁴² One of the simplest definitions of the poet-theologian, and one that Kavanagh himself may have given, could be 'one who has concern for the Word.'

At the beginning of "The Great Hunger" ("clay is the word"⁴³) Kavanagh showed his appreciation of the dynamic breadth of meaning captured by the term. There, the spiritual currency of the Word had been distorted and debased by the 'clay' - the suffocating conditions of Irish rural life. Kavanagh had travestied this debasement in order to rage against the spiritual deprivation being imposed on the victims of the 'apocalypse of the clay'. In "Advent", he had changed course, deciding that the best way to resist spiritual impoverishment was to find his treasure, and his God, in the ordinary moments of life where nothing or no-one could stop him. Christ "the January flower" was the symbol of this spiritual and poetic revivication. Here in "Canal Bank Walk", "the Word eloquently new and abandoned to its delirious beat" resounds with a similar purpose.

³⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, "Canal Bank Walk," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 294.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Kavanagh, "Advent," 125.

⁴² Kavanagh, "Canal Bank Walk," 294.

⁴³ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 79.

To be sure, there are crucial moments between these two poems, “Advent” and “Canal Bank Walk”, where Kavanagh takes stock of his life through the lens of his Christian faith. Other important manifesto poems such as 1953 piece “Having Confessed” (“We must be nothing,/Nothing that God may make us something”⁴⁴) and the 1951 poem “Auditors In” (“Is verse an entertainment only/Or a profound and holy faith/that cries the inner history/Of the failure of man’s mission?”⁴⁵) demonstrate a dispossession and reliance on God’s initiative in the most pivotal moments of Kavanagh’s life.

What makes the connection between “Advent” and “Canal Bank Walk” so noteworthy is the Christological element and the accompanying hope that it injects into these two poems. As a deeply-felt Christian, Kavanagh understood that the Christ-event accounted for all that can be said of human life. If he wanted to express the deepest of grief, penance to the suffering Christ is the paradigm his faith offered him in such moments of despair. If he wanted to capture in words the hope that erupted into his life almost without explanation – the Incarnation and the Resurrection of Christ is the summit of all that can be said of human hope. The long poems of the early 1940s by their length and subject matter give greatest air to Kavanagh’s understanding and relationship with Christ’s claims on his life and poetry. However, “Advent” and “Canal Bank Walk” are two perfectly illustrated vignettes of Kavanagh’s reliance on the ‘mythology’ of Christianity in the moments of greatest despair and hope in this life. When he despairs at the course his poetry had taken at the beginning of the 1940s, it is to Christ he turns to absolve and reorient him. When he grasps for language to express the impossibility of his newfound life after his *annus horribilis* of 1954, it is to Christ the Word that he turns to express the delirious hope he feels. These poetic choices are those of a poet-theologian deeply in tune with the Word in his life. For it is the figure of Christ that shows humankind the human face of God, in both the brokenness and blessedness of human life. When Kavanagh is face to face with the sharpest edges of his own humanity, it is to Christ he turns as the ultimate sign of God at work in the world and in his own life.

Conclusion: kidnapping God “out of the countryside”

It is true that Kavanagh did not always find Christ easily in the decisive moments of his life. In “Winter in Leeds”, which Quinn describes as some of the “bleakest” verse he

⁴⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, “Having Confessed,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 256.

⁴⁵ Kavanagh, “Auditors In,” 245.

ever wrote,⁴⁶ Kavanagh yearned for a mythology that could have sustained him in the tumults of life. At other points earlier in his career, he seems to struggle with an image of Christ concerned with sin, judgement, and suffering. This was the image of Christ he had gleaned from the religious environment of his time. It did not sit easily with his own convictions about the Christian faith, summarised by a friend who knew them well:

Paddy seemed to regard the field and swamps, and indeed the whole world, as one huge project where God was breathing life and love all around. One of his irritations with the Church was that it seemed to be trying to take God out of the countryside and confine him to buildings... namely churches. Another was that the Catholic clergy were not allowing Irish culture and traditions freedom to grow. Paddy said they were imposing rules and restrictions that had no moral basis.⁴⁷

Much of Kavanagh's treatment of Christ in the three long poems of the early 1940s is a kind of reckoning with these frustrations he had with the theology of his day. Crucially, these early works were not merely criticism designed to tear down the structures of Christianity, but rather sought to restore what had been taken from the ordinary believers by the "rules and restrictions that had no moral basis." As Kavanagh went on to explain to his friend, the proper Christian understanding of Christ – and of his sacraments – had been particularly badly affected by the conditions of the day:

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Paddy, ‘we have enough real sins. We don’t need the Church inventing more for us. We should go back to what Christ said: ‘This is my body, this is my blood.’ He didn’t say, I’ve taken God out of the countryside and put him in a cup...they act as if they’ve kidnapped God, were holding him in a church, and they were the only ones who can understand or talk to him.’...

