



FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
Univerzita Karlova

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE - FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR
DEPARTMENT OF ANGLOPHONE LITERATURES AND CULTURES

Class, Sexuality and Nationalism: Identity Building in the Prose Writings of Brendan Behan

Společenská třída, sexualita a nacionalismus: konstrukce identity v prózách Brendana Behana

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE
MA THESIS

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Praha, květen 2021
Prague, May 2021

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studijní obor (subject):
Anglistika a amerikanistika

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'L. R.', is written over a light blue rectangular background.

“There's a rocky old road I would follow, to a place that is heaven to me,
Though it's never so grand, still it's my fairyland, just a wonder world set apart,
In my island of dreams you are with me it seems”

To Patrick, who is more than just my “china,” my partner in crime, the Beatrice to my Brendan. Thank you for keeping me fed, rested and sane during the writing of this thesis. I promise to never make you read it in full and I love you.

Thank you to Professor Ondřej Pilný, who not only inspired me to come to UK, where I learned more and was taught by better teachers than I could have ever hoped for, but also to pursue my passion for Irish Studies. Without you, this thesis would never have seen the light of day and I thank you for your support and feedback throughout.

I also want to thank my family, especially my parents for making me who I am today, for introducing me to Ireland and taking me there as often as you did. For supporting my decisions and helping me fund my travels to Prague.

Thank you for always being there for me.

Lastly, to Brendan Behan, whose story fascinated me even as a young teenager and whose words have accompanied me ever since: thank you.

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‘Somebody to love you:’ Introduction

“The principal thing to do in this world, is to get something to eat and something to drink and somebody to love you.”¹

Walking around Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin, eventually one may find the grave of ‘Dublin’s laughing boy,’ Brendan Behan. The final resting place of the famously boisterous author is only remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, it is adorned by a small figure sitting cross-legged atop the gravestone scribbling into a notebook, an ode to his lifelong devotion to his craft. Secondly, often enough, one might find a pint of Guinness placed on the grave. This Dublin tradition honouring one of the city’s most beloved characters alludes to his other, perhaps more well-known side, that of the perpetually drunken entertainer. Playing into Behan’s love for the “gargle” by buying him a pint is, however, not the only way his city remembers him. Along the Royal Canal a visitor so inclined may sit down with the author to enjoy the peaceful atmosphere. Of course, fifty-seven years after his early death, it is only a statue by John Coll that will keep the visitor company. The placement of this statue, which was unveiled in 2003, 12 years after a similar statue of Patrick Kavanagh by the same artist took its place on the canal, speaks to the author’s position within Dublin’s literary pantheon. While a statue of James Joyce has taken centre stage just off the city’s tourist hot spot of O’Connell Street, where anyone might come across it, for the last 31 years, Behan’s effigy is all but hidden out of sight quite close to where the Russell Street home of his childhood would have stood. While this honours his status as one of Dublin’s favourite sons, one of whom many may tell an interesting story or two, usually involving some drunken escapade in one of the city’s numerous pubs, it also mirrors how his generation lived and wrote in Joyce’s shadow. Just as no Irish writer could as of yet replace Joyce’s statue’s prominent placement, so no writer can escape the influence of and comparison with Joyce’s literary achievements. When it comes to Behan, it is his public persona, not his literary legacy which people tend to remember. Indeed, when reading accounts of Behan’s life and writings, there is consensus about the fact that he was “a writer whose literary accomplishments have frequently been overshadowed by the notoriety of his public persona.”² In fact, his larger-than-life persona found little favour in puritanical mid-century Ireland, anxious to leave behind notions of stage-Irishry which Behan seemed to embody. As John Brannigan indicates,

¹ Brendan Behan, *Brendan Behan’s New York* (London: Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 1984) 92.

² Martha C. Carpentier, “Introduction,” *Joycean Legacies*, ed. Martha C. Carpentier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 5.

Behan's stage-Irish persona undoubtedly had much to do with the ambivalence with which he was received in Ireland. His alcoholism, exuberance and profanity perhaps offended the sensibilities of a modernising, middle-class Ireland, eager to show the world the signs of its maturity and respectability.³

This legacy has also affected Behan's position within the canon of Irish literature and the Irish literary industry, as John McCourt has recently pointed out:

In December 2017, what Christie's auctioneers described as 'The literary and personal archive of Brendan Behan' was sold in London, almost unnoticed, for the relatively modest sum of £200,000. [...] The National Library of Ireland chose not to buy these precious documents, which were sold without earning as much as a mention in Irish newspapers.⁴

Like the recent collection *Reading Brendan Behan*, edited by McCourt, this thesis seeks to redirect critical focus to the author's literary output, as well as support the collection's claim "that Behan's works deserve a more prominent place in the pantheon of twentieth-century Irish literature."⁵ Furthermore, partly due to the author's limited output, there is a tendency to focus on his two major plays, *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*, which brought him the fame that would eventually be his downfall. However, "*Borstal Boy* [...] is shown to function as the core of Behan's entire output"⁶ by the contributors to *Reading Brendan Behan*. That Behan's autobiographical novel, focused on the time he spent in English prisons in his youth, is the centrepiece of his oeuvre, as well as his personally most meaningful piece of writing, is also proposed in earlier critical work by Colbert Kearney and the biography *Brendan Behan: Man and Showman*, written by his close friend and collaborator Rae Jeffs. Kearney, a second cousin of Behan's, suggests that the author's choice in *The Scarperer*, his only other novel, to "sho[w] us the effect of imprisonment through the eyes of a young boy who is inside for the first time"⁷ is an indication of his preoccupation with *Borstal Boy*, which he was already working on at the time. Jeffs, on the other hand, recalls Behan asking her: "All this will help my book, won't it?"⁸ referring to the success of *The Hostage* on the London stage. That the acclaim received for the play should be conceived, by the author, as good press for his upcoming book implies that he was, in fact, equally if not more concerned with the success of his prose writings. It is for this reason that this project focuses on Brendan Behan's prose

³ John Brannigan, *Brendan Behan: Cultural Nationalism and the Revisionist Writer* (Paperback reprint, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014) 22.

⁴ John McCourt, "Reading Brendan Behan: Introduction," *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 1.

⁵ McCourt 2.

⁶ McCourt 8.

⁷ Colbert Kearney, *The Writings of Brendan Behan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977) 42.

⁸ Rae Jeffs, *Brendan Behan: Man and Showman* (London: Corgi Books, 1968) 59.

texts. Specifically, it examines how in his prose, the author uses notions of class, sexuality and nationalism to create identity.

Since most if not all of Behan's prose writing is of autobiographical nature, it is not just his characters' identities that are formed through his writing, but his own public self as well. The resulting confusion of Behan, the public figure, Behan, the literary character and Behan, the author that is visible in much critical work about him, seems to also have affected him personally, as Rae Jeffs discloses:

Ever the great showman, he enjoyed living up to what was expected of him, confounding his friends and his critics in equal measure, and for a while he was able to keep these various acts in surprisingly tidy compartments. [...] he acted the man well, hard and long, until somehow the true Brendan got lost in the character part and even he could no longer differentiate. [...] He became the shell of himself – the unfulfilled, wasted talent.⁹

This was, of course, a development of later years. In his early prose, as well as in *Borstal Boy*, the fictional versions Behan creates of himself are still far from the ebullient perpetually drunken character referred to here, some of the more implicitly autobiographical short stories even expressing elements of his character that otherwise needed to be hidden. Jeffs asserts: "If he did not object to the false reputation that he was building up around himself, he did mind when this reputation coloured people's opinion of his work."¹⁰ Accordingly, it is important while considering Behan's biography alongside his writing, not to allow the spectre of his legend to overshadow the power of his literary output. Instead, it can be argued that each of Behan's prose works, to some extent, echoes a part of his life, later works necessarily exhibiting signs of weakness, illness and the effects of celebrity status. The closing line of *Confessions of an Irish Rebel*,¹¹ for instance, "resonates with a sense of closure, of words spoken from a death bed, as if Behan is dictating how he wishes to be remembered,"¹² as Brannigan indicates in his monograph *Brendan Behan: Cultural Nationalism and the Revisionist Writer*. Additionally, he argues, "in Catholic ritual, the confessional is an important part of an individual's preparations for death [...] To confess is thus to offer up the final autobiographical version of one's life."¹³ Since, according to Kearney, Behan was aware of his impending death,¹⁴ *Confessions* can thus be read as the author's final bow. Of course,

⁹ Jeffs 13.

¹⁰ Jeffs 83.

¹¹ "And I can only say, like, 'I've been faithful to thee, after my fashion.'"

See: Brendan Behan, *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* (London: Arrow Books, 1991) 259.

¹² Brannigan 161.

¹³ Brannigan 164.

¹⁴ Kearney 140.

Brendan Behan's New York, which contains numerous references to Behan's failing health is another case in point.

Moreover, the development of Behan's literary persona throughout his oeuvre follows his personal descent from rebel-come-writer to a man getting lost in his public persona. This is especially apparent in the last three finished works by Behan, namely *Brendan Behan's Island*, *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* and *Brendan Behan's New York*. All three were not physically written by him, but rather dictated to his editor Rae Jeffs due to Behan's declining health. It was Jeffs who then made the recordings into the books they are today, padding the spoken material with elements from their personal acquaintance and pieces of Behan's earlier writings. All three titles, thus, rely on Behan's reputation as a rebel and celebrity more than on their actual literary quality. Furthermore, the way the character of Brendan Behan is constructed in these texts is partially due to Jeffs' and the public's view of Behan at the time and therefore requires a different approach than those works in which he was more actively involved. For this reason, they will not be discussed in detail within the limits of this thesis.

As Sean Ryder argues in his chapter in Liam Harte's *Modern Irish Autobiography*, "autobiographical writing is as much a product of the time of its composition as it is a reflection on that time."¹⁵ It is thus vital for the analysis of autobiographical works to consider the historical and personal circumstances of their gestation; in the words of Claire Lynch:

an artificial narrative structure must be applied to histories of all scales – personal and national – in order that they become meaningful. The writing of autobiography provides perhaps the best example of this, compiling as it must the multiple histories of the self, others, cultures, and contexts into a workable narrative structure. As a consequence, autobiography evolves alongside the changing influences and motivations of history.¹⁶

In Behan's case the historical background to his life and writing is of particular interest. Born in 1923, he never grew tired of recalling that:

all my family were in the Rising [...] I grew up to be rather surprised and condescending to any grown-up person who had not taken part in it. [...] Now I have learned enough arithmetic to know that I could not possibly have taken part in an event which happened seven years before I was born, and it saddens me.¹⁷

¹⁵ Sean Ryder, "'With a Heroic Life and a Governing Mind': Nineteenth-Century Irish Nationalist Autobiography," *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, ed. Liam Harte (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 27.

¹⁶ Claire Lynch, *Irish Autobiography: Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation* (Oxford : Wien: Lang, 2009) 9.

¹⁷ Jeffs 118.

Growing up at a time when Ireland, for the first time in almost a decade, was at peace, albeit not united, he would, according to McCourt, forever have “to deal with the dull, even dour, aftermath of the previous, more heroic age of Irish twentieth-century history.”¹⁸ As Brannigan indicates, “De Valera’s failure to ‘complete’ the nationalist revolution, and more importantly his legitimising embrace of the counter-revolutionary ideologies of state nationalism, left cultural nationalism in the mid-century with nothing but its memories.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Bernice Schrank argues, “postcolonial Ireland fashioned repressive domestic policies in support of rural life, patriarchal domestic arrangements, small shopkeepers and farmers, artistic censorship and Catholicism.”²⁰ In such an Ireland, the young Brendan Behan was faced with a desire to fight for his country’s complete freedom, inspired by family history, literature and conviction. First jailed aged sixteen for acting upon that desire, a growing boy with an unfixed personality, he had to find ways to assert his identity in the face of the uniformizing force of prison. Even after his imprisonment, Behan, “rendered [...] an outsider in Ireland [by] his working-class background and socialist beliefs, his bisexuality, his involvement in acts of republican terrorism at a time when it was neither profitable nor popular”²¹ struggled to assert his identity as a man, a nationalist and later a writer within his newly independent but not yet free home country.

Ryder points out that

memoirists themselves frequently draw attention to the way events are constructed differently by the writings of others, and especially by the ‘official’ discourse of the government. Apart from *bona fide* errors of memory, there are dangers of bias, relativity and partiality of perspective.²²

It is therefore advisable in the analysis of a largely autobiographical oeuvre such as Behan’s to read it alongside biographies of him written by others. The discrepancies uncovered through the consultation of first and foremost Michael O’Sullivan’s *Brendan Behan: A Life* between Behan’s depiction of events and the factually researched sequence of the same occurrences significantly influence how the creation of identity in Behan’s prose writings is figured. Referring to the changes made in different versions of *Borstal Boy*, Schrank agrees that “careful study of the manuscript revisions testifies to Behan’s efforts to bring to his life

¹⁸ McCourt 2.

¹⁹ Brannigan 11.

²⁰ Bernice Schrank, “Creating the Self, Recreating the Nation: The Politics of Irish Literary Autobiography from Moore to Behan,” *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, ed. Liam Harte (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 35.

²¹ McCourt 4.

²² Ryder 23. Original emphasis.

writing all the benefits of fictional enhancement, reshaping, at least in part, the documentary truths of his early life to sharpen the unorthodox insights of his maturity.”²³ Of course, the collusion of autobiography and identity formation is based on the assumption that, since “in autobiography the author is the text,”²⁴ the self is a construct, like the text representing it. As Liam Harte puts it, “the (de)composing self, may in fact be no more than an effect of the process of writing.”²⁵ Consequently, this thesis will continue to reference several volumes on Irish autobiography and memory for the analysis of its chosen primary literature.

Autobiography has a long tradition within Ireland’s cultural landscape. In the nineteenth century, nationalist prison memoirs celebrating the martyrdom necessary to the cause were a common genre. Behan himself was familiar with these texts, the ideals of which were difficult to reconcile with the reality of gaol he encountered. His autobiographical writings thus make an interesting addition to the Irish tradition of life-writing for the purpose of nation-making. Furthermore, in the introduction to *A History of Irish Autobiography*, Harte writes that William Butler Yeats, George Moore and Sean O’Casey “were compulsive self-interrogators whose mastery of the multi-volume autobiography established the importance of life-writing within the larger project of Irish cultural nationalism.”²⁶ In this context, it will be argued in this thesis that Behan’s move away from violent republicanism cannot be read as abandonment of conviction, but rather as a choice to pursue a more demure nationalism through his writing instead. Lynch agrees that “[t]he contrast between the idealism which inspires activity and the disillusionment which inspires writing [...] is a common and important structural pattern of Irish autobiography.”²⁷ Indeed, in *Borstal Boy*, Behan follows

a narrative arc that propels the [...] protagonist from an idealism fuelled by the rhetoric of romantic nationalism, through varying degrees of doubt and disappointment with the politics of liberation, to eventual alienation from, or partial accommodation with, the unheroic actualities of state and society after independence.²⁸

²³ Bernice Schrank, “Telling It Like It Is (and Isn’t): Recreating the Self in Brendan Behan’s *Borstal Boy*,” *Brno Studies in English* 37.2 (2011): 174, Digital Library Masarykova Univerzita <https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/bitstream/handle/11222.digilib/118148/1_BrnoStudiesEnglish_37-2011-2_15.pdf?sequence=1> 30 Dec. 2020.

²⁴ Lynch 12.

²⁵ Liam Harte, “Introduction: Autobiography and the Irish Cultural Moment,” *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, ed. Liam Harte (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 5.

²⁶ Liam Harte, “Introduction: Autobiography Theory and Criticism in Ireland,” *A History of Irish Autobiography*, ed. Liam Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 2, Cambridge Core <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/history-of-irish-autobiography/4CE4C02E8650335B004C064F6D29F6DE>> 2 Jan. 2021.

²⁷ Lynch 31.

²⁸ Harte, *A History of Irish Autobiography* 5. Referencing Michael Kenneally.

This, according to Harte, is an arrangement typical of post-revival Irish autobiography.

On the other hand, in the post-independence Ireland of Behan's lifetime, autobiography began to be an important tool for the portrayal of 'hidden' Irelands,²⁹ i.e. voices that did not fit into the state's vision of itself. It also functioned to fix identity in the isolationism and repressiveness that became unanimous with the de Valera era, which exposed an Ireland unsure of its own identity. The alienation from the state referred to above often stems from the original identification of the self with the nation, which inevitably leads to disappointment. Due to the colonial history of Ireland, the idea that "to tell the story of the self is to write the narrative of Ireland"³⁰ is ubiquitous in pre-independence writing. This is because, in a colonial setting, "autobiography is implicitly political and the writing of the self a means of forcefully confronting the other which has shaped that self and brought about its losses,"³¹ as Eve Patten indicates. Consequently, "[a]utobiography's potential not only to represent but to be representative"³² has often led to the assumption that the self created in nationalist autobiographies was the only authentic Irish self. Considering that this self was mostly male, heterosexual and of the middle or upper classes, this depiction marginalised various significant groups. Regarding class, Emmet O'Connor mentions that

the narrative act of placing oneself at the centre of events is an act of presumption and self-regard. It requires a measure of education, egotism and even arrogance (not to mention contacts with publishers), traits that were traditionally in shorter supply among the working class than among other groups.³³

The same is, of course, true for women, who were usually expected to remain within the private sphere. Members of the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland were censored to the point of criminalisation virtually until the end of the twentieth century. However, as Harte argues "[a]lthough often intended to offer a template of paradigmatic national collectivity, the textualised selves that are brought into being by the act of autobiography testify instead to the plurality of experiences and lay bare the constitutive differences that comprise the nation."³⁴

²⁹ Brannigan 15.

