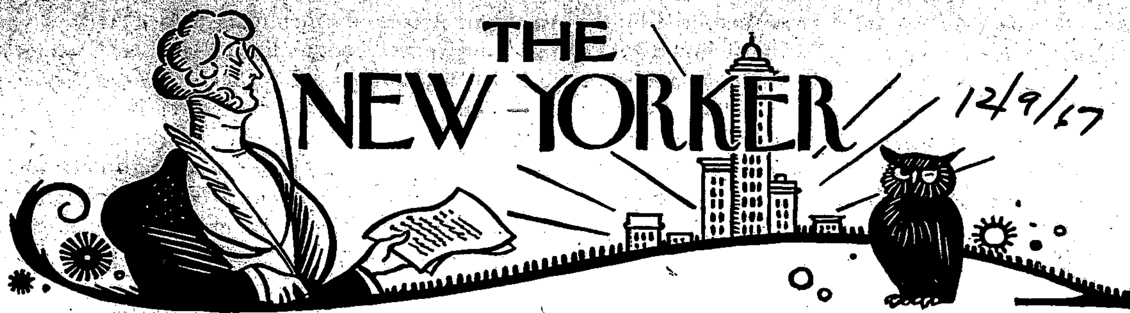
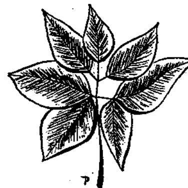


THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

WE used to think that only the vagueness and enchantment of distance could create mythical figures; now, after reading Josiah Thompson's "micro-study" of the Kennedy assassination, entitled "Six Seconds in Dallas," we conclude that closeness of scrutiny is also mythopoeic. For example, "the umbrella man": though the day was clear and blowy, he can be detected, in photographs, standing on the curb just about where the assassination would in a few seconds occur, holding a black umbrella above him; seconds later he is again photographed, walking away, gazing tranquilly at the scramble of horrified spectators. His umbrella is now furled. Who was he? Where is he now? And would any crowd, caught in the matrix of interlocking photographs taken in those few momentous seconds in Dealey Plaza, yield a figure or two equally anomalous and ominous? He dangles around history's neck like a fetish. And what of the other substanceless figures sifted from the clouds of witnesses: "the tan-coated man," seen now running away from the Texas School Book Depository Building, now riding in a gray Rambler driven by a Negro; and "the Secret Service agent," who identified himself to Patrolman Smith behind the stockade fence, though all Secret Service men had gone to Parkland Hospital; and—eeriest of all—the blurry figure visible, in some frames of Robert Hughes' 8-mm. movie film, in the window *beside* the pair of windows from which the shots, or some of the shots, were fired? We wonder whether a genuine mystery is being concealed here or whether any similar scrutiny of a minute section of time and space would yield similar strangenesses—gaps, inconsistencies, warps, and bubbles in the surface of circumstance. Perhaps, as with the elements of matter, investigation passes a threshold of common sense and enters a sub-atomic realm where laws are mocked, where persons have the life-span of beta particles and the transparency of neutrinos, and where a rough kind of averaging out must substitute for the absolute truth. The truth about those seconds in Dallas is especially elusive; the search for it seems to demonstrate how perilously empiricism verges on magic.

WE mourn the death in Dublin last week of Patrick Kavanagh, the premier poet of Ireland. Poetry is a hard trade, because it imposes on its practitioners the burden of an almost continuous idleness. Poets must find a place and assume a stance that will invite a peculiar lightning to strike them, and between lightnings they are expected to disimprove the hours and days with as little physical damage to themselves as possible. (It is usually the poet's stomach that suffers in order that the health of his eye and ear may be preserved. Kavanagh's friend Dylan Thomas was described by one of the doctors who attended him as having died of "a massive insult to the brain," but Thomas took care on other occasions to deliver many an insult to many a lesser organ.) Of poets it can be truly said that they also serve who only sit and wait, and if Ireland is a good place to grow poets in, it may be because the art of doing nothing is practiced there without notoriety. You can lounge all day in a pub and give no offense save by your tongue, and in Ireland to give offense by that means is a form of giving pleasure, perhaps even to your victims.



For a long time, Kavanagh made the seat of his strenuous non-endeavors a Dublin pub called McDaid's. He would shuffle in soon after ten in the morning and sit slumped and unmoving, a sackful of rumpled clothes, for an hour or so, uttering at intervals a muffled "Oh, dear God! Oh, dear God!," as if he were simultaneously taking the measure of how awful he felt as a consequence of the night before and making his pious ejaculations serve as a kind of thank offering that he had survived the night at all. By noon, having coughed and blown his nose and cleared his throat and tossed back several packets of anti-dyspeptic bread soda and a few small Scotches, he would be moved to coherent speech. Mild enough at first, his words would gain strength and malice as he continued. It was as if his powers of invective accumulated all the faster for being spent, and because he was a great hater of cant he never lacked for targets—local, national, or over the sea. Nor did he fear to lacerate himself for however and whenever he had played the fool with his talent. Teatime and suppertime would come and go, and Kavanagh would rumble and grumble on. His audience would see to it that there was a drop of something in the glass that rested all but invisible in the big chunk of his raw farmboy fist, and this continuously reinforced hospitality was the proof of his distinction: an Irishman has no difficulty earning free drinks by the sound of his voice in London or New York, which are in want of good talkers, but to earn them in Dublin! There Kavanagh was among his peers, and it was they who chose to keep him fortified and in eruption. Not that he would ever consent to be purchased by mere gawking hangers-on, or to be badgered by leeterary admirers who believed themselves to be making some sort of pilgrimage to some sort of shrine. Though he never roared and threatened the fabric of a building like that bull of Bashan, Brendan Behan, he shared Behan's superb vocabulary of scatological abuse, and, soiled and ram-

shackle though his coign of vantage might be, he kept it free of vermin.