‘Jokes aside,’ said Jimmy, ‘Christ was the sum of all goodness.’

‘Christ was the sum of wisdom for all men for whom he died, which was the race of man.’ Paddy said.⁴⁸

The implications of these comments of Kavanagh are substantial; beyond his critique of the “anti-life heresy”⁴⁹ of the Church and some rare allusions to its Jansenist extremes, there is relatively little firm account of Kavanagh's problems with the version of Christianity he encountered in much of his life. The three long poems at the beginning of the 1940s provide

⁴⁶ Quinn, *Born-again Romantic*, 449.

⁴⁷ Elisabeth O'Toole, *A Poet in the House: Patrick Kavanagh at Priory Grove* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2021), 43.

⁴⁸ O'Toole, *A Poet in the House*, 45.

⁴⁹ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 257.

much of the basis for a reconstruction of his views, but these are complex poetic works. The above comments, published as part of a 2021 memoir by a close friend of Kavanagh, thus have a powerful impact on our understanding of the understanding of his faith.

As Kavanagh makes clear, his view is that Christ is the summit of our human understanding of God, yet the strictures of the prevalent theology in Ireland had distanced Christ from the people. Associated with sin and sacrifice, the brokenness of Christ had been emphasized to the exclusion of the abundant life of blessedness made possible through him. This passage is crucial for the balance it brings out in Kavanagh's outlook. His conviction, expressed often in his poetry, that God was "in the bits and pieces of Everyday"⁵⁰ was not designed to undermine a more traditional understanding of Christ in the sacraments or in the Church, but was seeking a balance he saw as lacking in the theology of his day. His intention was corrective, not destructive. Indeed, seen in the light of these comments, much of Kavanagh's most profound religious imagery in his poetry can be considered anew as a kind of intentional counterpoint to the theological conditions of his day.

This gets to the heart of what it might mean to call Kavanagh a poet-theologian or to identify in his work a 'sacramentality' of any kind. Una Agnew, for example, has firmly established the case for the 'mystical imagination' of Kavanagh, and questions elsewhere the value of ascribing to his work a 'sacramentality' that "is not shown to be closely related to Kavanagh's mystical imaginative stance."⁵¹ Agnew seeks an account of Kavanagh's work that is capable of "drawing parallels or distinctions between what is 'sacramental' and what is 'mystical'."⁵² Quinn is asking the right questions in seeking more precise definitions and distinctions of religious terminology used to comment on Kavanagh's writings. Her own work has gone to lengths to establish the case for a mystical understanding of Kavanagh's methods. This current study has taken up the challenge posed by Quinn and has sought a more robust appraisal of Kavanagh's theology – in particular his sacramentality. At least part of the answer to Quinn's question about the difference between the mystical and sacramental in Kavanagh's work must lie in the comments from the poet quoted above. If Kavanagh, as we now know, was critical of the Church for kidnapping Christ, for "taking God out of the countryside and putting him in a cup"⁵³, at least part of his response to this situation would

⁵⁰ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 88.

⁵¹ Una Agnew review of *No Earthly Estate: God and Patrick Kavanagh: An Anthology*, by Tom Stack, *The Furrow* 56, no. 3 (March 2005), 189.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ O'Toole, *A Poet in the House*, 45.

be to free God and share him with the world afresh. In other words, there is a discernible theological intent to Kavanagh's religious language. It is a response to a certain situation he has identified, and identified in strikingly explicit terms. It is a problem with the Church's theology, both Christological and Sacramental. His religious language cannot be considered without this in mind. This is most obviously the case in the three long poems of the early 1940s. Most of the sacramentality contained in these poems is part of a direct challenge to the dour religious attitudes he is seeking to travesty. Hence, the resounding assertion that "God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday"⁵⁴ is not delivered in isolation, but as a direct challenge to a more narrow-minded theology outlined in the lines directly preceding it: "For God is not all/ In one place, complete and labelled like a case in a railway store/ Till Hope comes in and takes it on his shoulder."⁵⁵