³⁰ Nicholas Allen, "Autobiography and the Irish Literary Revival," *A History of Irish Autobiography*, ed. Liam Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 152, Cambridge Core <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/history-of-irish-autobiography/4CE4C02E8650335B004C064F6D29F6DE>> 2 Jan. 2021.

³¹ Eve Patten, "'Life Purified and Rejected': Autobiography and the Modern Irish Novel," *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, ed. Liam Harte (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 67.

³² Lynch 10.

³³ Emmet O'Connor, "The Autobiography of the Irish Working Class," *A History of Irish Autobiography*, ed. Liam Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 209, Cambridge Core <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/history-of-irish-autobiography/4CE4C02E8650335B004C064F6D29F6DE>> 2 Jan. 2021.

³⁴ Harte, *Modern Irish Autobiography* 4.

Hence, “the fraught relationship between subject and nation for those marginalized by gender, class position and material circumstance,”³⁵ as well as by sexuality, has to be taken into account. In other words, by repurposing the genre of autobiography to portray working-class communities, same-sex relationships³⁶ and leniency towards the English, Behan changes the way in which Irish national identity and personal identity in general are formed through writing.

Behan’s works are considered by Lynch to be among those autobiographical texts which “highlight the emergent individuality of the author.”³⁷ This individuality, as mentioned above, is forged by the author himself. Thus, it is important to consider at what point in the autobiographer’s life the text was produced and which part of his life it concentrates on. Moreover, a reader may only expect an autobiographical text to be truthful when they also consider the writer capable of reliably remembering and choosing, as well as honestly portraying the relevant events of his life.³⁸ Hence, in order to be able to establish how identity is formed in Behan’s prose writings, the narrative arrangement of these texts has to be examined. As Birgit Neumann indicates, “identity and biographical continuity rely completely on the ability to remember.”³⁹ Indeed, “the narrativisation of remembered experience produces individual and social memory and thus contributes to individual and collective identifications.”⁴⁰ Michael Böss adds that

³⁵ Harte, *A History of Irish Autobiography* 9.

³⁶ When considering the author’s allusions to non-heterosexuality, Barry McCrea’s *Languages of the Night* offers pertinent insights. In his monograph, McCrea connects writers’ same-sex attractions to their use of a language which is not their mother tongue. For Behan, the use of Irish, be it in his poetry or the play *An Giall*, was one way of adding to his character as post-independence writer, rebel and Irishman. Moreover, McCrea indicates that “[t]he years in which Behan was active in the Irish language coincide with those in which he most actively pursued homoerotic affairs” (65). Irish, he argues, “was a means to express a more generalized sense of not being at home in the world,” (60) since non-heterosexual desires were strictly taboo in mid-century Ireland. However, since the analysis of Behan’s work in Irish is beyond the scope of this thesis, this argument will be of limited use in the following chapters, despite its poignancy.

For further details, see: Barry McCrea, *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in Twentieth-Century Ireland and Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 65 + 60, EBSCOHOST <<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=cb71276e-14e4-4f69-9f3a-9d76d02549e4%40pdc-v-sessmgr04&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=960163&db=nlebk>> 20 Jan. 2021.

³⁷ Lynch 5.

³⁸ Ryder 23.

³⁹ Birgit Neumann, „Literatur, Erinnerung, Identität,“ *Gedächtniskonzepte der Literaturwissenschaft: Theoretische Grundlagen und Anwendungsperspektiven*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005) 151, DE GRUYTER <<https://www-degruyter-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/view/title/16762>> 9 Jan. 2021. My translation: “Identität und biographische Kontinuität [beruhen] allein auf der Erinnerungsfähigkeit.“

⁴⁰ Hedda Friberg, Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Lene Yding Pedersen, “Introduction: Memory as Re-Covering,” *Recovering Memory: Irish Representations of Past and Present*, eds. Hedda Friberg, Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Lene Yding Pedersen (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2007) xii, EBSCOHOST <<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzUzMjIxM19fQU41?sid>>

throughout his or her life, the individual is engaged in a process of re-interpreting and re-narrating his or her self. [...] individual self-narrativisation implies the constant integration of new, different and partly self-contradictory circumstances and experiences into individual life stories. In most cases, however, the chronological character of the narrative self prevents such new experiences from becoming threatening or disrupting. It is only when we fail to integrate new experiences into our 'story' that we may feel a 'crisis of identity.'⁴¹

It will be argued that in *Borstal Boy*, such a "crisis of identity" occurs when the character Brendan Behan does not manage to merge his self-narrative, namely that of republican martyr, with his real in-prison experience of fear, alienation and positive feelings towards members of the enemy state. This crisis is not momentary, but gradual, eventually leading to certain amendments in the character's self-narrative, which will be further discussed later on.

Having established the link between memory, narrative and identity, it is now clear why narrative categories such as "the selection and arrangement of plot elements and setting, the relationship between characters, plot structures as well as narrative perspective (through narration and focalisation)"⁴² are going to be essential in the analysis of Behan's prose writings. Special focus will be placed on the narrator, elaborating on the notion that "[t]he singular writer of autobiography is spliced into: author, narrator and subject; simultaneously outside the text, within it, and of it,"⁴³ as Lynch puts it. Therefore, the narrator's relationship to the text and his reliability become of interest. Vera Nünning elaborates: "The 'narrating-I' explains, comments and evaluates the experiences of the 'experiencing-I' from a later, matured perspective, which often highlights interpretations which were not accessible to the experiencing-I."⁴⁴ The awareness of this split is crucial to the analysis of Behan's prose

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⁴¹ Michael Böss, "Relating to the Past: Memory, Identity and History," *Recovering Memory: Irish Representations of Past and Present*, eds. Hedda Friberg, Irene Gilsean Nording and Lene Yding Pedersen (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2007) 23, EBSCOHOST <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/uaccess.univie.ac.at/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxIYmtfXzUzMjIxM19fQU41?sid=0fd95a26-8039-49f2-96a1-6e812dd90231@pdc-v-sessmgr04&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_viii&rid=0> 15 Jan. 2021.

⁴² Astrid Erll and Simone Rogendorf, "Kulturgeschichtliche Narratologie: Die Historisierung und Kontextualisierung kultureller Narrative," *Neue Ansätze in der Erzähltheorie*, eds. Ansgar Nünning and Vera Nünning (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2002) 82. My translation: "Auswahl und Anordnung von Handlungselementen und Schauplätzen, Figurenkonstellation, Plotstrukturen sowie narrative Perspektivierung (durch Narration und Fokalisierung)"

⁴³ Lynch 43.

⁴⁴ Vera Nünning, "Erzählen und Identität: Die Bedeutung des Erzählens im Schnittfeld zwischen kulturwissenschaftlicher Narratologie und Psychologie," *Kultur – Wissen – Narration: Perspektiven transdisziplinärer Erzählforschung für die Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Alexandra Strohmaier (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013) 153, DE GRUYTER <<https://www-degruyter-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/transcript/view/title/466187>> 11 Jan. 2021. My translation: "Das ›erzählende Ich‹ erklärt, kommentiert und bewertet die Erfahrungen des ›erlebenden Ich‹ aus einer späteren, gereiften Perspektive, die oft andere Deutungen in den Mittelpunkt stellt, als dem ›erlebenden Ich‹ zugänglich waren."

works. The figure of the narrator requires special attention in the analysis of the author's short stories, collected in *After the Wake*. Different as most of these are in terms of tone in particular, the narrator acts as a highly influential force in characterisation and identity building in all of them. Behan may naturally be regarded as a prime suspect in creating unreliable narrators because of the way he portrayed himself in real life. His lies and fabrications in much of his work are another way in which, narratologically, his identity and that of his characters are created.

The theoretical and contextual approach outlined above will be applied to the following selection of Brendan Behan's prose works: in the first part of this thesis, the collection of his short stories, *After the Wake*, will be analysed, as well as his early novel, *The Scarperer*. Additionally, a selection of his *Irish Press* columns will be examined, as collected in *Hold Your Hour and Have Another*. These three books have been grouped together, as they are the earliest examples of Behan's prose writing. In the next chapter, *Borstal Boy*, the author's most extensive work and, as some have argued, masterpiece, will be in focus. The four subheadings relate to the most prominent themes of the novel as regards the formation of the character Brendan Behan on and off the page. Finally, in the conclusion the results of this detailed analysis will be discussed.

‘Our budding genius’: Early Works

“The Irish are not my audience;
they are my raw material.”¹

When asked in an interview on television whether he would like the people of Ireland to be his audience as well rather than just his “raw material” Brendan Behan replied: “No, I don’t care.”² Although he seems to have told Rae Jeffs the same thing, there are also voices, among them Derek Hand, claiming that Behan was “destined to be profoundly misunderstood in the one place where he want[ed] desperately to be understood: his home.”³ The reasons for this lack of recognition were, of course, his socialism, sexuality and history with militant nationalism. Despite being alienated from the official image of Ireland, Behan, like Joyce, used the people of Dublin as inspiration for much of his writing. Unlike his towering predecessor, however, he never left the city behind completely, always returning home, more or less willingly from sojourns in France, England and later the US. These absences, however, only added to the grievances felt towards Ireland, which frequently become the focus of Behan’s short stories and *Irish Press* columns, while also being an underlying current in *The Scarperer*.

Having finally gained partial independence, mid-century Ireland tried to build itself up from the ground as an Irish-speaking, Catholic state. This meant, however, that “significant minorities were excluded from the nation’s successes throughout the century, and many [...] sought to regain some lost status through autobiographical writing,”⁴ as Claire Lynch argues. Eamon de Valera’s narrative of Ireland, like earlier Revival stories, honed in on an idyllic vision of rural Ireland, thereby marginalising city-dwellers such as Behan and his family. As John McCourt indicates, “Behan found himself attempting, almost single-handedly, to give voice to the Dublin working class and to Dublin republicanism but also straining to represent a working class that transcended nationalism.”⁵ Furthermore, in what Declan Kiberd calls the “far-from-free state,”⁶ any mention of homosexuality was taboo. Thus Behan, newly released from prison and ready to become a successful writer, felt that he, like Beckett and Joyce

¹ “Brendan Behan on Camera,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dexmusic, 9 Feb. 2016
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVHThmt21AY>> 20 Jan. 2021.

² “Brendan Behan on Camera”

³ Derek Hand, “Brendan Behan’s Borstal Boy: The Public Persona and the Delicate Art of Deceit,” *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 20.

⁴ Claire Lynch, *Irish Autobiography: Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation* (Oxford: Wien: Lang, 2009) 4.

⁵ John McCourt, “Reading Brendan Behan: Introduction,” *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 3.

⁶ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of The Modern Nation* (London: Vintage 1996) 166.

before him, would have to leave Ireland for Paris in order to be able to freely express himself. There he could publish stories without worrying about Irish censorship rulings.

Some of these stories, it has been argued, he later deemed “pornography.” Indeed, Behan’s wife Beatrice reports that “he had spent penniless years [in Paris], and he had written pornography to survive.”⁷ These claims were frequently accompanied by his excuse: “Hunger makes pornographers of us all.”⁸ Since there are no known surviving examples of any pornographic writing by the author, John Brannigan, amongst others, alludes to the suspicion that Behan might have been referring to stories such as “After the Wake,” rather than actual pornography. However, he argues, the story in fact “is not properly pornographic [...] since it represents sexual desire, but not the sexual act itself.”⁹ Still, the mere focus on same-sex attraction would have been outrageous in Dublin at the time. On the other hand, what Behan may have been referring to was not necessarily writing stories with pornographic content, but rather writing only for money, thereby selling out artistically. He makes similar references in poems such as *Buíochas le Joyce*¹⁰ and in various columns, where he has characters call him a “hack.”

Be that as it may, all of Behan’s prose follows, in the words of Hand, the “basic desire to tell stories that had not been told before, to get at the real beneath the veneer of official Ireland,”¹¹ to, in other words, represent the various facets of his own life and the people surrounding him. Michael Kenneally indicates that “in Irish autobiography we find a sophisticated use of innuendo, caricature, gossip, the wisecrack, and the *bon mot*, all of which contribute to a highly personalised manner of writing.”¹² Correspondingly, in the introduction to *After the Wake*, Peter Fallon writes about the story “The Last of Mrs Murphy” and the final, unfinished novel *the catacombs* that they “are infused with compassion, wit and perceptive comment.”¹³ He then goes on to describe “the hallmarks of the author’s talent – an ability to bring characters to life quickly and unforgettably, a sharp ear for dialogue and dialect, and a natural vocation for story-telling.”¹⁴ Although Fallon makes these claims mostly based on the short

⁷ Peter Fallon, “Introduction,” Brendan Behan, *After the Wake*, ed. Peter Fallon (Dublin: The O’Brien Press Ltd., 1996) 11. Quoting Beatrice Behan, *My Life with Brendan*.

⁸ Michael O’Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1997) 154.

⁹ John Brannigan, *Brendan Behan: Cultural Nationalism and the Revisionist Writer* (Paperback reprint, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014) 57.

¹⁰ The poem deals with anxiety of artistic influence and profiting of Joyce’s legacy.

Source: Thomas O’Grady, “Thanks be to Joyce: Brendan Behan á Paris,” *Joycean Legacies*, ed. Martha C. Carpentier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 33-53.

¹¹ Hand 20.

¹² Quoted in Lynch 31.

¹³ Fallon 11.

¹⁴ Fallon 11.

stories, fragments and *Irish Press* columns compiled in his collection, they can be applied to all of Behan's prose writings. Fallon also alludes to the confusion between Behan, the author and Behan, the character which is one of the central points of discussion in this thesis. Indeed, of the previously unpublished fragment of *the catacombs*,¹⁵ Fallon writes: "It is filled with memorable characters – Uncle Hymie, Stinking Fish and the author himself, for this time there is no attempt to disguise the identity of the chief protagonist."¹⁶ This implies, in the context of the short story collection, that in Fallon's view, Behan inserts himself into most, if not all of his stories. In order to expand on this notion, early examples of Behan's prose will be analysed in this chapter, namely his surviving short stories, the early novel *The Scarperer* and his *Irish Press* columns, all published before he rose to international fame. In these texts, as McCourt argues, Behan seeks to fashion "a model of how to impose a city setting, city voices and a city aesthetic on his writings at a time when there was an undoubted supremacy of the rural in Irish writing."¹⁷ It is Behan's tendency to use his own background, experiences and aspirations in his writing that leads him to present the city as a viable literary setting.

His upbringing also influences the way he presents himself in his texts. As Colbert Kearney indicates, Behan's mother

Kathleen brought up her children to have an almost religious reverence for her brother Peadar; even at the height of his fame Brendan often described himself as nephew to the author of the Irish national anthem. As a child he saw Kearney as an example of what he himself longed to be: soldier, writer, socialist, celebrity.¹⁸

In the selected texts, traces of what would become even more pronounced throughout his writings, namely Behan's desire to live up to his idol Peadar Kearney are already visible. He fashions himself a soldier through the implication of insight into the IRA in "The Execution," a socialist through his poignant commentary in "The Last of Mrs Murphy," as well as a writer and budding celebrity in the columns. *The Scarperer* is concerned with a more ordinary criminal crowd. Still, the novel already includes hints of those elements typical of Behan's later fiction: experimentation with genre, insight into prison structures, as well as the portrayal of class conflict and working-class communities.

¹⁵ As *the catacombs* was written late in the life of the author and remained unfinished, it will not be further discussed in the course of this thesis.

¹⁶ Fallon 15.

¹⁷ John McCourt, "Not exactly patterned in the Same Mould': Behan's Joyce," *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 147.

¹⁸ Colbert Kearney, *The Writings of Brendan Behan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977) 19.

‘I can’t resist being liked’: *After the Wake*

After the Wake is a collection of six short stories, the novel fragment *the catacombs* and fourteen columns previously published in the *Irish Press*.¹⁹ It was assembled in 1981 by Peter Fallon and named after one of Behan’s most accomplished stories. This section will be dedicated to the short stories. Alongside Irish language poetry, short stories were Behan’s first literary output as an adult. The first of these texts to be printed was the autobiographical story “I Become a Borstal Boy,” the 1942 publication of which in *The Bell* coincided with the beginning of Behan’s second term of incarceration, this time, after a two year stay in English prisons and borstals, in Ireland. As Kearney argues, Behan “had always had literary ambitions and, like many other prisoners, he found that the discipline of life in jail afforded the time and the concentration necessary for composition.”²⁰ Hence, even though there is ample evidence of Behan’s juvenilia, it was only during his time in gaol in the 1940s that he began to write with a view of making a living from it. In a letter to the Commandant of Arbour Hill, the military prison he spent part of his sentence in, he writes:

there is a big market open just now for short stories, particularly in England, due to the fact that many pre-war writers are now serving in the armed forces etc. As I intend to adopt the profession of letters, whenever I shall return to normal existence, it would be of great help to me if I could get ‘dug in’ so to speak, while stories are in demand and cannot be supplied by well-known authors.²¹

According to Michael O’Sullivan, this letter written in 1943 is the first indication of Behan valuing his writing over his duties as an IRA soldier. During his four years in Mountjoy Prison, Arbour Hill and the Curragh Camp the author fought ferociously to gain the right to have his work published,²² even promising to not touch upon “controversial matters (politics, Irish prisoners, etc.).”²³ It would, however, take his release under general amnesty and his departure for Paris for the next stories to meet the public.