A few years ago, Kavanagh gave a talk over the Irish TV, and in reading a copy of the talk one hears again the low, harsh voice, with its edge of savage indignation that an earlier Irish poet may have taught him how to sharpen and draw blood with: "My father, being a shoemaker, was probably less poor than the small-farmer classes. What was called the 'dropping shilling' kept coming in. But as for the *scraidins* of farmers with their watery little hills that would physic a snipe, I don't know where they got any money. . . . In those days [1946] in Dublin, the big thing besides being Irish was peasant quality. They were all trying to be peasants. They had been at it for years, but I hadn't heard. And I was installed as the authentic peasant, and what an idea that was among rascals pretending to have an interest in poetry. Although the literal idea of the peasant is a farm-labouring person, in fact a peasant is all that mass of mankind which lives below a certain level of consciousness. They live in the dark cave of the unconscious and they scream when they see the light."

We had met Kavanagh at McDaid's, and once, on one of his rare visits to America, we asked him to have a drink with us at the Algonquin. It was an exceptionally hot summer's day, and Kavanagh arrived in the lobby of the hotel with his year-round old heavy tweeds steaming. Vapor rose from his wrinkled face and up through the little green-plastic-visored cloth cap that he had on. A waiter explained that he would be unable to serve Kavanagh, because he wasn't wearing a necktie; however, the hotel would be glad to provide him with a temporary one. We expected Kavanagh to blow up, but not at all; he appeared charmed, and when the waiter returned with a nondescript brown tie of considerable age and degree of wear Kavanagh slipped it on with pleasure. An hour or so later, as we were leaving the hotel, the waiter hurried up and asked Kavanagh to surrender the pro-tem tie. Kavanagh looked stricken. He unknotted the tie and handed it over to the waiter with a sad shake of the head. "Oh, God, that's a lovely tie, that tie is," he said. "I was hoping to pull off a swipe."

In Orbit

A WEEK ago Tuesday, we dropped by the Waldorf-Astoria to look in on a conference that was sponsored by the American Astronautical Society and had been organized with the help of the Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation. Some two hundred astronautical engineers were gathered in and about the hotel's lobby, and were dimly illuminated by the Waldorf's Christmas decorations, which blinked and twinkled like an armada of satellites. The title of the conference was Astronautics International, and its avowed theme was International Coöperation in Space, but it looked to us as if the American spacemen outnumbered the foreigners ten to one. A Russian delegation had failed to appear, and, as for the other nations, their space programs are scarcely off the drawing boards. There were *some* foreign spacemen present, however. We met J. Bertrand, a Frenchman who is assistant director for technical plans of the European Space Research Organization, or ESRO. ESRO, the European version of NASA, is a coöperative enterprise of ten European countries. In spite of this grand alliance, M. Bertrand, who was wearing a dark-blue suit, seemed far from cheerful. He said glumly that ESRO had prepared a number of satellites but that none were in orbit. We asked what had happened to them, and learned that a small satellite, Esro II, was supposed to have been launched last May at the test range in Lompoc, California, but that the launch had failed. Curiously, Esro II had been scheduled for launching ahead of Esro I, which should have gone up in October but never made it, because one of the experiments it was to carry was late in arriving.

We wished M. Bertrand luck with his Esros and moved on to another

Frenchman, Jean d'Arcy, a wiry man with a lively Gallic face, who is director of the Radio and Visual Services Division of the United Nations. M. d'Arcy said that he wanted the United States to launch a communications satellite for the United Nations, adding that the U.N. would, however, settle for access to an already existing communications satellite, such as Comsat. "We need satellites for our operations throughout the world," M. d'Arcy said. "Telephones are no longer adequate. For situations like the recent crisis in Cyprus, we need *instant* communication. We could have used satellites to advantage during our operations in the Congo and the Middle East." A United Nations communications satellite, he continued, could be used in non-critical times for broadcasting United Nations meetings to remote parts of the world.

A little way off, we met Kevin Corrigan, a young man in an immaculate blue suit with red pinstripes, who is a consultant in New York on international communications. We asked if he knew M. d'Arcy. Mr. Corrigan nodded, and said that the United States could do more than it has done to foster international communication by satellite. The problem, he explained, is that the most efficient communications satellites have to be in what is called synchronous geostationary orbit over the earth—that is, in an orbit exactly twenty-two thousand three hundred miles above the equator, where a satellite can stay in the same position over the earth, provided that the satellite's velocity is approximately nineteen times that of the earth—and that, because they might interfere with one another electronically, only a limited number of them can be parked in synchronous geostationary orbit at any one time. Mr. Corrigan believes that this orbit is a resource that belongs to the world, and not to any one country, though at the moment certain communications interests in the United States are requesting communications satellites solely for domestic purposes. "Within the United States, communication by satellite is a redundancy, and a dangerous one," Mr. Corrigan said. "It could lead to the Balkanization of space, with each country having its own domestic satellite over the equator. Yet just three synchronized satellites, properly spaced, can cover the entire world." There is a sixty-nation partnership, called Intelsat, for worldwide communication by satellite, and Mr. Corrigan hinted that the corporations that own the transoceanic cables are not enthusiastic about it. The largest underwater telephone cable has