Mysticism is derived from the Greek *muein* 'to be silent'. There is a sense in which the silence of contemplation allows the believer to receive from outside themselves an insight into God's wisdom. Much of Kavanagh's religious language seems to bear the hallmarks of such a mystical imagination. Even in instances, as above, where Kavanagh's language is more deliberate and considered, there is a sense in which the cadence of poetry always comes from outside the self: Heaney calls this "self-forgetfulness",⁵⁶ by his reckoning one of the most important qualities a poet can possess. However, in drawing out the theological element in the term sacramentality, this study has sought to focus, where possible, on the intent of Kavanagh as a writer. If we are to take Kavanagh seriously in his self-ascription as a poet-theologian, we must put weight on the element of deliberation inherent in theology. If Kavanagh's critique of the Church as a poet-theologian was for its arrogance, for its focus on sin, for its distortion of Christ, then a flourishing sacramental theology espoused in his work would be an appropriate theo-poetic response. This sacramentality would display a humble acknowledgement of our human need for God's divine initiative ("We must be nothing,/ Nothing that God may make us something"⁵⁷). It would seek to re-enshrine both the brokenness and blessedness of life in Christ, a life of sorrow for our sins but a life of joy in the light of Christ's hope ("Who lives in Christ shall never die the death"⁵⁸). It might also identify signs of God's light and love breaking into the world through the most unlikely and

⁵⁴ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 88.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 88.

⁵⁷ Kavanagh, "Having Confessed," 256.

⁵⁸ Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," 86.

transformative apertures (“beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God/ Was breathing His love by a cut-away bog”⁵⁹).

This study has found evidence throughout Kavanagh’s corpus of a consistent, considered approach as a poet-theologian. The level of consistency, as with his poetry at large, is fragile and at times erratic, but speaks to a trajectory that spans from his earliest days as a budding farmer poet to the later years after his poetic rebirth on the Grand Canal. The consistency and consideration owes much to the constancy of the religious landscape that clashed with his own deeply felt Christianity and acted as a kind of theological stimulus for Kavanagh the poet-theologian. The problems he saw in the Church went some way to shaping his own unique brand of humble sacramentality, rooted in human need, divine initiative, and the agency of an “eloquently new”⁶⁰ Christ freed from a Church hierarchy who held him captive as if “they were the only ones who can understand or talk to him.”⁶¹ Warnings abound for any study that threatens to weigh Kavanagh down with too much religious sensibility, let alone a consistent and considered theological deliberation. The most extraordinary achievement of Kavanagh, and one that speaks to the undoubted mystical imagination he possessed, was the lightness of touch to put words to the deliberations of his mind. This is the rarest of skills that allowed him to fulfil the unparalleled role of poet-theologian.

This very lightness of touch is what is captured in a rare drawing of Kavanagh, undertaken by Piroska Szanto in 1965.⁶² In it, Kavanagh is shown brooding over a luminescent earth as it hovers in the midst of the holy blood of Christ in a chalice. An angel and a demon flank the chalice, the latter accompanied by a bottle of alcohol. Birds circle gently over Kavanagh’s hair. It is a truly remarkable evocation of Kavanagh the “sacramentalist”⁶³. Kavanagh is not without his need for God. His demons are not hidden. Neither is the initiative his: he gazes graciously, as in prayer. Rather, the drawing gives the sense of what Kavanagh is capable of apprehending because of his sacramental vision: that the world is constantly disclosing the divine initiative at its heart: “the luxurious ecstasy of God in the fields or on the Altar.”⁶⁴ The drawing makes a piercing distinction that gets to the very heart

⁵⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, “The One,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 292.

⁶⁰ Kavanagh, “Canal Bank Walk,” 294.

⁶¹ O’Toole, *A Poet in the House*, 45.

⁶² See Appendix A.

⁶³ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 155.

⁶⁴ Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn*, 85.

of Kavanagh's Christian point of view as a poet-theologian. Kavanagh complained that the Church had "taken God out of the countryside and put him in a cup."⁶⁵ Kavanagh's theological response, captured in this drawing, is not to retaliate in kind. Kavanagh does not take God out of the cup, deny his presence in the formal sacraments, and consign him to the world. Instead, he places the world back in the cup with God, consecrated once more to His divine life.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

This thesis began with a clear-eyed appraisal of the difficulties inherent in unpacking the meaning of Kavanagh's elusive declaration that "a poet is a theologian"¹. A small but influential consensus in analyses of his work seemed reluctant to seriously broach the interdisciplinary challenge posed by the figure of the poet-theologian and summarised by Fiddes: "literature tends to openness, doctrine to closure."² The study proceeded on the basis that Kavanagh's fierce and prolonged investment in the idea of the 'poet' earned him the right to be taken seriously in ascribing a measure, however uncertain, of theology to the very identity he had spent his life pursuing. In doing so Kavanagh pushed provocatively at the boundaries of both disciplines; poetry was afforded the authority of closure, theology the luxury of openness.