In later years Behan apparently told Rae Jeffs:

ten years ago in Strangeways Prison I stopped trying to find political solutions and began seriously to write. I don’t argue the political issues involved between England

¹⁹ In a later section of this thesis a selection of columns from the collection *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* will be discussed. Of the weekly columns Behan wrote for the *Irish Press* between 1954 and 1956, 46 were collected in *Hold Your Hour*, 14 were published in *After the Wake*. Of these 14, 5 had already appeared in *Hold Your Hour*.

²⁰ Kearney 27.

²¹ O’Sullivan 106-107.

²² O’Sullivan 86-120.

²³ O’Sullivan 107.

and Ireland any more. In my work, I try to mirror what happens to the people involved and leave it to the literary intelligentsia to expound their own theories afterwards,²⁴ thereby referring to yet another prison term spent in England in 1947. This would seem to suggest that, while he already showed heightened interest in a literary career over a Republican army one in 1942, it was only five years later that he actually replaced the one with the other instead of trying to reconcile them as a “writer for the cause.”²⁵ Whatever the exact truth of the matter, the stories which will be discussed in this section are exemplary of Behan’s decision to focus on his writing rather than his Republican activism. Since Brannigan maintains that “[i]n both its oral and written forms, storytelling functioned in early twentieth-century Ireland to legitimate and ground nationalist ideologies and identities,”²⁶ the writing of stories was perfect to express new identities in the wake of independence as well. Instead of using story templates in the same fashion as earlier authors, Behan appropriates them to legitimise his own notions of identity. Through these stories, Behan could express his own experiences, not only with nationalism, but also with growing up in a working-class environment and questioning his sexuality, using them to create literary identities. These personal experiences, according to Brannigan, give authority to the act of storytelling.²⁷ Even a story such as “After the Wake” can be linked back to the author’s personal life because, without ever making direct reference to him, it shares the narrative voice and setting of other more obviously autobiographical stories. Furthermore, all of Behan’s short stories are relayed by a first-person-narrator, thereby leading the reader to imagine the author as narrator. Consequently, all knowledge of the author may potentially be brought into the reading, colouring the experience of, especially, stories such as “The Execution.”

The stories in which Behan immortalises his childhood are those in which he paints the most intricate picture of his class background. He makes tenement living, working-class communities and a little boy who was his grandma’s favourite come to life through vibrant storytelling. Emmet O’Connor muses: “It is curious [...] that those who grew up in the Dublin slums always had something good to say about them and found the experience educational.”²⁸ Indeed, Behan’s portrayal of his working-class home is ambivalent, often celebrating the communal spirit of the Northside, while also implicitly condemning the hypocrisy of his

²⁴ Rae Jeffs, *Brendan Behan: Man and Showman* (London: Corgi Books, 1968) 33.

²⁵ O’Sullivan 107.

²⁶ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 60.

²⁷ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 52.

²⁸ Emmet O’Connor, “The Autobiography of the Irish Working Class,” *A History of Irish Autobiography*, ed. Liam Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 223, Cambridge Core <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/history-of-irish-autobiography/4CE4C02E8650335B004C064F6D29F6DE>> 2 Jan. 2021.

fellow Dubliners and the effects the excessive alcohol consumption he was surrounded by as a child had on him. Lynch asserts that “[t]he self depends on others for its definition, it cannot exist in isolation, nor can it be written about without reference to others.”²⁹ In “The Last of Mrs Murphy” and “The Confirmation Suit” Behan makes protagonists out of those most influential on his childhood self, namely his Grandmother Christina English and her motley crew of gossip and alcohol providers. As Kearney surmises: “With his Granny English and her cronies there was no fanaticism or idealism other than in pursuit of a good time and lively company; even her name, English, seemed to mock the patriotism of the rest of his family.”³⁰ Accordingly, nationalism takes a back seat in these stories, mostly concerned with community and childhood. Behan’s Granny English was, according to his brother Dominic “everything in the world to him.”³¹ Her death four days before his thirteenth birthday³² was the first, but not the only tragedy in Behan’s young life. Soon after, his family home in Russell Street would be torn down and the family moved to the outskirts of the city. Brannigan mentions that “the slum clearances of the 1930s struck Behan for their casual destruction of working-class cultures and communities.”³³ Certainly, in “The Last of Mrs Murphy,” which although written in the early 1950s, remained unpublished until Fallon’s collection, a strong sense of community is obvious, as well as a desire to regain the feeling of a happy childhood lost to modernisation and maturation. After having held “a kind of a wake”³⁴ in a local pub for Mrs Murphy, an elderly neighbour of the child narrator who intends to move to a “refuge for the dying,”³⁵ she and all of her companions are too drunk to be allowed into said refuge. The narrator’s granny, who is significantly called Christina, and other neighbours thus decide to look after Mrs Murphy themselves. While still in the pub, great amounts of alcohol are consumed and songs are sung “for old time’s sake.”³⁶ The young narrator “wish[es] it could go on forever.”³⁷

Since “The Last of Mrs Murphy” is one of Behan’s more autobiographical stories, not only is the author here fashioning himself through his childhood self as depicted in the story as a generational drinker, but also a core member of a working class that is about to be lost, by

²⁹ Lynch 44.

³⁰ Kearney 11.

³¹ O’Sullivan 29.

³² O’Sullivan 29.

³³ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 64.

³⁴ Brendan Behan, “The Last of Mrs Murphy,” *After the Wake* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press Ltd., 1996) 21.

³⁵ Behan, “The Last of Mrs Murphy” 20.

³⁶ Behan, “The Last of Mrs Murphy” 20.

³⁷ Behan, “The Last of Mrs Murphy” 21.

focusing on a very old woman and creating a sense of departure. Indeed, Jeffs recalls that in later years

he loathed and detested the walk from his house, with no possibility of waving his hand at the friendly faces as they popped up over their garden hedges [...] ‘You’d be needing a drink to give you the courage to face such loneliness,’ and although he laughed as he spoke these words, I knew he meant them seriously.³⁸

In those days, it was drink that allowed him to overlook the loneliness felt by someone who once enjoyed the company of women such as his grandmother, ready to give up their time and money to help a neighbour and is now ostracised by fame and life amongst neighbours who will not even greet a passer-by. In the pub, Behan sought to find a similar sense of community and, in some way, to return to his apparently happy childhood memories of alcohol consumption as reflected in the story: “In the pub she sat in the corner and ordered a bottle of stout for herself and a dandy glass of porter for me. [...] ‘The drop of gargle will do him good,’ said Mrs. Murphy.”³⁹ Indeed, Ulick O’Connor reports that Behan “acquired his taste for spirits from his Granny [...] He knew what it was to be inebriated well before he was in his teens.”⁴⁰ As Denis Sampson argues, “childhood – or, more precisely, boyhood – has been recovered and mythologised as an enabling, creative force in adult life.”⁴¹ As an adult, therefore, the author underlines the good over the bad aspects of his childhood, creating a sense of nostalgia.

Childhood recollections can also be used, according to Lynch, “as a route to understanding [someone’s] adult personality.”⁴² This is exemplified in “The Confirmation Suit,” a story written in 1953 and published by *The Standard* in the same year. While writing about childhood may “sugges[t] that the simplicity and freedom of [...] formative experiences can be recovered and preserved forever,”⁴³ this story, which conveys a sense of excitement and a capacity for embarrassment that is typical of early adolescence, ends in a tragic twist, leaving the protagonist full of regret for just these childish antics. Thus, the story evokes two parallel images, namely that of a young narrator understandably embarrassed by an outrageous suit jacket and that of a much more mature author-narrator, aware that his actions do impact others. In *Borstal Boy*, the character Brendan exhibits a strong desire to please most

³⁸ Jeffs, *Man and Showman* 116.

³⁹ Brendan Behan, “The Last of Mrs Murphy” 18.

⁴⁰ Ulick O’Connor, *Brendan* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 19-20.

⁴¹ Denis Sampson, “‘Voice Itself’: The Loss and Recovery of Boyhood in Irish Memoir,” *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, ed. Liam Harte (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 198.

⁴² Lynch 44.

⁴³ Sampson 199.

everybody he meets, thus often seeming two-faced. The same characteristic appears in “The Confirmation Suit.” Here, the young narrator is too afraid to offend Mrs McCann, the neighbour and family friend sewing his displeasing suit, therefore only complaining to his parents about it. Additionally, he is aware of his duty as a good Catholic: “I cursed all belonging to me, and was hard at it on my father, and wondering why his lace collar hadn’t choked him, when I remembered that it was a sin to go on like that, and I going up for Confirmation,”⁴⁴ while also later missing ‘the pledge,’ due to fainting from heat after refusing to take off the overcoat hiding the suit. The pledge referred to being, of course, the one Irish children took to abstain from alcohol till the age of at least eighteen.⁴⁵ This offhand comment – “my father said I went into a sickness just as the Bishop was giving us the pledge. He said this was a master stroke and showed real presence of mind,”⁴⁶ – shows the hand of a more mature writer, rather than that of a young narrator, especially one who would later frequently reference his taste for alcohol from a young age.

It is the end of the story, however, which showcases not only Behan’s at times dark wit, but also his taste for irony and poetic justice. After pretending to wear the suit every Sunday to please Mrs McCann, the lie is exposed by the narrator’s mother. Subsequently, he discovers the old woman, a habit maker by profession, “crying, and her arms folded under her head, on a bit of habit where she had been finishing the I.H.S.”⁴⁷ The inscription, according to her (and Leopold Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*), meaning not the name of Jesus, but “I have suffered;” and suffered she has, slaving over a suit for a young boy she nursed when his mother was still in hospital only to be betrayed by his favour. The boy himself is plagued by a guilty conscience, which does not stop the author from making a joke of the situation: “I needn’t have worried about the suit lasting forever. Mrs McCann didn’t. The next winter was not so mild.”⁴⁸ Both, the old seamstress and her young neighbour, are punished. The former for taking advantage of the fact that “there wasn’t much stirring in the habit line, on account of the mild winter”⁴⁹ and ruining the boy’s confirmation in the process; the latter for not honouring his neighbour’s devotion to him. He tries to make up for having hurt Mrs McCann

⁴⁴ Brendan Behan, “The Confirmation Suit,” *After the Wake* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press Ltd., 1996) 42.

⁴⁵ The Yank, “Time for Alcohol Pledge to be Dropped from Confirmation,” *Irish Central*, Irish Studio LLC, 13 Mar. 2012 <<https://www.irishcentral.com/opinion/others/time-for-alcohol-pledge-to-be-dropped-from-confirmation-142462895-238123941>> 7 Feb. 2021.

⁴⁶ Behan, “The Confirmation Suit” 44.

⁴⁷ Behan, “The Confirmation Suit” 45.

⁴⁸ Behan, “The Confirmation Suit” 45.

⁴⁹ Behan, “The Confirmation Suit” 41.

by walking after her coffin in his suit, getting drenched in the rain. Here, we can see the same desire as that of the narrator of *Borstal Boy* to make people like him at all costs.

Another issue that also resurfaces in later works by Behan is that of religious hypocrisy. It is particularly pertinent in the stories “A Woman of No Standing” and “After the Wake.” In the former, originally published in 1950 by John Ryan’s literary magazine *Envoy*, the reader is led by a nameless narrator through the events surrounding a man’s death. The story begins by his wife and daughter condemning him and his supposed mistress, him to purgatory, her to being banned from visiting him in hospital. However, as the story progresses, the ironic tone of the narrator (“They’ve a mortuary chapel in the Pigeon House sanatorium, nice and handy, and most soothing, I’m sure, to new patients coming in, it being close to the entrance gate.”⁵⁰) exposes a certain criticism of the situation, while more and more details of the illegitimate relationship surface. Not only have the man and his wife Ria been separated for a long time, the woman who is not even allowed at the funeral, not being his lawful wife, also turns out to be “a poor middle-aged woman, bent in haggard prayer,”⁵¹ instead of being, as expected, “dolled up to the nines – paint and powder and fur coat.”⁵² The narrator’s expectations vary drastically from reality, due to the strictly Catholic interpretation of the situation by the man’s family members and priest: “this person [...] continues as a walking occasion of sin to stand between him and heaven.”⁵³ In reality, the person who, according to societal interpretation, is responsible for the man’s impending “years of harmonious torture in Purgatory,”⁵⁴ has devotedly cared for him, “scrubbing halls for me dear departed this last four years – since he took bad.”⁵⁵ Behan thus exposes the hypocrisy of mid-century Catholic Ireland, which would rather see a man die alone than allow divorce and re-marriage. Furthermore, the man’s family are insistent on his partner being a bad person, even though they themselves apparently did nothing to help him in his hour of need, and neither did the Church. Due to the narrative situation, the reader does not know the full context, but the objective surprise of the narrator at the other woman’s appearance allows these claims. Thus, her identity is created through the relations, actions and words of the characters, as well as the surprise ending. Love and compassion, usually seen as building blocks of the Catholic faith, are only to be found in the titular character, who is characterised indirectly, through the words of others. The narrative of

⁵⁰ Brendan Behan, “A Woman of No Standing,” *After the Wake* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press Ltd., 1996) 55.

⁵¹ Behan, “A Woman of No Standing” 56.

⁵² Behan, “A Woman of No Standing” 56.

⁵³ Behan, “A Woman of No Standing” 53.

⁵⁴ Behan, “A Woman of No Standing” 54.

⁵⁵ Behan, “A Woman of No Standing” 56.

her fate is an attack on the repressive state, which refuses to accept that sometimes life cannot be made to fit the Catholic regulations put on Ireland's population.

Love, figured as a forbidden, sinful act, also plays a crucial role in "After the Wake," first published in the Paris-based magazine *Points* in 1950. As Åke Persson points out

even if Free State nationalism defined itself very much against colonial England, the 1861 Offences Against the Persons Act and the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act which criminalised gay sex were two of few English laws kept after independence. It goes without saying that making same-sex love illegal was a powerful way by which to stifle sexual behaviour not conforming to the politically acceptable construction of Irish identity.⁵⁶

Thus, Behan's decision to write about homosexuality, illegal in Ireland until 1993, almost thirty years after his death, is a way to criticise the official version of Irishness condoned by the state. As Brannigan mentions, "'After the Wake' [...] is a neatly crafted narrative of homoerotic seduction,"⁵⁷ the setting of which in the context of a very clearly Irish tenement house is unconventional. Kearney, on the other hand, argues that "the mood of the story is not one of simple conquest but rather one of confused melancholy. Throughout there is a sad awareness that for his love [the narrator] must live a lie."⁵⁸ Accordingly, the subject of homosexual relations has to be approached carefully, almost through code. In "After the Wake," the narrator in fact conducts a "campaign" of seduction through literary and historical examples of 'manly' homosexuality. In Brannigan's words: "'After the Wake' connects the process of seduction with the persuasive power of narrative [...] The narrator tells his friend stories and anecdotes [...] in an attempt to seduce him."⁵⁹ Of course, the narrator's use of literature is also an issue of representation. In many cultures, those who are 'different,' for example members of the LGBTQ+ community, struggle to find themselves represented in media. This can often lead to a struggle with self-acceptance. As O'Sullivan acknowledges: "A young, working-class homosexual in 1940s Dublin seeking models for his orientation faced a desert."⁶⁰ Thus, by showing his friend examples of other homosexuals, thereby to an

⁵⁶ Åke Persson, "'Do Your Folks Know That You're Gay?': Memory and Oral History as Education and Resistance in Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship*," *Recovering Memory: Irish Representations of Past and Present*, eds. Hedda Friberg, Irene Gilsenan Nording and Lene Yding Pedersen (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2007) 254, EBSCOHOST
<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzUzMjIxM19fQU41?sid=0fd95a26-8039-49f2-96a1-6e812dd90231@pdc-v-sessmgr04&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_viii&rid=0> 15 Jan. 2021.

⁵⁷ John Brannigan, "Bohemian Behan: Late Modernism, Sexual Politics and the 'Great Awakening' of Brendan Behan," *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 58.

⁵⁸ Kearney 35-36.

⁵⁹ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 58.

⁶⁰ O'Sullivan 135.

extent normalising what may otherwise be perceived as unspeakable, the narrator almost gives him permission to give in to any possible desires on his part. On the other hand, his campaign might also be read as an implication that anyone may be seduced into homosexuality, thereby offering an explanation, perhaps even an excuse for Behan's own suspected same-sex relationships in and out of prison.

Nonetheless, as Brannigan indicates, "[t]he story is one of considerable moral ambiguity; the narrator is a predator who ruthlessly exploits the innocence of others for his own sexual gain, but as the narrator's desire inhabits the story entirely there is no counter-vailing moral perspective invoked against him."⁶¹ While it might take the reader some re-reads to recognise the predatory behaviour of the narrator, this is not to say that the narrator makes a secret of his own character. Indeed, within the first two pages of the story, he utters the following: "the last crowd of kids too shrimpish, small, neutral cold to take my interest."⁶² The mere implication that children might attract the sexual attention of a gay man may reflect the image Behan inherited from the societal norms of his time. In much of his later work, too, he shows remarkable understanding for those who have been convicted for homosexual activities, while always emphasising that someone's sex life is nobody's business, unless a child is harmed in the process. However, in the context of this story, the comment casts a slightly sinister light on the subsequent interaction between the two main characters:

He said he'd hated most of all sleeping with his brothers – so had I, I'd felt their touch incestuous – but most of all he hated sleeping with a man older than himself. [...] 'I don't mind sleeping with a little child,' he said, 'the snug way they round themselves into you – and I don't mind a young fellow my own age.'⁶³

Furthermore, the interaction takes place after a swim the two men share, the first, but not the last association between swimming and budding sexual feelings in Behan's writing.

Brannigan adds that borstals "cultivat[e] a love of sport and fitness, but this has the effect on Behan of aestheticising and eroticising male bonds and bodies."⁶⁴ This observation may be tied to Brannigan's later claim that "[t]he narrator invites us to share two insights simultaneously: that there is nothing more natural than homosexual love between men, and that there is nothing more unexpected than homosexual love between men,"⁶⁵ swimming being a rather innocent activity and physical contact between men in this context being

⁶¹ Brannigan, "Bohemian Behan" 59.

⁶² Brendan Behan, "After the Wake," *After the Wake* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press Ltd., 1996) 47.

⁶³ Behan, "After the Wake" 47.

⁶⁴ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 141.

⁶⁵ Brannigan, "Bohemian Behan" 58.

nothing remarkable: “we sat on his towel – our bare thighs touching.”⁶⁶ That it is mentioned, however, adds to the characterisation of the narrator as someone clearly aware that his attraction to his neighbour is not what is expected of him. This notion is emphasised by the fact that he is instead suspected of being in love with his crush’s wife, a desire that is accepted far more than that which he actually pursues. At her eponymous wake, attendees “shook hands with him [...] then they shook hands with his and her other relatives, and with me, giving me an understanding smile and licence to mourn my pure unhappy love.”⁶⁷

The indication that the mere notion of homosexuality should not be the scandal of this story is further examined at the denouement of the story, when the narrator gets into bed with the man he pursued: “I sat on the bed, undressing myself [...] I fancied her face looking up from the open coffin on the Americans who, having imported wakes from us, invented morticians themselves.”⁶⁸ These final words are full of implications. Michael Pierse argues that they “suggest that the adornment of the dead shares something with the narrator’s hiding of the truth,”⁶⁹ as well as claiming: “Irish society, Behan suggests, is more eager to expose the dead, the physically ugly, than to tolerate the beautiful and the alive, the man’s living body and his narrator’s taboo attraction to him.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, the sudden change of topic and the shift of perspective from the narrator to the dead wife distract from what might happen once the narrator is finished undressing, while also alluding to other actions she might look upon from her deathbed and “feel angry, not so much jealous as disgusted, certainly surprised”⁷¹ about. By highlighting the measures taken by society to ignore the possibility of homosexuality and by non-heterosexuals to fulfil and at the same time hide their desires, Behan puts a spotlight onto a characteristic of his main character that would usually be undermined, if not censored completely. In general, it can be said that in his short stories, Behan puts into focus characteristics that were grounds for marginalisation during the times these stories were written, and utilises them as main building blocks of his characters’ identities.

Another aspect of marginalisation discussed in these stories is that of non-state sanctioned nationalism or republicanism. Indeed, post-independence Ireland frowned upon the militant nationalists who had made Eamon de Valera’s leadership possible, incarcerating and executing many of them during the Second World War. The publication of “I Become a

⁶⁶ Behan, “After the Wake” 47.

⁶⁷ Behan, “After the Wake” 51.

⁶⁸ Behan, “After the Wake” 52.

⁶⁹ Michael Pierse, “Behan’s Graveyard of Radical Possibility: Richard’s Cork Leg and the (Irish-) American Dream,” *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 192.

⁷⁰ Pierse 192.

⁷¹ Behan, “After the Wake” 46.

Borstal Boy” thus was “a contribution to [*The Bell*’s] mission to bring voices not being heard in post-independence Ireland to notice,”⁷² as Derek Hand indicates. The story is especially interesting as it is one of the earliest versions of what would eventually become the beginning of *Borstal Boy*. Brannigan argues: “The evolution of this story [...] situates Behan’s writing at this time (1941-42) within an ideological framework entirely concomitant with the governing doctrines of Irish cultural nationalism.”⁷³ Indeed, it was only in the late ‘40s that he replaced the ardent Catholicism and nationalism prevalent in the story with the ostracization felt by being ex-communicated and the subsequent crisis of faith regarding both the Church and the IRA that are crucial themes of *Borstal Boy*. The final version of his narrative of Borstal was only completed, of course, after his second prison term, which led to his disillusionment with the cause.

However, it is already in the final story to be discussed here, “The Execution,” which was written in 1942, but only published in one 1978 limited edition until *After the Wake*, that Behan offers a portrayal of an IRA intervention which makes the men involved look anything but glorious. Since this story is, alongside “After the Wake,” the most incriminating for the author, as readers might question where he gained insights into either, an IRA execution or homosexual seduction, both stories share a curious absence. In “After the Wake,” no names are mentioned. Names in most other stories tend to connect the narrative back to Behan’s own reality; such was the case with ‘Christina’ in “The Last of Mrs Murphy” and will be with ‘Brendan’ in *Borstal Boy*. The lack of names, thus, as a narrative technique serves to create distance between the author and the story, i.e. the narrator figure. The same happens in “The Execution,” where the narrator remains nameless. Even though the story is told by a first-person narrator and readers might be aware of Behan’s involvement with the IRA, the further lack of description helps to separate the story’s characters from any real people. In an additional attempt to separate the narrator from himself, Behan mentions the narrator’s Fusilier father and lack of thirst for alcohol. Both are untrue of the author, who by the time this story was written, was already on the way to becoming a well-known pub character. In fact, he resembles more closely the victim of the execution, Ellis,⁷⁴ who “had been fond of

⁷² Hand 17.

⁷³ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 53.

⁷⁴ An ironic choice of name seeing as the character shares it with the well-known English hangman John Ellis, responsible, amongst others, for the execution of Sir Roger Casement. This was surely done on purpose by Behan, whose older brother was named after the Irish martyr and who was fond of applying such irony, especially to the topic of execution.

See: “Roger Casement: Ten facts about the Irish patriot executed in 1916,” *The Irish Post*, 3 Aug. 2016
<<https://www.irishpost.com/news/roger-casement-ten-things-know-human-rights-activist-british-diplomat-irish->

boasting about the Fenian tradition of his family,”⁷⁵ but was not a particularly good soldier himself.

The crux of the story is, according to Brannigan,

the conflict between religious faith and nationalist discipline in men who conduct their orders effectively, even if with moral repugnance. ‘The Execution’ articulates the ideological contradictions inherent in a nationalism motivated by religious imagery and iconography, through the dispassionate observations of its first-person narrator.⁷⁶

He continues: “‘The Execution’ resembles the pared-down prose of Hemingway,”⁷⁷ thereby “refus[ing] to do any more than its duty. [...] and so resembl[ing] the singular conviction and cold exercise of orders which characterises Behan’s gunmen.”⁷⁸ Conversely, the narrator seems to take on a ‘dispassionate’ voice in order to guard himself from the acts he is about to commit. When, for instance, he remarks that “a pint seemed even more unmanageable tonight”⁷⁹ or “I tried to pray for his soul. I couldn’t. It seemed awful to think of souls just then,”⁸⁰ the implication that the execution is not only hurting the victim, but the perpetrators as well is hard to overlook. The reference to souls, especially, points back to the conflict between political violence and Catholic faith, as it is his own soul the narrator is concerned with. He seems to be aware that what he is doing is considered a sin and will cost him later on. That he follows his orders despite this awareness, emphasises the story’s critique of political nationalism which Brannigan highlights: “the narrative of the story [...] excludes the ‘counternarratives’ which might dissolve and question the logic of political violence [...] the curious lack of dialogue in this story indicates the degree to which one voice is permitted to dominate the narrative.”⁸¹ It is this painful insight into the mind of an IRA soldier which, despite the many red herrings, makes a connection between Behan and the narrator thinkable again. However, due to the lack of success in his personal IRA career, it may be assumed that this insight was not gathered by him personally, but rather is a narrative tool to reflect back on his credentials and possibly exaggerate them.

nationalist-executed-century-ago-today-96334> 5 April 2021., and O’Sullivan xvi.

⁷⁵ Brendan Behan, “The Execution,” *After the Wake* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press Ltd., 1996) 32.

⁷⁶ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 54.

⁷⁷ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 55.

⁷⁸ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 56.

⁷⁹ Behan, “The Execution” 33.

⁸⁰ Behan, “The Execution” 34.

⁸¹ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 56.

‘New name [...] new me’: *The Scarperer*

Both *The Scarperer* and the *Irish Press* column were ways for Behan to make money, without having to resort to his trade, house painting and thus still being able to work on what might be called his passion project, *Borstal Boy*. *The Scarperer* was first published as an *Irish Times* serial in 1953 under the name Emmet Street. Behan claimed this was because “the Dublin intelligentsia had seen pieces of pornography that I’d written [...] This didn’t exactly endear me to them, so being short of the readies, I decided to write under a phony name.”⁸² This statement is quite contradictory, as the intelligentsia would not necessarily provide the money, or in Behan’s words, the “readies” he was after. It was the *Irish Times* that provided the money and for that reason they would have known who the real author was. Thus, as Kearney intimates:

It seems more likely that he himself was so eager to discard the image of hack journalist and to be accepted as a serious writer that he was afraid to put his name to a lightweight newspaper serial. He was painfully aware that, despite his poems, short stories and work in progress, he was still better known as a freelance journalist and ‘character’.⁸³

However, the claims made to Rae Jeffs some years later do, of course, add to the legend of Brendan Behan, the ostracised writer unable to ‘get in’ with the Dublin intelligentsia because of his need to work for money. They also exemplify his frequent attempts to paint his own morals as questionable, therefore creating a hard man image for himself. Nonetheless, according to Jeffs, *The Scarperer* “is a story of which he was particularly fond and one which he thoroughly enjoyed writing, with the added kick of knowing it was a hoax.”⁸⁴ Moreover, the crime novel has “a neat plot, cleverly constructed, and reveals one further piece of his extraordinary versatility,”⁸⁵ Jeffs argues. Thus, writes Kearney: “Though no masterpiece, *The Scarperer* reads easy and well. It is the work of a professional writer.”⁸⁶ Regardless, it often receives no more than an honourable mention in discussions of Behan’s oeuvre. The way in which identity is treated in the novel, however, is worth consideration. Before discussing this, the autobiographical elements of the novel have to be mentioned. The plot is inspired by a supposed prison break Behan was involved in after his release from the Curragh internment camp. Brannigan explains that the author “proved incapable of extricating himself fully from the attractions of playing the Republican hero, participating in a disastrous jailbreak in Manchester in 1947 which perhaps offered too tempting an opportunity for Behan to mimic

⁸² Rae Jeffs, “Foreword,” Brendan Behan, *The Scarperer* (London: Arrow Books Limited, 1987) 6.

⁸³ Kearney 40.

⁸⁴ Jeffs, “Foreword” 6.

⁸⁵ Jeffs, “Foreword” 7.

⁸⁶ Kearney 41.

the heroics of the Manchester Martyrs,”⁸⁷ but which also led to him serving another prison sentence. O’Sullivan, on the other hand, claims that the author’s involvement in the event was marginal at best, if not completely fictional.⁸⁸ If in fact Behan exaggerated his role in the jailbreak in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel*, he still made good use of the occurrence itself in *The Scarperer*. While in *Confessions* he mentions: “Even at this stage of the game, it would not do to go into details as to how this was done [...] I would not like to spoil the game for others by shooting my mouth off now,”⁸⁹ in the earlier text, he offers a detailed description of the act.

Moreover, *The Scarperer*’s many citations of Joyce are of interest in this section. Not only does the city function as a background character as it does in *Ulysses*, the novel also leaves various strands of narrative unexplained until many pages later, while at the same time explicitly referencing, for example, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “Michael Conroy (Pat.), Clonaboola, Glawn, Co. Galway, Ireland, the World.”⁹⁰ The city in question is, of course, Dublin but a large part of the novel also takes place in Paris, which Behan had gotten to know well during his long stays there. As Brannigan indicates, Behan “depicts both cities as labyrinthine dens in which vice runs rampant and the police are the alienated outsiders struggling to contain the lawlessness of the city.”⁹¹ In fact, through a large cast of colourful characters, loose strands of narrative, quick scene changes “intended to be absorbed *nebeneinander* – simultaneously – by the reader,”⁹² as O’Grady mentions, as well as a dramatic denouement, Behan establishes his novel as one of a few city novels, in the midst of a rural-focused cultural climate. By frequently referencing Joyce, without ever losing sight of the mischief involved in *The Scarperer*’s publication, Behan pokes fun at those who would rather not see Dublin as the centre of Ireland’s literary output: “Yous scruffy lot of bogmen. Bogmen and Orangemen, them’s the only ones there’s a bit of respect for in this town.”⁹³ In fact, as Brannigan argues,

[i]n Behan’s writings, the city is never a neutral space, but neither is it fully comprehensible as the antithesis to rural paradise, nor as urban pastoral. The labyrinthine metropolis which the characters of *The Scarperer* inhabit is not a site of loss, but is instead a productive space of interconnection.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 31.

⁸⁸ O’Sullivan 131.

⁸⁹ Brendan Behan, *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* (London: Arrow Books, 1991) 96.

⁹⁰ Brendan Behan, *The Scarperer* (London: Arrow Books Limited, 1987) 90.

⁹¹ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 70.

⁹² O’Grady 34.

⁹³ Behan, *The Scarperer* 9.

⁹⁴ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 71.

Both Paris and Dublin function as ‘productive spaces’ in the novel in which characters meet and express their own relationships and identities.

The novel’s characters are frequently identified by the places they come from, to differentiate them in the melting pot that the city truly is. Names such as Kilbeggan Kate and Tralee Trembles are the norm in the Dublin of *The Scarperer*. Additionally, rarely is a character introduced without mention of where they are from or what accent they possess: “said the Guard in a heavy Munster accent,”⁹⁵ “Donlan, a small wiry Limerick man.”⁹⁶ Often accents and provenance are the only distinct features of the characters. Even some of the protagonists, such as the Scarperer or the Limey are only distinguishable because of their speech patterns and nicknames. A nickname taken on or given to someone often signifies a specific stage of their life. In the novel, for instance, the schoolmaster James Guiney takes to alcohol and becomes Tralee Trembles. This change is only one indication of the novel’s figuring of identity as fluid. Eddie Collins, the Scarperer’s right hand man, moreover, takes on a variety of roles and disguises, effortlessly becoming another person when necessary. The Scarperer himself, who remains without a proper name throughout the novel, is the best example of an identity created and adapted at will, due to his ability to fluidly code-switch: “The Scarperer turned to her and in gentle tones informed her [...] In the nasal viciousness of the North Dublin Slums that seemed to come from the mouth of a different man, he addressed the students”⁹⁷ and his plans for the future: “new papers, new name, new nationality, *new me*, as a matter of fact.”⁹⁸

Moreover, in *The Scarperer* Behan continuously toys with the idea of the double, exchanging Tralee Trembles for the Limey, the Limey for Pierre le Fou, as well as calling one of the people bringing about the surprising ending Hugh O’Donnell, then commenting on his namesake Red Hugh O’Donnell, the chief of the North. However, O’Donnell’s interlocutor, Aunt Jeannie “thought he was a Liverpool Communist,”⁹⁹ falsely interpreting the chief’s nickname. This trivialisation of one of Ireland’s ancient heroes, this Hugh O’Donnell’s achievement being comparatively small, is not the only time Behan pokes fun at the Gaelic League’s and Eamon de Valera’s attempts to return to an essential Irishness during the 1940s and 50s. The League, which stood in support of de Valera, intended to preserve and revive the Irish language. However, the novel’s treatment of Hugh O’Donnell reflects back on the

⁹⁵ Behan, *The Scarperer* 19.

⁹⁶ Behan, *The Scarperer* 44.

⁹⁷ Behan, *The Scarperer* 94.

⁹⁸ Behan, *The Scarperer* 126. Emphasis added.

⁹⁹ Behan, *The Scarperer* 135.

discrepancy between the grandeur of the League's goal and the reality of the language situation in Ireland. The impracticability of the League's goals is also exemplified in *The Scarperer*, by the repeated confusion between 'Gaelic' and 'Garlic'¹⁰⁰ and the attempt of the Bonapartist to say 'Sinn Fein' which comes out as "Chang Fung."¹⁰¹ Further, when Nancy quips that "a person wearing a Fáinne will always be able to direct you in English,"¹⁰² she exposes the fact that those wearing the pin meant to indicate Irish language skills are most likely native English speakers and seemingly not able to inspire others to use Irish. The artificiality of Irish in any context but what can be supposed to be an Aran island hide out, where Lugs speaks "to the old man [a native speaker] in laborious Irish"¹⁰³ is thus emphasised, the subtext being that the Irish language is not necessarily the mark of a true Irish person, let alone a Dubliner. The Irish are identified by their accents when speaking English, not their Irish language skills.

Accents, of course, also figure as an element of class distinction in the novel. The issue of class is indeed of importance in *The Scarperer*, as was the case in the short stories. The novel's intrigue, which unravels bit by bit, comes to a close in Paris, where the crew around the Scarperer, successfully having disguised the Limey as Pierre and thus helped him escape prosecution, is met by two Irishwomen, Nancy and her aunt Jeannie. The older of the two accuses the men of murder, unaware of just how true the claim is: "Murderers, murderers of our dumb brother!"¹⁰⁴ Here, the author deliberately misleads his readers by making it very believable that "brother" refers to the murdered Limey. Thus, the charade may be kept up for a few more pages before it is revealed that "our dumb *brothers*" would have been the more accurate expression, as the woman is a member of "[t]he Irish section of the International Society for the Defence of the Horse"¹⁰⁵ and thus not at all concerned with the Limey. The fact that Aunt Jeannie, Nancy and the embassy official they call for help have the time and leisure to investigate what they deem an unethical animal transport marks them as people in possession of disposable income, as well as members of a higher social class than most if not all of the other characters. In contrast, men such as Lugs and Jerry are willing to become involved in criminal ploys for the need of the "readies": "anything I ever done was only for the money."¹⁰⁶ This is, however, not something a woman like Aunt Jeannie, able to refuse five

¹⁰⁰ Behan, *The Scarperer* 91.