The first half of the thesis set out to establish the groundwork for the kind of robust and fruitful dialogue presupposed by the figure of the poet-theologian. Wonder was posited as a crucial unifying state of mind for the work of the poet as well as the theologian. Kavanagh's enlistment of Aquinas as a standard-bearer for the discipline of theology, it was argued, was rooted in his admiration of Aquinas' ability to achieve a virtuous balance between an inquisitive and a more contemplative wonder: to reconcile the "dry stuff"³ with the "imaginative unreason."⁴ The theological exploration of wonder in Chapter One posited that Aquinas' ability to achieve such a virtuous Christian wonder lay in two distinctive pillars of the Christian tradition: a suspicion of the sin of *curiositas* (counterfeit wonder) and the principle of *apophasis* that enshrines the ultimate unknowability of the divine in its true essence.

An overview of wonder in Kavanagh's own writing in Chapter Two identified his pursuit of a virtue analogous to the Christian wonder of Aquinas; Kavanagh emerged as a quintessentially wounded writer constantly taking himself in hand to eschew his own forms of *curiositas* and submit humbly to God's grandeur in order to re-enshrine an innocent wonder into his vocation as a poet-theologian.

¹ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Prose* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1967), 22.

² Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 7.

³ Patrick Kavanagh, *Kavanagh's Weekly: a journal of literature and politics* (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1981), 32.

⁴ Kavanagh, *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 56.

The second half of the thesis built on the conclusions of the first in order to undertake a deeper examination of the theological elements of Kavanagh's work under the heading of sacrament and sacramentality. A theological study of the notably multifarious concept of sacramentality in Chapter Three outlined the terms of its relationship to the formal sacraments of the church. These sacraments are the markers of the Christian life, the method of God's continuing self-disclosure in Christ and the means by which God responds to the needs of his faithful and makes them holy. God's initiative, the faithful's human need, and Christ's agency were posited as essential characteristics of sacramental theology and the markers of a meaningful sacramentality in the work of a Christian writer such as Kavanagh. In the final stages of the thesis, sacramentality emerged as the key to the theological content and intent of Kavanagh the poet-theologian. His ability to identify the "luxurious ecstasy of God in the fields or on the Altar",⁵ it was shown, was forged first in the three long poems of the 1940s ("The Great Hunger", "Lough Derg", "Why Sorrow?") in which he travestied the pessimistic religious landscape of his time in order to reform it. As Agnew comments: "it is his persistent subtraction of all that is not God that leaves him with a solid poetic kernel corresponding to a firm intuition of God."⁶

Kavanagh's theology, it has been said, "defied systematization",⁷ "is not concerned with abstruse theological debate",⁸ "does not yield systematic declarative statements."⁹ Crucially, however, the content of his sacramental poetry was shown to be infused with a considered theological intent: to correct the dour either/or dualism of his contemporary religious landscape and to install in its place a more balanced both/and theological outlook that honoured "the God of Life, the God of the grass, of the sun"¹⁰ as devotedly as the Christ he worshipped in the sacraments: "O Christ, that is what you have done for us:/In a crumb of bread the whole mystery is."¹¹ The later manifesto poems "Advent" and "Canal Bank Walk" emerge out of the more polemical long poems of the 1940s as two quintessential examples of Kavanagh's sacramentality at play and resolve the complex ambivalence of Kavanagh's early Christology. If the long poems provide the foundation of his journey as a poet-

⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1949), 85.

⁶ Una Agnew, *A Buttonhole in Heaven? The mystical imagination of Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: Columba, 2019), 27.

⁷ Agnew, *Buttonhole*, 234.

⁸ Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: Born-again Romantic* (New York: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), 162.

⁹ Tom Stack, review of *A Buttonhole in Heaven? The mystical imagination of Patrick Kavanagh*, by Una Agnew, *The Furrow* 50, no. 3 (March 1999), 179.

¹⁰ Kavanagh, *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 45.

¹¹ Patrick Kavanagh, "The Great Hunger," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 88.

theologian, “Advent” and “Canal Bank Walk” constitute the definitive marker points that maintain the essential continuity, however erratic, in Kavanagh’s theological trajectory across a complex life plotted by pockets of despair, rejection and self-sabotage.

Kavanagh’s figure of the poet-theologian will not resolve the suspicion that can so often accompany the meeting of different disciplinary outlooks, but his ability to transcend such unease speaks to a characteristic lightness of touch that Kirwan, following Rahner and Aristotle, would call *eutrapelia*: “the mean between the extremes of boorish rudeness on the one hand and frivolity on the other.”¹² For Kirwan, *eutrapelia* is the best hope of a mutually respectful and nourishing dialogue between the disciplines of literature and theology, an “elusive conversational quality... which [holds] promise of an overcoming of ancient barriers of mutual suspicion.”¹³ Even those commentators who are reluctant to grant a serious theological element to Kavanagh’s work identify an appealing frankness and ease in his approach to “writing Catholic Ireland.”¹⁴ What they are identifying in these moments is Kavanagh’s distinctive genius as a poet-theologian: his *eutrapelia*. It is this lightness of touch that unifies the tenor and ensures an essential coherence in Kavanagh’s seemingly disparate pronouncements as poet-theologian. It is a unique blend of the “rectitude”¹⁵ and the “humorosity”¹⁶ he prizes in the poetic spirit. Indeed, there is an important sense in which Kavanagh’s declaration that “a poet is a theologian”¹⁷ is a challenge to other poets to display the same lightness of touch that his work does in its treatment of God. Seamus Heaney gets close to the *eutrapelia* of Kavanagh’s poet-theologian when he speaks of “in-betweenness” – the metaphysical half-spaces of life where the stuff of myth and mystery and poetry and the transcendent lie close at hand: “I like the in-betweenness of up and down, of being on the earth and of the heavens. I think that’s where poetry should dwell, between the dream world and the given world.”¹⁸ It is enough to say of Kavanagh’s theology that it achieved this “in-betweenness”. Frustrated at turns by his own failings and by the society in which he

¹² Michael Kirwan, “Theology and Literature in the English-Speaking World,” in *The Power of the Word*, eds. Francesca Knox and David Lonsdale, 9-30 (Ashgate: Farnham, 2015), 10.

¹³ Kirwan, *Theology and Literature*, 24.

¹⁴ Quinn, *Born-again Romantic*, 159. Quinn’s remarks at p. 389 are typical: “He drew liberally and unselfconsciously on Roman Catholic beliefs, symbology and terminology, with the ease of one who takes his religious culture for granted.”

¹⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, “From Monaghan to the Grand Canal” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 48, no. 189 (Spring 1959): 35.

¹⁶ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 21.

¹⁷ Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

¹⁸ Seamus Heaney, “15 Questions with Seamus Heaney,” interview by Hwung W. Kim, *The Harvard Crimson*, October 9, 2008, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2008/10/8/15-questions-with-seamus-heaney-seamus/>.

lived, his relentless belief in the power of the Word took him gradually towards the realisation of a detached, care-free wonder as the means to restore both his poetry and his relationship with God.

This study ran the risk of falling into the very trap outlined in its introduction by presuming theology has “the answer to every existential question”¹⁹ and reducing its analysis of Kavanagh’s working as a poet-theologian to the measure it tallied with the answers already provided by theologians such as Aquinas. To guard against this danger, this thesis has placed at its forefront the contention that Kavanagh did not seek to conform the poet to the mores of the theologian, but rather to expand the remit of both. His declaration did not seek the narrowness of ‘closure’, but the authority that comes with extending the ‘openness’ of poetry into one of the few realms it seemed reluctant to broach: the divine.

As the beginning of this study made clear, a realistic and attentive methodology was required to account for the tension that can accompany an interdisciplinary encounter between religion and literature, summarized by Felch: “religion and literature are not identical spheres of human endeavour; they may not always be allies.”²⁰ The alternating theological and poetic treatments of each of the chapters gave room for both sides of the encounter to establish a footing for its claims, while the shared concepts of wonder and sacrament united these claims and opened the opportunity for their fruitful interrelation by the end of the thesis. This methodology was rooted in contemporary practice in this oft-contested interdisciplinary arena, based on a conviction that “it is a matter of integrity and justice to consider our language carefully, to respect the terms preferred by practitioners, and to recognise that no one person can speak for an entire genre or an entire faith tradition.”²¹ Even as its subject, Patrick Kavanagh, spoke with the bold authority of the self-anointed poet-theologian, this thesis was mindful to treat with the utmost care the truth-claims and terminology of the two disciplines involved.