¹⁰¹ Behan, *The Scarperer* 137.

¹⁰² Behan, *The Scarperer* 144.

¹⁰³ Behan, *The Scarperer* 106.

¹⁰⁴ Behan, *The Scarperer* 124.

¹⁰⁵ Behan, *The Scarperer* 132

¹⁰⁶ Behan, *The Scarperer* 151.

thousand pounds, can fathom: “It just happened that instead of preventing men’s cruelty to dumb beasts, I was assisting at the mystery of their cruelty to each other.”¹⁰⁷ The author thus comments poignantly on the poverty and class conflict often underlying criminal activity, while writing a story “only for the money.”

‘The man is a hack:’ *Hold Your Hour and Have Another*

In 1954 Behan started to write a regular column for the *Irish Press*, which lasted until 1956. In 1963 some of these short texts were collected by Rae Jeffs in *Hold Your Hour and Have Another*. Jeffs, who by that time took a great personal interest in Behan’s talent, success and person, asked Beatrice Behan to add illustrations to the columns in their re-published form, which “add greatly to the interest of a book which will do much to enhance the fame Brendan Behan so justly received.”¹⁰⁸ It remains questionable whether the book really did enhance Behan’s fame or literary legacy, but it does definitely add to his public persona, as well as to the image of Dublin he presented to the world throughout much of his writing. In his columns, Behan usually features, alongside a fictionalised version of himself, a colourful crowd of characters, who directly and indirectly paint him as a writer, a Dublin working-class export to the continent and a pub dweller. As Michael Kenneally has pointed out, anecdote is a defining feature of autobiography;¹⁰⁹ anecdote is also an important element in Behan’s columns. Kearney adds that the short articles are: “all informed by the personality of the author [...] generous, loquacious, inoffensively proud of his travels, an unfanatical supporter of the working-class people who comprised the majority of his readers and a conscientious objector to the work undertaken by that class.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, columns are a much more personal way of writing than short stories, for instance, which are expected to be more fiction than expression of personal opinion or identity. Therefore, while “Breeding Behing” may be a thinly veiled fictionalised version of the author himself,¹¹¹ the columns were still published under Behan’s real name, which had yet to become internationally renowned. As a result, none of the columns in *Hold Your Hour* touch upon topics as controversial as Behan’s short stories, plays or literary autobiography *Borstal Boy*. However, the columns still give an impression of the complicated relationship the author had with class, his calling as a writer and the official version of Irishness during his lifetime.

¹⁰⁷ Behan, *The Scarperer* 150.

¹⁰⁸ “Preamble,” Brendan Behan, *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (London: Corgi Books, 1965) 1. No author credited.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Lynch 48.

¹¹⁰ Kearney 43.

¹¹¹ Fictionalised versions of the self in columns are not uncommon, an example from Behan’s lifetime being, of course, Brian O’Nolan who wrote the popular column Cruiskeen Lawn as Myles na gCopaleen.

In her account of Behan's life Jeffs writes: "Public houses were Brendan's life-blood, not for the drink that they sold but for the people who frequented them, and it was upon these characters that he based much of his writing material, particularly in the articles which he wrote for the *Irish Press*."¹¹² The main recurring characters from Behan's *Irish Press* columns are Mrs. Brennan, Maria Concepta and Mr. Crippen, the regulars in Michael's pub which the narrator, Brendan Behan also frequents. They are all described as (retired) workers, their class background and taste for drink being, together with their artistic pretensions and entertaining way of speaking, their primary defining features. In contrast to his working-class characters, Behan's depiction of himself in the columns is at once of the same class, but also aloof. He is, after all, a writer and he makes this known. In the second column in Jeffs' collection "Overheard in a Bookshop," which does not actually take place in the pub, the narrator, supposedly shopping for books, overhears the young bookshop assistant telling her suitor about her customers. When she is asked if she knows *Ulysses* by James Joyce, she mishears: "did I know Joyce is useless;"¹¹³ when someone inquires after the "new Greene,"¹¹⁴ she directs them to St. Stephen's Green, adding: "he might do the best he could with the old ones, because it was the only one I'd heard of in these parts."¹¹⁵ The narrator seems in equal parts fascinated and shocked by her display of ignorance, as she "removed the volume from my lifeless fingers,"¹¹⁶ telling him to leave if he does not intend to buy anything. The contrast between the authorial narrator and the shop assistant is even more apparent when, in answer to an inquiry about *Anna Karenina*, she replies: "An bhfuil cead agam dul amach,"¹¹⁷ which is translated in a footnote as "May I go outside?"¹¹⁸ She justifies this sudden use of Irish thus: "It doesn't do to let yourself down before these foreigners. When they speak to me in their language I believe in answering them in mine."¹¹⁹ That her Irish answer was clearly nonsensical she disregards.

Here, once again, it is emphasised that Irish is not the language of the Dublin working class, but also that Behan, whose proficiency in Irish allows him to interpret the situation correctly, is no longer a 'typical' member of this class, now a writer, well-versed in both, literature and Irish. This is also emphasised in "Meet a Great Poet." In this short article, Behan fashions

¹¹² Jeffs, *Man and Showman* 141.

¹¹³ Brendan Behan, "Overheard in a Bookshop" *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (London: Corgi Books, 1965) 14.

¹¹⁴ Behan, "Overheard in a Bookshop" 14.

¹¹⁵ Behan, "Overheard in a Bookshop" 14.

¹¹⁶ Behan, "Overheard in a Bookshop" 16.

¹¹⁷ Behan, "Overheard in a Bookshop" 16.

¹¹⁸ Behan, "Overheard in a Bookshop" 16.

¹¹⁹ Behan, "Overheard in a Bookshop" 16.

himself the only true artist amongst the pub regulars. Mr. Crippen who “has literary ambitions himself and bitterly resents any pretensions in that direction on the part of anyone else,”¹²⁰ claims to have written poetry in English and Irish, criticising the others for not knowing Irish at all or “only the new stuff they have in the schools.”¹²¹ He then proceeds to recite an Irish poem of which Mrs. Brennan “could folly nearly every word”¹²² because, as it turns out, it is actually in English. Then, Michael the publican points out to Behan that the poems the old man just claimed to be his own “were written by Yeats. Y’often heard of him; owned the Half-Way House above in Drimnagh.”¹²³ Not only does Crippen plagiarise Yeats’ poetry, the opposite also occasionally happens, as Brannigan mentions:

Yeats and Joyce appear in Behan’s stories as household names, tripping off the tongues of working-class Dubliners. Mr Crippen, indeed, invents verses which he then attributes to the pen of Yeats, indicating that Behan’s Dubliners know the value and cultural power of the names, and the authority which is derived through quotation and cultural reference.¹²⁴

While Crippen uses the famous poet’s name to give value to his own scribblings, Behan himself, Brannigan continues, “[i]n paying homage to Joyce, and to O’Casey, Yeats and others, [...] is not only claiming their authority for his own work, but also proposing a genealogical tradition of which his work is the latest manifestation.”¹²⁵ Thus, by discrediting the others’ claim to literary talent and associating himself with other famous Irish writers, Behan uses the columns to fashion himself as a “pudding cheenis.”¹²⁶

Moreover, in the columns, Behan often hints at his aversion to labour: “I’m allergic to stockbrushes and afraid of knives. Putty knives, hacking knives, and glazing knives.”¹²⁷ Instead, he has “to buy a new ribbon for the old Remington,”¹²⁸ as he tells his fellow pub-dwellers. While he sees this errand as a useful and necessary activity, one that will keep him from wasting away his day in the pub, the other regulars immediately mock him: “‘Mark that judiciously, Maria,’ said Mrs. Brennan, ‘he’s to buy a new ribbon for his Renningtom.’”¹²⁹ Most of them have actual work to attend to: “‘Good morning, all. We’ve to go up as far as Candem Street.’ ‘We’ll be out with you,’ said the painter. ‘I’ve to start out for this old one’s

¹²⁰ Brendan Behan, “Meet a Great Poet,” *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (London: Corgi Books, 1965) 71.

¹²¹ Behan, “Meet a Great Poet” 74.

¹²² Behan, “Meet a Great Poet” 74.

¹²³ Behan, “Meet a Great Poet” 75.

¹²⁴ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 35.

¹²⁵ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 34.

¹²⁶ Brendan Behan, “Our Budding Genius Here,” *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (London: Corgi Books, 1965) 47.

¹²⁷ Brendan Behan, “Let’s Go to Town,” *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (London: Corgi Books, 1965) 18.

¹²⁸ Behan, “Let’s Go to Town” 21.

¹²⁹ Behan, “Let’s Go to Town” 21.

ceiling in Foxrock.”¹³⁰ This self-ironic treatment of Behan’s own literary pretensions pokes fun at the leisurely lifestyle of the writer in contrast to that of the manual labourer. In this way, Behan allows himself to at once distance himself from physical work and remain on the good side of his working-class readership. Brannigan argues that “[s]elf-deprecation and parody is a consistent feature of Behan’s representation of himself as narrator in the sketches, and much of the humour revolves around deflating the pretensions and pomp of being a ‘real writer.’”¹³¹

It is not just his own position as a writer which Behan ridicules while at the same time cementing it in his columns. Indeed, one of the main themes in several of the short articles is the false claim to authenticity of revival and post-independence Irishness. As Brannigan adds, the author

continued to represent ‘hidden’ Irelands throughout his literary career. In particular, Behan gave expression to the cultural dispossession of working-class Dubliners, who found themselves ostracised from the political visions of successive Free State governments, and dislocated in the slum clearances of the thirties.¹³²

While the author himself was affected by these slum clearances, as previously mentioned, he was on his way out of the group often referred to as “the working poor” by the time the column was written. At this crossroads he encounters a basic issue that comes with the territory of autobiographical writing, especially in the Ireland of his time: “the tensions between the subject’s assertion of individual uniqueness and the demands of the collective discourse for exemplary self-narratives.”¹³³ As Liam Harte argues here, an autobiography needs to possess a unique story, while also catering to the expectation of the narrated life being relatable to the readers. When the Brendan Behan of the columns is thus told “I’m fed up and brassed off [...] with the Continong [...] I’m gone blue melanconnolly from reading about it. Why can’t you write about something natural?”¹³⁴ it shows that he is becoming alienated from the working-class communities of his youth. Indeed, an Irish writer seeking inspiration on the continent and a working-class boy eschewing his trade for the chance of becoming a professional writer, he differs from the isolationist ideals of the post-independence state and the social expectations of his surroundings alike. Nonetheless, in the

¹³⁰ Behan, “Let’s Go to Town” 21.

¹³¹ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 38.

¹³² Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 15.

¹³³ Liam Harte, “Introduction: Autobiography and the Irish Cultural Moment,” *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, ed. Liam Harte (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 4.

¹³⁴ Brendan Behan, “We Fell Into the Waxies’ Dargle,” *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (London: Corgi Books, 1965) 130.

Irish Press, Behan tries to find balance between his literary aspirations and his class background, which he figures as a vital part of his identity throughout his prose writings. In, for example, “Up the Ballad-Singers” he quotes “a good song from an old County Dublin man”¹³⁵ claiming that “I write ‘an’ instead of ‘and’, and ‘gev’ and ‘lavins’ instead of ‘gave’ and ‘leavings’, because that was how the man pronounced it. [...] in case you think I don’t know any better.”¹³⁶ This simultaneously distances him from the supposedly uneducated man he heard the song from and connects him intimately to the working-class tradition of ballad singing he dedicates this article to, thereby expressing the in-between position he would find himself in for the rest of his life.

Furthermore, the author writes:

According to some nationally minded citizens, it would be as much as your life is worth to even hint that the English-speaking Gael hasn’t got the same way of speaking as the B.B.C. or Oxford University. The same nationally minded citizens practically killed the old ballads of Dublin forty years ago with the rise of the Gaelic Leagues.¹³⁷

The ballads he refers to were, of course, in English, as this was the native language of most of the generation preceding him. The simple change from lobbying for Irish to insisting on ‘proper’ English use by these “nationally minded” people exposes the hypocrisy of much of the revival movement. Behan continues:

I often heard it regretted that most of the people in the country parts lost the language, in one generation removed from the older people of now, but surely it was some loss that the people of the period of ‘sixteen and after were told that the old songs of the Northside and the Liberties were ‘stage-Irish’, ‘coarse’, ‘made a show of the country’, and were made ashamed of the old songs to such an extent, that even the sad and lovely *Kevin Barry*, known and sung the two sides of the Irish Sea and the Atlantic, has been, all its life, an outlaw from any Dublin hooley.¹³⁸

Indeed, the overcorrection of the colonial legacy to the point of erasure of genuine Dublin hybrid culture¹³⁹ is described here as one of the many harmful actions taken in the revival and post-independence eras. In Behan’s column, this hybridity is expressed not only through song, but also through reference to the “significant value of British army pensions to the economic conditions of post-independence Dublin. Such a vibrant subculture frequently found itself, in

¹³⁵ Brendan Behan, “Up the Ballad-Singers,” *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (London: Corgi Books, 1965) 31.

¹³⁶ Behan, “Up the Ballad-Singers” 31.

¹³⁷ Behan, “Up the Ballad-Singers” 31.

¹³⁸ Behan, “Up the Ballad-Singers” 31-32.

¹³⁹ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 14.

Behan's depictions at least, diverging from the rhetoric of self-sufficiency,"¹⁴⁰ as Brannigan mentions.

In "Nuts from the Crimean War" Behan writes: "Round our way there were many candidates for the brain garage. They were victims of the Great War, as it used to be called; the Black and Tan War, the Civil War [...] Mrs. Leadbeater could have been nuts from the Crimean War – she was old enough."¹⁴¹ By bringing together in this list the Great War, i.e. the First World War and the Black and Tan War, also known as the War of Independence, he equates soldiers who fought as members of the British Army with those who fought against the British Army only a few years later. This is only possible in a country which failed to properly honour its First World War veterans until many years later, because of Behan's implication that these men were still Dubliners more than members of the British Army. Like any other Dubliner depicted in Behan's column, the "British Army pensioners and pensionesses"¹⁴² of "Up and Down Spion Kop" meet in a pub, sing songs and consume copious amounts of alcohol: "Jimmy-the-Sports' Bar did not at all relish the British Army or anything to do with it, but a publican is of a kind above politics."¹⁴³ Behan merges in this article his grown-up perspective with that of his childhood self, explaining how he "sat at the feet of the veterans, to sell my country for a glass of Indian ale and a packet of biscuits,"¹⁴⁴ then drawing parallels between the Army pensionesses and his own grandmother's crew: "the older ladies believed in a sup of porter for children of pre-Confirmation age and even said, 'Let them have a taste of it now and they'll never bother with it when they're grown up.'"¹⁴⁵ Of course, for Behan early consumption of alcohol was only the beginning of a life-long addiction. Thus, it is in this column, amongst others, that the older Behan breaks the narrative of the childhood memory to allude to the consequences the young Behan will have to suffer for these experiences: "Sometimes, *mo bhron*, these theories have little or no scientific basis."¹⁴⁶ These theories, of course, including the old ladies' assumption that a child fed alcohol will not develop a taste for it in adulthood.

¹⁴⁰ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 20.

¹⁴¹ Brendan Behan, "Nuts from the Crimean War" *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (London: Corgi Books, 1965) 67.

¹⁴² Brendan Behan, "Up and Down Spion Kop," *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* (London: Corgi Books, 1965) 85.

¹⁴³ Behan, "Up and Down Spion Kop" 86.

¹⁴⁴ Behan, "Up and Down Spion Kop" 86.

¹⁴⁵ Behan, "Up and Down Spion Kop" 86.

¹⁴⁶ Behan, "Up and Down Spion Kop" 86. Meaning: "My sorrow," translated in footnote. Original emphasis.

The literary persona thus created in Behan's early prose writings is one that is multiply marginalised, a working-class Dubliner, while the working-class communities of his childhood are in decline, a critic of Irish Catholicism, while Catholicism was figured as an integral part of Irishness, a man with same-sex desires, at a time when acting upon such desires was a criminal offense, an ex-IRA member, who had to somehow negotiate his identity in between all of those contradictory personal and societal challenges. Kearney argues that Behan "was not the kind of person who could be content with the quiet approval which greets a poem in Irish or a short story in a little magazine. [...] he had always longed to make some noise in the world."¹⁴⁷ Having realised in prison that it was not through rebellion that he would achieve this goal, he attempted to 'make noise' as a writer. He did so by writing about marginalised groups and by creating for himself a persona that would live on long after his untimely death.

¹⁴⁷ Kearney 37.

‘It must be wonderful to be free:’ *Borstal Boy*

“Friday in the evening, the landlady shouted up the stairs: ‘Oh God, oh Jesus, oh Sacred Heart. Boy, there’s two gentlemen to see you.’”¹

So begins Brendan Behan’s *Borstal Boy*. These words are already brimming with the blasphemy that would be amongst the reasons for the autobiographical novel being banned in Ireland and the spark that would make it the author’s masterpiece. Yet, Behan’s manuscript almost never made it to the printing press. Rae Jeffs had spent her first evening with Behan following him around pubs, trying to convince him to hand over the still unfinished typescript, only to leave the pages in question on a London train on her way home. Panicked, she raced after the train in a taxi and, thanks to a hold-up on the line, caught up with the precious manuscript at the next station. When she told Behan of her mishap, he simply said: “It’s a good job for me that you found it, kiddo [...] I did not have a duplicate manuscript.”² Luck, therefore, played a role in the publication of the autobiographical novel, but its success was due solely to the author’s vibrant narrative style and his creative use of the perhaps most formative period of his life.