It is also important to point out that Kavanagh himself undertook his own degree of self-measuring against the discipline of Aquinas. His declaration that “a poet is a theologian”²² came only at the high point of his career, five years before his death. In order to accrue the

¹⁹ Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Vielleicht hält Gott sich einige Dichter* (Mainz: Matthias-Grunwald, 1991), 313.

²⁰ Susan M. Felch, “Introduction” in Susan M. Felch ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 16.

²¹ Felch, *Introduction*, 14.

²² Kavanagh, *Collected Prose*, 22.

confidence to make such an authoritative claim for poetry, Kavanagh's work had included references, comparisons and allusions to theology – Aquinas in particular – across several decades. The analysis of this study has shown that Kavanagh developed over time an affinity with and an intuition for the fundamentals of Aquinas' approach as a theologian. Kavanagh's sense of Aquinas was by no means an expertise, but by its analysis of Aquinas' tradition this thesis has shown that Kavanagh's theological intuition withstands, benefits from, and demands considerable theological scrutiny. Kavanagh's appetite for Christian material and his familiarity with the English writer would make Chesterton's classic portrait of Aquinas a likely source of his feeling for the saint. The kind of theologian Kavanagh had in mind as a model for his work as a poet is surely recognisable in the below passage from the closing stages of Chesterton's work:

It is often said that Saint Thomas... did not permit in his work the indescribable element of poetry... And yet I confess that, in reading his philosophy, I have a very peculiar and powerful impression analogous to poetry... a quality that is Primitive, in the best sense of a badly misused word: but anyhow, the pleasure is definitely not only of the reason, but also of the imagination... I mean the elemental and primitive poetry that shines through all his thoughts; and especially through the thought with which all his thinking begins. It is the intense rightness of his sense of the relation between the mind and the real thing outside the mind. That strangeness of things, which is the light in all poetry, and indeed in all art, is really connected with their otherness; or what is called their objectivity... The flower is a vision because it is not only a vision... this is for the poet the strangeness of stones and trees and solid things; they are strange because they are solid.²³

The appeal of such an intellectual and moral system to Kavanagh is clear. One of the defining features of Kavanagh's theology is the searing confidence of his sacramentality: his certainty that "God is down in the swamps and marshes"²⁴ shows the same belief Aquinas had in the 'objectivity', the 'solidity' of ordinary things: that what we see with our eyes really exists and can reliably communicate the reality of God. This is the bedrock of Aquinas' thought, and it is undoubtedly a keynote of Kavanagh's sacramental poetry. Once this profoundly simple principle is established, humble and gracious wonder is a natural theological or poetic response. If the flowers and trees and swamps are 'really there' and are constantly disclosing their divine origin, it is unimaginable to ignore the real depth of mysterious meaning in the

²³ G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1933), 228-229.

²⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, "The One," in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 291.

material world: what Chesterton calls “the strangeness of things”. Kavanagh’s approach as a poet-theologian is so often to recognise and honour this “strangeness”: to see God’s grandeur where others see the detritus of everyday life. “I knew some strange thing had happened”²⁵ is a brilliantly condensed summation of Kavanagh’s theopoetic intuition for ‘strangeness’, heightened to a pitch on a childhood Christmas morning.

Chesterton’s Aquinas is a likely model for Kavanagh’s poet-theologian, and his “strangeness”²⁶ an intriguing description for the “inbetweenness”²⁷ inherent in Kavanagh’s work. It confirms once more what this thesis has argued: that Kavanagh’s poet-theologian tended towards expansion and authority rather than narrowness or conformity. A serious analysis of the terms of that expansion did not seek to over-systematize his poetry with abstruse theological debate, but rather to reveal the luxurious in-between space Kavanagh conjured, where the divine “strangeness” of everyday things could become the concern of the poet as well as the theologian.

²⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, “A Christmas Childhood,” in *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 144.

²⁶ Chesterton, *Aquinas*, 229.

²⁷ Heaney, *15 Questions*,

Appendix A

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¹ Pirooska Szanto, *Drawing of Patrick Kavanagh*, 1965, in Peter Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper: a biography of Patrick Kavanagh* (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1979), 285.

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