Behan was only sixteen when the police came knocking on his landlady’s door to catch him with a “suitcase, containing Pot. Chlor, Sulph Ac, gelignite, detonators, electrical and ignition, and the rest of my Sinn Fein conjuror’s outfit” (1). He had only been in England for a few hours, but would have to stay for the next two years. As Michael O’Sullivan mentions, as a child, Behan had been “a member of Fianna Éireann, the boy scout wing of the Republican movement [...] founded in 1909 by Constance, Countess Markievicz [...] to be a potential ‘reservoir of supporters’ for the recruiting needs of the Republican movement.”³ At the age of sixteen, he “finally graduated from scout to fully-fledged IRA member.”⁴ His early involvement in the Republican movement came naturally to him, as he saw it as a continuation of a family tradition he was particularly proud of: “All of us in Fianna Éireann had lost some relation or other during the Troubles, and my mother was only two years married to Jack Furlong, a ’16 man. My own father was involved in the burning of the Customs House.”⁵ When Behan was born his father, Stephen was serving a prison sentence in

¹ Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy* (London: Arrow Books, 1990) 1. All future page references in this chapter will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

² Rae Jeffs, *Brendan Behan: Man and Showman* (London: Corgi Books, 1968) 30.

³ Michael O’Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1997) 26.

⁴ O’Sullivan 27.

⁵ Brendan Behan, *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* (London: Arrow Books, 1991) 136.

Kilmainham for his Republican activities; his uncle Peadar wrote what was to become the Irish national anthem, “The Soldier's Song” and, according to O’Sullivan, Behan claimed that his mother “Kathleen’s hatred of England and the English had been at the root of his Republican ideology.”⁶

In *Borstal Boy*, Behan gives a fictionalised account of his time spent in English jails and borstals as a result of his attempt to prove his devotion to the cause by participating in the 1939 IRA bombing campaign. In 1942, shortly after beginning his 14-year sentence in Mountjoy Jail for another misguided offense, he had already published a short story concerned with the same period of his life (December 1939 to November 1941), namely “I Become A Borstal Boy.” This story he later expanded to novel length, the result of which, simply titled *Borstal Boy*, was published in 1958. In *Confessions of an Irish Rebel*, Behan describes how in 1952 he was sent to France via England to cover a football match for a newspaper which led to his arrest for violating the expulsion order he was given when released from Borstal over ten years earlier. Before the trial for this offense, Behan was on remand for a week, during which time he tirelessly worked on his story:

Although I had written an article about Borstal which was published in *The Bell* ten years before, I spent most of my time extending it, so that when the week got well under way I had more or less completed the rough draft of a book. This was later to appear as *Borstal Boy*, but I re-wrote it several times before the final version was published.⁷

Deirdre McMahon argues that *Borstal Boy*’s

hybrid genre of autobiography and novel [...] combined with the book’s long gestation period [...] facilitated the writer’s measured reconstruction of memory. Through the medium of the autobiographical novel, Behan was able to construct an alternative identity and a sense of inclusion in the liminal space of a prison.⁸

Indeed, McMahon continues, “power resides with the storyteller to refashion events to suit his purpose.”⁹ While in the early short story, Behan portrays the character Brendan Behan¹⁰ as an

⁶ O’Sullivan 58.

⁷ Behan, *Confessions* 234.

⁸ Deirdre McMahon, “Brendan Behan: Modernist Writer,” *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 68.

⁹ McMahon 73.

¹⁰ Throughout this chapter, whenever a distinction between the author and the character is necessary, the character will be referred to as “Brendan,” the author as “Behan.”

ardent Republican and Catholic, ready to incite rebellion within the confines of Walton Prison, the same autobiographical character in *Borstal Boy* is much more nuanced.¹¹

Instead of writing another Irish nationalist prison memoir promoting the cause of Republicanism and painting the protagonist as either hero or martyr – in some cases both – Behan appropriates the genre to show his character’s development from a boy drawn in by the stories of nationalist heroes, family legacy and the promise of glory through rebellion or martyrdom, into a young man “commit[ted] to real freedoms – freedoms from poverty, repression and drudgery,”¹² as John Brannigan puts it. In fact, when an inspector says to Brendan: “you know plenty about the IRA organization in Ireland. You’ve been connected with it since you could walk – you didn’t get much chance really” (26). He resists this assessment initially, very much insisting on his being an IRA man by choice and conviction; however, in the course of *Borstal Boy*, Brendan amends his original vision of himself and his Republican ideals to incorporate a more liberal view, critical of both the English and the Irish state. This is not to say that he abandons either his desire to fashion himself as a Republican martyr, nor his nationalist beliefs completely. Instead, Behan tells the story of his young self in such a way as to leave room for his character to grow and to focus on additional elements of his identity, such as his class background and sexuality. Both of these aspects enable Brendan to form meaningful relationships within the English prison system, which alleviate the pain of imprisonment and exile. Furthermore, he realises that oppression is not necessarily exclusive to the coloniser-colonised relationship. As Derek Hand indicates:

Brendan’s ideas modify and transform in the face of his experiences. So, difference might fade away, but the desire for justice and equality emerges as paramount. The common cause that Brendan articulates signals the death of a narrow Irish nationalism that will be exchanged for a republican socialism.¹³

Indeed, a shared class background gradually emerges in *Borstal Boy* as more significant for the formation of allegiances than a shared nationality. Yet, as is known from Behan’s biography, he did not leave Borstal a reformed IRA man, but rather someone who still believed in the cause, only now able to differentiate between England, the oppressor and the

¹¹ Indeed, it is due to the discrepancies between “I Become A Borstal Boy” and *Borstal Boy*, that Behan’s choice of the word “article” for the earlier text is disregarded here, as it would connote a higher truth value than can actually be asserted.

¹² John Brannigan, “Bohemian Behan: Late Modernism, Sexual Politics and the ‘Great Awakening’ of Brendan Behan,” *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 49.

¹³ Derek Hand, “Brendan Behan’s *Borstal Boy*: The Public Persona and the Delicate Art of Deceit,” *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 24.

English, who sometimes fall victim to the same oppressive system as the inhabitants of the colonies.

Despite Brendan's development in the course of *Borstal Boy*, the feeling of exile prevails and the young protagonist continuously seeks connections to his home country. He is almost exclusively called "Paddy" by the other characters which marks him as different. At the same time, the nickname, used derogatively as well as affectionately, through its somewhat anonymous character allows Brendan to simultaneously fashion an unthreateningly Irish identity as well as to overcome his inhibitions when it comes to defending himself. One medium that Brendan uses to remind him of Ireland is literature. Reading plays a significant role in the novel and, together with the few instances of his writing, his extensive literacy ultimately points towards his future as a writer, rather than an IRA soldier. In short, *Borstal Boy* shows Brendan's development from IRA soldier to Republican writer. In this chapter, Behan's use of "Paddy" will be discussed, succeeded by an analysis of the protagonist's evolution as a Republican in the novel. Additionally, *Borstal Boy*'s treatment of class and sexuality will be interrogated. Finally, the chapter will consider in how far *Borstal Boy* is Behan's take at a *Künstlerroman*.

'Paddy he is:' Playing the Irishman

Brendan spends his first night in prison in Dale Street Bridewell. There he meets Charlie Millwall, who will be his "china," i.e. mate throughout the entire course of *Borstal Boy*. During their first interaction, which spans only a little over two pages, Charlie calls Brendan either Paddy or Pad eleven times (10-12). Near the end of their conversation, Charlie introduces himself, which Brendan does not reciprocate. It seems, in that moment, that he takes on the role of "Paddy." The term "Paddy" is of course derived from the common Irish name Patrick and used, often in a derogatory fashion, as a slang term for people of Irish descent, especially when referring to Irish immigrants in Great Britain. It is also closely related to the figure of the stage Irishman, as they share stereotypical characteristics such as, for example, drunkenness, an exaggerated brogue and a tendency for buffoonery, singsong and violence. As Declan Kiberd indicates, "[t]he stereotypical Paddy could be charming or threatening by turns."¹⁴ Hence, as most stereotypes, the Paddy could be either a positive or a negative figure, either an entertaining but dumb, or a cunning and violent character. Regarding this duality Kiberd argues:

¹⁴ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of The Modern Nation* (London: Vintage 1996) 29.

Coming from windswept, neolithic communities of the western Irish seaboard to the centres of industrial England, many [Irish immigrants] found it easier to don the mask of the Paddy than reshape a complex urban identity of their own. Acting the buffoon, they often seemed harmless and even lovable characters to the many English workers who might otherwise have deeply resented their willingness to take jobs at very low rates of pay. [...] The stereotype had indeed certain short-term advantages. It permitted some form of elementary contact between the immigrant and the native English: but it necessitated only a circumscribed relationship, which the Irish could control and regulate at will. An Art of fawning duplicity was perfected by many, who acted the fool while making shrewd deals which often took their rivals unawares.¹⁵

In *Borstal Boy*, the stereotype of the Paddy is used similarly. Although Brendan does not stem from “the western Irish seaboard,” he is still a stranger to England and immediately cast as “Paddy” by the English people he encounters. Yet, it seems that he uses Paddy as a way to control his interactions with others and monitor perceptions of himself by alternately catering to and contradicting certain elements of the stereotype. Conversely, within the anonymising space of prison, in which everyone is reduced to a mere number, Paddy becomes a way for Brendan to sustain at least a fraction of his identity. This is because Paddy is a space onto which Brendan can project everything he wants to, while at the same time functioning as a mask to hide his true self behind.

When Brendan’s aim is to make friends, he seeks to come across as “harmless” and “lovable;” however, when he encounters antagonism, he tends to either contradict the notion of the Irish buffoon or play up the violent side of the Paddy to conceal his own fears. Thus, as happens frequently, there is a certain disconnect between his exterior (Paddy) and his interior (Brendan). Colbert Kearney argues:

The synoptic structure, placing side by side what he actually said and what he said in the safety of his own head, is used throughout the book. In the early stages it shows Behan trying to maintain his identity while avoiding the mistreatment which would follow any overt demonstration of it; later on, it enables him to qualify his amicable flattery.¹⁶

Examples of this are manifold: when Charlie calls to Brendan while the latter is using the lavatory, he feels annoyed and expresses this inwardly: “[Fuck] you, Charlie, said I in my own mind [...] ‘Like that song, Paddy?’ ‘Smashing, china’” (15). While Brendan might want to curse at his new acquaintance, he outwardly displays the stereotypical joviality of the Paddy in order not to offend him. He is friendly, even mirroring Charlie’s Cockney rhyming

¹⁵ Kiberd 29-30.

¹⁶ Colbert Kearney, *The Writings of Brendan Behan* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977) 99.

slang,¹⁷ thus expanding their friendship. In a similar interaction with a guard, there is again a distinction between what Brendan thinks and what he says. However, now instead of acting out an aspect of the stereotype, Brendan explicitly goes against expectations by using a rational argument in the face of conflict. The stereotypical Paddy would react violently to being mistreated by the guard; Brendan, however, although terrified, points out that he can defend himself in other ways as well: “[Fuck] you and Constable Houlihan, said I, in my own mind, and to the turnkey, ‘and I’ll complain to the magistrate about your bad language’” (13). While Brendan inwardly curses the warden, outwardly he portrays himself as in control of the situation and thus very different from what the warden might expect. At the same time, he conceals his fear of physical punishment. Thus, using the front of Paddy in this way allows Brendan to remain true to himself without the consequences he fears, be it abandonment by friends or violence from warders.

The Paddy’s readiness to commit acts of violence has already been mentioned. In contrast, Brendan usually tries to avoid violent confrontation. However, after being repeatedly humiliated by another prisoner, Brendan talks himself into attacking James, the fellow inmate in question:

No, be Jesus, and I twisted the palm round in my hand. I’ll James you, you foxy-faced drippings of a cankered –, you poxy bastarding whore’s melt [...] I was no country Paddy from the middle of the Bog of Allen to be frightened to death by a lot of Liverpool seldom-fed bastards [...] No, be Jesus, I was from Russell Street, North Circular Road, Dublin, from the Northside where, be Jesus, [...] the whole of this pack of Limeys would be scruff-hounds would be et, bet, and threw up again – et without salt. I’ll James you, you bastard (77-78).

Barely anywhere else in *Borstal Boy* is there such a lengthy passage of internal monologue, saturated with colourful curses, Hiberno-English expressions and accent markers. Of course, as a proud Northside Dubliner, Brendan is careful to distance himself from the “bogman.” Unlike the Irish migrants described in Kiberd’s quote above, Brendan is a working-class city boy, who shares the fighting skills and cunning that can be picked up on the streets of Dublin, as well as any English industrial town. It is his equally tough background that he calls upon to overcome his apprehension of fighting an English boy. However, there is a distinction between the “country Paddy” who would be frightened and the violent Paddy, ready to savagely attack his antagonist. It is the latter which is summoned to further strengthen the

¹⁷ “China” is derived from “China plates,” meaning, therefore, mates. See: Bernice Schrank, “Telling It Like It Is (and Isn’t): Recreating the Self in Brendan Behan’s *Borstal Boy*,” *Brno Studies in English* 37.2 (2011): 176, Digital Library Masarykova Univerzita <https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/bitstream/handle/11222.digilib/118148/1_BrnoStudiesEnglish_37-2011-2_15.pdf?sequence=1> 30 Dec. 2020.

image of the Dublin ruffian, forming Brendan's own urban version of a brogue slinging, belligerent Paddy. The same occurs again in a later section of the novel: "I pulled his head back by the hair, and aimed for his nose with my head, cursing and almost frothing at the mouth with a heavy Irish accent: 'Jasuss! Be the livin' Jasuss, I'll bejasuss –'" (162). Yet, Behan shows that Brendan is relieved when the fight is stopped by a warder, exposing the character's toughness as a front. To his fellow inmates, this front remains impenetrable, however. When Brendan stealthily stops Charlie from getting involved in a hopeless altercation, due to his successful posing as Paddy, he is free from suspicion: "He wouldn't [...] An Irishman would never stop a bundle. [...] I 'eard my old man say that the Irish will fight till there's only one left, and 'e'll bleedin' well commit suicide 'cause there's no other fugher left to fight with" (165). Thus, Brendan is ready to conform to the stereotype whenever it benefits him, without ever fully compromising his own personality.

While the frequent musical performances in *Borstal Boy* can be connected to the Irish stereotype as well, additionally they serve a variety of more complex purposes and are not exclusive to the Irish protagonist: Not only do songs endear Brendan to others, they also maintain his connection to home in his exile. As John McCourt indicates, "[i]n all of Behan's writing, the use of song was a natural and almost unconscious act. Communicating through music was a vital technique, the extension of a family tradition."¹⁸ In *Borstal Boy*, Behan regularly depicts Brendan singing to or with other borstal boys, but also being sung to. In prison, singing is part of the coded language used by inmates to talk to each other through cell walls. Soon after their first meeting, Charlie sings to Brendan. He chooses an Irish song, since Brendan's Irishness reminds him of his own home: "there's a lot of blokes round our way are Irish. [...] We all used to sing Irish songs" (10). Through the medium of music, he hopes to alleviate the homesickness and isolation the boys share. The two songs Brendan sings in response are equally as telling. First, he sings "a song I learned at school. Ireland crying for the Bonnie Prince" (15). Not only is this a reference to Charles Edward Stuart who was known as "Bonnie Prince Charlie" and thus shares a name with the boy being serenaded, a fact that will be discussed in a later section of this chapter, but it also could be an implication of Ireland crying for yet another "boy" she has lost, namely Brendan himself. The second song, chosen by Charlie, is "Kevin Barry." This too, "s[u]ng [...] slowly and mournfully," (16) reflects on Brendan's situation: "in his dreary prison cell, / British soldiers tortured Barry / Just because he would not tell / [...] ...Only a lad of eighteen summers" (16). Like Kevin

¹⁸ John McCourt, "'Not exactly patterned in the Same Mould': Behan's Joyce," *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 148.

Barry, Brendan, who is about to turn seventeen, is very young, languishing in a prison cell and refusing to tell the police anything about his IRA companions. Of course, this comparison highlights Brendan's Republican spirit, as well as expressing his own vision of himself as a Republican martyr. To Charlie, the use of these songs signals a sense of community and mutual understanding of each other's loneliness in prison: "Good old Paddy," (16) he applauds. Indeed, throughout much of the novel music is used as an indicator of community, a case in point being the "Borstal Song": "all the boys sang; [...] 'Oh, they say I ain't no good 'cause I'm a Borstal Boy, / But a Borstal boy is what I'll always be, / I know it is a title, a title I bear with pride'" (201). Indeed, being a Borstal boy and becoming part of this community through playing to his strengths such as singing helps Brendan feel less alone in exile.

At the same time, when Brendan mentions songs, he frequently relates them to his family: "I started to put an air to it. That's a thing we're all very well able to do in my family" (87). Since this is something Brendan mentions during a time of utter isolation, namely when he is in solitary confinement as punishment for attacking another inmate, it may be assumed that in this moment, music offers an escape, it reminds him of home and a time when he felt less alone. It is also through song that in *Borstal Boy*, the sea becomes a symbol of freedom, as well as a connection to Ireland, which is, after all, surrounded by the sea and thus, free from Great Britain: "The sea, oh, the sea [...] / Oh, long may you roll between England and me, / God help the poor Scotchmen, they'll never be free, / But we're entirely surrounded by water" (202). The fact that a version of this song called "The Sea Around Us" with slightly different lyrics is attributed to Brendan's younger brother Dominic adds another layer of familial connection to it. Since Dominic Behan was only twelve years old in 1940 when Brendan supposedly sings this song to his fellow inmates, it is difficult to know whether the inclusion of the lyrics in the novel are an older author's nod to his brother's talent¹⁹ or indeed, whether the song was simply something both brothers knew from their family. Either way, it ties together the image of the sea with Brendan's longing for his home and family. That the sea is one of the strongest connections he has to his home country while exiled is also remarked upon by his "chinas": "You don't 'alf fancy the sea, Paddy. I reckon there's not a night you don't go down and 'ave a look at it before you kip in" (363). The pain of exile that is implicit in this act of looking out to sea, to freedom in other words, is alleviated only when, after almost two years, Brendan leaves Borstal and crosses the sea towards "his native shore" (335): "There they were, as if I'd never left them; in their sweet and stately order round the Bay –

¹⁹ Unlikely because, according to O'Sullivan (55), Behan's relationship with his brother was strained due to his aspirations as a writer, which Behan reacted to jealously.

Bray Head, the Sugarloaf, the Two Rock, the Three Rock, Kippure, the king of them all, rising his threatening head behind and over their shoulders till they sloped down to the city” (371).

‘God save Ireland:’ Making a Martyr

In his biography *Brendan Behan: A Life*, Michael O’Sullivan remarks how Behan’s “activities in the Fianna were more than a game – they were a sign of his growing political awareness and of his innate tendency to view himself in epic, literary terms.”²⁰ He continues:

The most significant event in Brendan’s teenage years was his acceptance into full membership of the IRA in 1939. [...] At this stage he appears to have had no wish to do anything more with his life than to make an enduring impression as a successful IRA guerrilla fighter. Family and friends affirm his fanatical desire for hero status.²¹

This desire grew strong enough for sixteen-year-old Behan to travel to England by himself, carrying only “his bombing kit, [...] 2 pairs of trousers, 2 shirts, a pullover, a waistcoat, a change of underwear and a pair of painter’s overalls,”²² but not his family’s approval, nor, it seems, an official IRA sanction for his plans.²³ Of course, Liverpool police spoiled his chances of becoming a hero by arresting him “fresh off the boat.” However, in his fictionalised account of the time subsequently spent in English jails, Behan utilises the notion that “martyrdom is as important to the liberation of Ireland as rebellion,”²⁴ which Bernice Schrank ascribes to traditional Irish nationalism. Instead of priding himself on his failed attempt at rebellion, the author thus writes *Borstal Boy* in such a way as to fashion his character Brendan and, due to the autobiographical nature of the book, himself as a Republican martyr. Since it becomes clear early on that Brendan cannot stomach what classical martyrdom calls for, i.e. physical suffering and potential death for the cause, his is more akin to “what in early Christian Ireland was known as ‘white martyrdom,’ going into exile from one’s homeland and community,”²⁵ as Barry McCrea puts it. During his very first day in prison, Brendan ponders:

They could easily kill you. Say you cut up rough. It had happened before. [...] At home it would be all right if you were there to get the credit of it. Give us back the mangled corpse of our martyr. [...] But the mangling would have to be gone through

²⁰ O’Sullivan 27.

²¹ O’Sullivan 37.

²² O’Sullivan 44.

²³ O’Sullivan 43.

²⁴ Schrank 175.

²⁵ Barry McCrea, *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in Twentieth-Century Ireland and Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 45, EBSCOHOST <<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/uaccess.univie.ac.at/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=cb71276e-14e4-4f69-9f3a-9d76d02549e4%40pdc-v-sessmgr04&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=960163&db=nlebk>> 20 Jan. 2021.

first. [...] ‘‘Ere’s your bloody breakfast. –ing sight more than you deserve.’ I took it and would have thanked him if he had waited. It was just as well he didn’t. I’d have nearly kissed him in relief (13-14).

While the young narrator is relieved that he will not actually have to give his life, he still thinks that it is an honour to suffer for the cause.

At sixteen, Behan had spent much of his life listening to his family’s stories of rebellion and martyrdom, of Republican heroes known to all, as well as of their own involvement in the struggle for independence. Brannigan agrees:

he was surrounded by, and sought to emulate, the imagery and iconography of cultural nationalism [...] celebrating martyrdom as the sacred duty of Irish men [...] More immediate than the canon of Irish heroes and martyrs was the Republican legacy of his own family, however, which had contributed both to the armed struggle and the cultural work of the revival.²⁶

Indeed, in the early chapters of *Borstal Boy* Brendan leans heavily on these nationalist models in order to fashion himself another Irish martyr. As Birgit Neumann indicates, “in shaping autobiographical memory, people tend to orient themselves on culturally established narrative patterns.”²⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that Part One of *Borstal Boy* is closely modelled on earlier Republican prison memoirs. The young prisoner encounters antagonistic warders, looks to God for salvation but is rejected by the Church, he experiences violence, isolation and heartache. Throughout it all, he tries to be strong, as the men in the stories he grew up with. When he encounters the priest of Walton Jail, who shows no mercy to Brendan, but only asks him to abscond the IRA, Brendan draws direct parallels between his own situation and that of an Irish martyr he looks up to:

I shivered and hadn’t been expecting this, but now it happened that this priest, too, was part of Walton Prison. I wasn’t surprised. Tom Clarke²⁸ saw Dr Gallagher in Portland with his lips a mess of raw meat, streaming blood where he had gone mad and started to chew glass. He told the priest, and the priest told him to mind his own business. [...] ‘The IRA is not a murder gang, Father,’ said I. Grip tight and hold on, said Tom Clarke. I’d do my best. Clarke held on for fifteen years, and lived to fight the bastards on more equal terms in Easter Week (64).

²⁶ John Brannigan, *Brendan Behan: Cultural Nationalism and the Revisionist Writer* (Paperback reprint, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014) 28.

²⁷ Birgit Neumann, „Literatur, Erinnerung, Identität,“ *Gedächtniskonzepte der Literaturwissenschaft: Theoretische Grundlagen und Anwendungsperspektiven*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005) 157, DE GRUYTER <<https://www-degruyter-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/view/title/16762>> 9 Jan. 2021. My translation: “Bei der Gestaltung autobiographischer Erinnerungen orientieren sich Personen an kulturell etablierten Geschichtsmustern.”

²⁸ Thomas Clarke also wrote about his experiences in a prison memoir, *Glimpses of an Irish Felon's Prison Life*.

By alternating between Brendan's conversation with the priest and a representation of his internal monologue about Tom Clarke and Dr Gallagher, as well as by presenting Clarke's words as if they were spoken to Brendan in that moment, even having the character answer them, Behan achieves a direct identification of Brendan with his Republican forefathers.

Furthermore, when Brendan is tried later, "[i]n addressing the court, and constructing himself within the mould of the nationalist martyrs and heroes of previous struggles, Behan advertises his conformity to the conventions of nationalist iconography,"²⁹ as Brannigan asserts, thereby referring to Brendan's defence: "it is my privilege and honour today, to stand, as so many of my countrymen have done, in an English court, to testify to the unyielding determination of the Irish people to regain every inch of our national territory" (124). Even before that, when first entering the police station after his arrest, Brendan makes his inspiration obvious: "I agreed to make a statement, with a view to propoganda for the cause. It would look well at home, too. I often read speeches from the dock, and thought the better of the brave and defiant men that made them so far from friends or dear ones" (4). Not only does he show here his intent, namely to make a name for himself by becoming one of those "brave and defiant men," but he also implies his own tendency towards white martyrdom, by emphasising the distance from home. After Brendan leaves Walton, thereby officially entering the Borstal system, the intertextual references to Irish martyrs begin to dwindle, until finally, in Hollesley Bay, Brendan's IRA involvement is only ever remarked upon in passing and then mostly by others. However, this does not mean that Behan has given up on the image of Brendan as a martyr or even that either author or character have abandoned their Republican convictions. Rather, it signals Brendan's gradual realisation that his situation is different from that of many other Republican prisoners.

In the relative safety of Borstal, Brendan shows awareness of his image as martyr being in jeopardy because of his lenient sentence.: "Well, another fellow was after her [his potential girlfriend Shiela] and I got Borstal: he's been sentenced to fourteen years by the military court in Dublin. It kind of puts me in the shade," (271) he mentions in conversation with the wife of Hollesley Bay's governor. His answer to her inquiry whether "the girl thinks this other fellow is a better patriot than you, because he got a longer sentence" (271) is affirmative. Knowing that despite his time in Walton, he will most likely not be regarded as a true martyr, Brendan finds other ways to make his time in jail meaningful, which will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. The more mature Behan writing about his experiences knows that he cannot

²⁹ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 131.

use his time in Borstal to self-style as martyr and hardened IRA soldier. In contrast to Walton which left a lasting negative impression on the author, Behan left Hollesley Bay with good memories and amicable feelings towards its administrators.³⁰ In Part Three of *Borstal Boy*, there is mention of Brendan's detached work and serving mass, both clear indicators that he is well integrated in the Borstal system and trusted by the officials. However, O'Sullivan explains that additionally Behan "was appointed House Captain at St Patrick's House. The position brought with it both responsibility and privilege."³¹ This part of his Borstal experience Behan omits entirely, instead compressing Brendan's final year at Hollesley Bay into a few paragraphs. Even though he spent almost a year and a half in Hollesley Bay, therefore, he devotes almost as much narrated time to his two months in Walton prison. This may have many reasons, such as pressure to finish his manuscript, fearing that his second year in Hollesley Bay was too similar to the first or even his lack of interest in portraying the time spent without his "chinas," all of whom were released before him. Yet another reason may be that he found the experience of Walton prison to be more pertinent or interesting. Similarly, by exposing just how well he did in Borstal, he would contradict the rebel image he so proudly maintained throughout his life. So instead, near the end of *Borstal Boy*, Brendan is depicted in an act of rebellion. In response to a guard threatening to send him to the governor after he has caught him giving tobacco to an inmate who is already being punished, he exclaims: "I'm not for him in the morning, or any fughing time, and sod him, and you too, you stringy looking Welsh puff" (367). For the first time his insults leave the safety of interior monologue, making it difficult to argue that he is completely reformed and docile by the end of his time at Borstal. Whether intentional or not, the time and detail afforded to the two months in Walton in comparison to the eighteen months in Borstal institutions thus emphasise Brendan's martyrdom. The author seemingly attempts to point out that despite the benefits of Borstal, Brendan still remains a rebel and martyr to some extent.

Throughout *Borstal Boy*, there is a certain tension between young Brendan's aspirations and older Behan's insights. At the time of writing, Behan had turned his back if not on the IRA then at least on his own involvement in the organisation. However, this was a decision he made not after his first imprisonment, but years later after having spent time in Irish gaols. With maturity came the realisation that his young self's engagement with Republicanism was somewhat naïve. Thus, despite acknowledging that he left Borstal still a rebel at heart, throughout the autobiographical novel Behan imbues Brendan with a sense of self-irony that it

³⁰ O'Sullivan 61-62 + 65-68.

³¹ O'Sullivan 66.

is hard to believe he possessed at the age of sixteen. Brendan's initial statement to police, for instance, includes a comment about how his proclamation would make him "look well at home," followed by a notion of being the talk of the town as a result of his arrest:

And all the people at home would say, reading the papers, 'Ah sure, God help poor Brendan, wasn't I only talking to him a week ago?' 'By Jasus, he was a great lad all the same, and he only sixteen.' And Shiela would be sorry she did not let me thread her, the night we walked the canal (5).

This indicates that he believes himself to be in the process of achieving hero status. That this would be his primary concern in a situation so detrimental is questionable. Indeed, after only a few hours in prison, Brendan's apparent readiness to follow in the footsteps of the Manchester Martyrs, who he has referenced in his statement, is waning. The reality of the treatment Republican prisoners are subjected to destroys his fantasy of glory through rebellion or martyrdom; the fear of pain and mistreatment, as well as the desire to return home overpower his wish to become known for his heroism: "I [...] sat huddled on the bed in my blankets, with tears in my mind and in my heart, and wishing I could wake up and find out that I had only been dreaming" (21). As Maria DiBattista argues, "[p]rison is the place of appalling realisations, the terrible school where Behan, a great if somewhat naïve reader, learns the literal, agonisingly physical meaning of brutal experiences that had only existed for him as words on a page."³²

Thus disillusioned, Brendan repeatedly fails to perform what he once perceived as his patriotic duty. When a fellow Irish inmate, whom he refers to as "a mad Republican" (124) incites an in-prison rebellion on behalf of two IRA men about to be executed, Brendan is terrified of the consequences his involvement might bring: "It didn't inspire me. I thought it better to survive my sentence and come out and strike a blow in vengeance for them, than be kicked to death or insanity here. And even that was not the truth. I only wanted to survive the night" (131). Subsequently, he keeps quiet, only feigning his support to Callan by "[giving] a discreet shout down the ventilator of 'Up the Republic'" (133). Shortly after this incident, Brendan is sentenced to three years in Borstal, which is when his comparisons of his own situation to that of other Republican prisoners become sparse, as has been mentioned above. Of course, after failing to live up to his expectations of martyrdom, the discourse of nationalism he has so far based his identity on no longer is compatible with his real situation.

³² Maria DiBattista, "Lessons of Detention," *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 35.

Realising that he is not a Republican hero akin to those he has read about, he has to rethink his own ideology to once again be able to make sense of the world and his place in it.

As Donal Carbaugh and Jens Brockmeier point out: “The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others organize our senses of who we are, who others are, and how we are to be related.”³³ For Brendan these stories are centred around the Irish Republican dichotomy of the oppressed Irish and the oppressing English. He has conceptualised himself as the Irish martyr, the English as the enemy. Furthermore, despite the Church’s issues with the IRA, Catholicism is an integral part of Brendan’s sense-making-processes. However, Behan wrote *Borstal Boy* not as a teenager, enthralled by these discourses, but as an adult, aware of their deficiencies. Claire Lynch indicates that: “In the new, purportedly modern Ireland, autobiographers sought to revolutionize the Irish self by questioning the communal identities that had failed them,”³⁴ a tradition which Behan also seems to have been acquainted with. Hence, in *Borstal Boy* Brendan repeatedly encounters experiences that do not conform to the Republicanism and Catholicism he has based his identity on, leading him to adjust the way in which he thinks of himself. The first event that calls forth this change has already been discussed, namely Brendan’s failure to reconcile his fantasy of Republican prison life with the reality of his experience. However, other issues arise which also leave the discourses determining Brendan’s identity formation open to question.

Despite his doubts about the Catholic Church, Brendan looks forward to meeting the priest of Walton Jail and feels that “it was like being let to the warmth of a big turf fire this cold Sunday morning to hear the words of love and consolation” (55) of the mass. However, their encounter results in his excommunication³⁵ and a vicious beating for “disrespecting” the priest, by pointing out to him, that “the Church was always against Ireland and for the British Empire,” (65) a claim he supports with ample historical evidence. When he is expelled from religious instruction as a result of this interaction, Brendan is distraught: “I sat down on the

³³ Donal A. Carbaugh and Jens Brockmeier, “Introduction,” *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self, and Culture*, eds. Donal A. Carbaugh and Jens Brockmeier (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001) 10, EBSCOHOST

<<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/uaccess.univie.ac.at/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzI1MzM4OF9fQU41?si d=bde06444-7978-44d9-9c24-a9f114d1ed69@sessionmgr103&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>> 4 Jan. 2021.

³⁴ Claire Lynch, *Irish Autobiography: Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation* (Oxford and Wien: Lang, 2009) 102.

³⁵ As Ulick O’Connor details, it had been common for the Catholic Church to threaten Irish rebels with excommunication for a long time, especially in Ireland where the bishops were “as a conservative body [...] in opposition to revolutionary activity in Ireland” (45). Those who were not ready to give up their cause, like Behan, found themselves pariahs, only to be re-admitted when they repented for their apparent breaking of the Church’s dogma by committing acts of violence.

See: Ulick O’Connor, *Brendan* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 45.

chair and leaned my head in my hands. I felt like crying for the first time in years, for the first time since I was a kid of four or five. I had often prayed after Mass at home that God would not let me lose the Faith” (95). Brendan’s relationship to the Church is difficult even before his own in-prison experiences:

I had been extra religious when a kid [...] I was a weekly communicant for years [...], and in spasms, especially during Lent, a daily one. Then I had difficulties, when I was thirteen or so, with myself and sex, and with the Church because they always seemed to be against the Republicans (52).

These “problems” are only highlighted in prison, when he experiences first-hand what it is to be abandoned by the Church you look to for guidance. By the last section of *Borstal Boy* Behan therefore concludes: “Walton had cured me of any idea that religion of any description had anything to do with mercy or pity or love” (330). Still, Behan would remain a “daylight atheist” throughout his life, struggling to reconcile his distrust of the Church and the belief in God and religion ingrained in him by his mother from early childhood.³⁶

Brendan’s grief over his excommunication adds to his image as a martyr, with Michael G. Cronin arguing that “Brendan’s exclusion from Catholic rites because of his republicanism is a source of political pride but emotional anguish;”³⁷ but it also leads him to reconsider his commitment to the Church. Hence, when Charlie and Chewlips ask to join the daily Catholic Easter Week service at Feltham, Brendan welcomes them to the ‘show.’ During mass, he is the least serious of them all, laughing at Joe’s inappropriate jokes and “wishing for something to pass the time,” (177) as he can no longer seriously follow mass:

I would have been very angry and violently angry about such behaviour in a Catholic church before my time in Walton, but why should I be angry and stick up for them, who wouldn’t stick up for me, but hounded and insulted me worse than the English Protestants? What the hell did I care about them or their service, except to pass an hour and enjoy it, like anyone else? (176)

While Brendan thus shows clear disdain for the way the Church has treated him, he also continues to reference his faith and what religion means to him. After the harrowing meeting with the priest and the subsequent assault, Brendan is grateful to be alive: “devil a much the matter with me [...] thanks be to God and His Blessed Mother” (70). Despite his belief in the Church’s practices having been injured, he is not ready to completely renounce them, nor his faith in God, which he indicates is separate from the Church to some extent. When pondering the reasons for his difficulties with the Church, after all, he recalls that these did not impinge

³⁶ Ulick O’Connor 25.

³⁷ Michael G. Cronin, “Eros and Liberation: The Homoerotic Body in *Borstal Boy*,” *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 85.

on his Faith: “it seemed the Church was always for the rich against the poor. But I have never given up the Faith (for what would I give it up for?) and now I was glad that even in this well-washed smelly English hell-hole of old Victorian cruelty, I had the Faith to fall back on” (53).

Indeed, although the Church does not offer the support he needs, the weekly mass is still something to look forward to; it offers distraction from the daily grind of prison life as well as being a reminder of home, with its familiar words and rituals. In Hollesley Bay, despite still being bitter about being excommunicated, Brendan even agrees to serve mass, performing “nearly better than the priest” (332). This is on the one hand an indicator of just how closely he connects the Church with his own identity, family history and home, on the other hand it is related to his feelings towards Hollesley Bay’s priest:

It was different in Liverpool, where the priest was an active enemy. [...] The priest was a small round-faced man. I never had much to do with him, except when he sent my application to the Bishop to be readmitted to the Sacraments . He was always very civil, but I think he thought he had enough to contend with, in a hostile area, without gaining further unpopularity by identifying himself too close with me. But he was always friendly and I think he did his best for me with the Bishop and, though his efforts were unsuccessful, I was thankful to him for them (329-331).

From his stream of consciousness before his first mass as a servant, it becomes clear that Brendan not only is still trying to be readmitted to the sacraments he claims he no longer desires, but also makes his opinions of the Church somewhat dependent on how he is treated by its representatives. Furthermore, he connects his service to his family back home as well as his ancestors:

If I was willing to serve Mass, it was in memory of my ancestors standing around a rock, in a lonely glen, for fear of the landlords and their yeomen, or sneaking through a back-lane in Dublin, and giving the pass-word, to hear Mass in a slum public-house, when a priest's head was worth five pounds and an Irish Catholic had no existence in law (329-330).

It is because of his family’s long Catholic tradition that Brendan cannot simply disavow the Church despite its mistreatment of him. Instead, as with nationalism, Brendan finds a way to retain the discourse that has formed him for a large part of his life, while also adjusting it to his new reality of prison life, one in which the focus lies not on what the Church wants of him, but rather what he can take from the Church.

‘We’re all good kids:’ Forming bonds

In Hollesley Bay, Brendan begins to realise that the dichotomy on which he originally based his hatred for the English, namely the oppressive coloniser versus the oppressed colony, is flawed. Indeed, Schrank argues that: “Whereas the conventional Irish prison memoir assumes

that the removal of British political control would be sufficient to usher into Ireland an era of freedom, *Borstal Boy* suggests that the policies and practices of the Republic are, in their way, just as oppressive as colonial rule.”³⁸ When accused by his friend Jock of liking the English, despite having spoken out against their crimes against (former) colonies, Brendan counters:

That’s only the British Empire – that’s a system. And some of the worse bastards running it are the Irish and the Scots. But judge them at home. How easygoing they are if people are living together without being married. [...] in Ireland, down the country anyway, if a girl got put up the pole she might as well leave the country, or drown herself and have done with it – the people are so Christian and easily shocked (301).

Not only does Brendan here acknowledge the difference between the state and its people, he also expresses awareness that post-independence Ireland has its own issues to deal with, one of them being the fact that religion has become a defining factor for the state, thus allowing the marginalisation of anything or anyone divergent from a specific kind of Catholic morality. This of course was a personal matter to Behan as in many ways his life and character did not conform to the ideals of de Valera’s Ireland.

While “Nationalist narratives of imprisonment tend to suggest the unequivocal identification of the individual with the nation,”³⁹ as Brannigan indicates, this is not possible for Behan. Due to his failure to reconcile his nationalist fantasy with reality as well as due to his undesirable politics, sexual orientation and status as a prisoner, he cannot identify with his nation as defined by de Valera’s Free State. Furthermore, as Sean Ryder indicates:

There is [...] a tension between autobiography’s revelation of the individual’s uniqueness and its assertion of the same person’s typicality. [...] The politics of nationalist autobiography, however, require that the egocentric emphasis on uniqueness be subordinated to an emphasis on what makes the autobiographer’s life paradigmatic or representative.⁴⁰

Thus, in a typical nationalist autobiography, everything that deviates from the norm is downplayed. Instead, the lives depicted are supposedly lived in a way others can model themselves and their Republican efforts on. *Borstal Boy*, therefore, is not a typical nationalist autobiography. Not only does Behan point out the oppressive nature of the state and the subsequent impossibility of identifying with it: from the very beginning, Brendan’s uniqueness also overshadows his representativeness as an Irish rebel. He is, for instance,

³⁸ Schrank 177.

³⁹ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 129.

⁴⁰ Sean Ryder, “‘With a Heroic Life and a Governing Mind’: Nineteenth-Century Irish Nationalist Autobiography,” *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, ed. Liam Harte (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 17.

incapable of phrasing his first statement to the police without making reference to his socialist views, which would not necessarily be welcome in the Republic or the IRA: “‘I came over here to fight for the Irish Workers’ and Small Farmers’ Republic’ [...] the craw-thumpers [...] would be hopping mad at me giving everyone the impression that the IRA was Communistic” (4).

Additionally, after Walton Brendan begins to identify less with earlier Republican heroes and more with the English people surrounding him. While in Part One of *Borstal Boy*, Brendan looks towards nationalist stories and the Church to give him strength, in Part Two, after being disillusioned with both of these discourses, he begins to consider the other soon-to-be borstal boys his stronghold. Instead of the typical Republican martyr, thus, there emerges a young man ready to focus on those elements of his character that allow him to become a part of the Borstal community, while also being problematic ‘outside.’ His identity, accordingly, begins to be defined not solely by his Republicanism and religion, but also by his class, sexuality and creative ability. Before his official sentencing, Brendan is concerned about his shifting loyalties:

I was a bit ashamed in a way that I was worried over going to ps for fourteen years or to Borstal for three and ashamed, too, because it was not really the length of the sentence that worried me [...] but that I’d sooner be with Charlie and Ginger and Brownny in Borstal than with my own comrades and countrymen any place else. It seemed a bit disloyal to me that I should prefer to be with boys from English cities than with my own countrymen and comrades from Ireland’s hills and glens (120-121).

As if to justify this realisation, almost every other Irish person in the first section of *Borstal Boy* is a negative character. From Brendan’s mean landlady, who “is only generous with things that cost little in cash,” (4) to the raging Inspector O’Sullivan who attempts to threaten him into informing on the IRA, or the Irish Catholic prison guards who “showed their loyalty to the King and Empire by shouting at me and abusing me a bit more than the others” (45-46), Irishness is usually accompanied by offense to Brendan’s sensibilities. In contrast, it is from English people that he receives the most kindness: “One warder, who looked very young, with red cheeks and a happy rough North of England accent, used to smile and whisper ‘Up the Republic,’ whenever he was on the locking or unlocking of the doors. Once or twice he gave me an extra slice of bread” (46). This reversal of expectations ultimately makes it understandable why Brendan would “prefer to be with boys from English cities.” It also allows Brendan to feel safe enough amongst the ‘enemy’ to lower his Republican front and consider the urban background and class affiliations he shares with Charlie and the other borstal boys:

I had the same rearing as most of them; Dublin, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, London. All our mothers had all done the pawn – pledging on Monday, releasing on Saturday. We all knew the chip shop and the picture house and the fourpenny rush of a Saturday afternoon, and the summer swimming in the canal and being chased along the railway by the cops (232).

As Brannigan argues:

In prison and borstal, ironically, Behan found an England and an Englishness for which his intensive tutelage in Republican prison narratives had not prepared him. By [...] discovering the hybridity of his own cultural identity, composed as much of industrialised working-class English culture as it was of Irish nationalism, Behan found the nationalist justification of war and sacrifice wanting.⁴¹

Whereas in Walton he felt isolated, his Irishness and Republicanism seemingly dividing him from the majority of other prisoners and putting him in constant danger, in Hollesley Bay his IRA involvement is greeted with indifference: “‘You in for the IRA, Paddy?’ asked the screw. ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘You must ‘ave been barmy,’ said he, blowing smoke down his nose. ‘There’s no percentage in that lark’” (209).

Feeling that no matter what he is “in for” he will be safe allows Brendan to focus on issues other than nationalism, like the fact that a shared class background oftentimes is more meaningful than a shared nationality. This he acknowledges after talking to a fellow inmate, Ken Jones whose “whole appearance was very neat and he spoke with a middle, or upper-class accent” (225). This boy plans to escape from Borstal, despite Brendan’s assertion that: “‘The place seemed alright. The Governor seemed a decent sort [...] The screws were all right, and I liked the other blokes’” (231). Ken, however, feels no such affiliation with the place or its inhabitants as Brendan soon realises:

In a way, as the middle-class and upper-class in England spend so much money and energy maintaining, the difference between themselves and the working-class, Ken was only getting what his people paid for but, still and all, I couldn’t help being sorry for him, for he was more of a foreigner than I, and it’s a lonely thing to be stranger in a strange land (232).

Indeed, while nationality seems to no longer be the great divider, class disparity definitely leads Ken to feel isolated and Brendan to feel part of the community. It is also no coincidence that Brendan’s group of “chinas” grows with each transition, from only Charlie and eventually Ginger in Walton, to Charlie, Ginger, Joe and Chewlips in Feltham and finally, through the addition of Jock, Tom Meadows and 538 Jones, to a large and comfortable clique in Hollesley Bay. It is the community Brendan builds around him that allows him to lay aside

⁴¹ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 29.

his preoccupation with nationalism and religion, in order to discover or expand on other parts of his identity. As Hanne Birk and Birgit Neumann assert, “[i]dentity can only be constructed and stabilised in close contact with the other and in interaction with the social environment.”⁴² Brendan’s way of conceptualising himself, therefore, changes when his social environment changes.

One of the advantages of Hollesley Bay is the possibility of physical labour. This is perceived as more desirable than the mailbag sewing done in Walton: “we would sooner have gone to work, from curiosity and from the novelty of working outside” (213). Additionally, it also allows some of the boys to follow their trade despite being imprisoned as the Governor explains to them upon entering his institution:

It may happen that the working party to which you have been sent does not suit you. I can’t always guarantee that I can transfer you to work to which you would be better suited. Obviously, though some of you may be good sailors, I can’t put you on a ship. [...] If possible we will make use of your talents in whatever way we can (211-212).

For Brendan, who is a proud third-year apprentice in the profession he shares with his father and several other family members, namely house painting, the prospect of getting to practise his trade is very welcome. Unlike in the *Irish Press* columns, Behan presents work as a positive and alluring force in *Borstal Boy*. This is because, apart from being a distraction from the monotony of prison life, it also is a way to feel free and connect to other prisoners: “I sometimes saw a fellow wearing overalls and walking round very much his own master, carrying brushes and paint [...] I envied him and admired his casual walk around the place and I would have liked to have been one of his seven mates even, for a start” (247). This “fellow” turns out to be Tom Meadows, another painter’s apprentice. Speaking to his peer “was like meeting somebody from home, not only from your own country, but from your house and family, only better because he was more intimate than a friend without being a blood relation” (293). Once again, a shared class and profession is conceptualised as more important than a shared nationality.

This is further emphasised by Brendan’s interaction with the Foreman engineer who assigns him to the Painters’ Party, only a few pages before his interaction with Tom:

‘I don’t suppose you know that I’m half Irish,’ said he. In normal circumstances I’d have said no, and what’s better still, I don’t give a fish’s tit what he was. But he seemed a

⁴² Hanne Birk and Birgit Neumann, “Go-between: Postkoloniale Erzähltheorie,” *Neue Ansätze in der Erzähltheorie*, eds. Ansgar Nünning and Vera Nünning (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2002) 124. My translation: “Identität [kann] nur in engem Zusammenwirken mit ‚den Anderen‘, in der Interaktion mit einem sozialen Umfeld konstruiert und stabilisiert werden.”

decent old skin and in any case he was giving me my detached job on the Painters' and I didn't want to offend him so I just said, 'I suppose it was your ancestors were Irish.' 'My mother was Irish – she was an O'Carroll from Longford.' 'A lot of people I've met inside seem to be of Irish descent, sir.' 'It doesn't seem to interest you very much,' said he. 'Well to tell you the truth, sir, it doesn't. When I was in Walton a lot of the screws were of Irish descent – Lancashire-Irish, they were and to prove that they were as British as anyone else they were worse to me than anyone else (288).

By rejecting the man's claim to their commonalities, Brendan asserts that at this point of his journey, he no longer feels that a shared country of origin alone is something that can sustain a positive connection. This is not only true for Irish people in England, but, in relation to where exactly they are from, for English people in jail as well. Repeatedly, the young prisoners' regional provenance is depicted as the seed of an argument:

'Good enough for you bloody swede-bashers,' said Murray. The London boys are getting fed up with all this talk of Lancashire and Yorkshire nick. [...] 'Up in fughing Geordie-land,' said Charlie [...] 'What's the matter with fughing Geordie-land?' asked the smaller Richardson, adding, in case Charlie might give him a reasonable answer, 'you bloody Croydon bastard' (163).

As in this interaction between several Feltham inmates, regional rivalries tend to be the basis of (physical) arguments, exemplifying *Borstal Boy*'s attempt at denaturalising nationality as a homogenous, unifying concept. Instead, class and friendship, which may cross national as well as regional boundaries, are depicted as the elements holding together the Borstal community, as well as, by extension, the outside world.

Another instance in which Brendan recognises that after several months in England, the strong connection to his British "chinas" overshadows any national or nationalist loyalties he may have once had, is his meeting with Harry Lavery, another IRA soldier imprisoned in Feltham. This is one of the few positive interactions Brendan has with another Irish person in *Borstal Boy*; however, while Lavery appeals to Brendan's sense of honour, morality and IRA pride, Brendan sarcastically and inwardly points out the flaws he sees in Lavery's arguments:

'The prisoners [...] talk about things, aye, and do things,' said he, fearlessly, 'that the lowest ruffian in Ireland, Catholic or Protestant, wouldn't put his tongue to the mention of [...].' I nodded, but what I was really thinking about was, that in Dublin no one ever heard of Protestant ruffians. At least not on the north side. All the Protestants I ever heard of were rich people in the city, and the poorest ones we knew were clerks in builders' offices [...] I'd have liked to have seen a Protestant ruffian. I suppose Charlie and Knowlesy and Chewlips were Protestant ruffians (186).

Instead of agreeing to Lavery's notion of a superior Irish morality, Brendan considers class as the overarching issue. He also immediately connects Lavery's comments to his friends, thereby indicating that their shared status as "ruffians" is more important to him than the

country he shares with Lavery. Furthermore, in this passage, Brendan emphasises that his part of Ireland differs from other parts: “in Dublin [...] on the north side” (186), once again asserting that within the same country, there can be disparities that make connections harder than those which are formed on the basis of shared experience.

In addition, Lavery hands Brendan a gift of “a large packet of Players, a box of matches, and six bars of chocolate” (187), with an appeal: “you don’t have too much to say to those fellows and never get into their dirty way of speaking. Remember that you’re not a cat burglar or a – a – ponce, but a Republican soldier, and carry yourself as such” (187). Brendan, however, ignores this appeal, meant to keep him separate from the other inmates, by sharing the gift amongst the other boys in his dormitory. As McMahan points out: “The effect is to undermine an essentialised notion of nationality in favour of unity based on shared experience, while presenting a more pluralist and tolerant society.”⁴³ This notion is further exemplified by the autobiographical novel’s repeated showcasing of solidarity and willingness to share amongst the prisoners. When during Easter Week, the Feltham priest invites all the boys to follow him along the Stations of the Cross, the different classes of prisoners mix:

it was a sore thing in any nick for one class of prisoner to get mixed up with another [...] So off we went, in great confusion. Remands loaded down with snout, Borstal Boys from Feltham with some snout, ourselves, the Allocations, Judges’ Respites, and Licence Revokes with no snout and the chokey blokes behind us, with no scoff but bread and water some of them, not to mind snout (181).

Of course, the boys take this opportunity to mix and mingle, to get tobacco off some and hand sandwiches to others. The readiness to give to other inmates what they lack is so frequent a feature in *Borstal Boy* that it highlights the value of the Borstal community over any other connections one may have to others outside of confinement.

However, that Brendan no longer bases his worldview solely on national difference once he enters the Borstal system does not automatically mean that he no longer holds on to his rebelliousness. Instead, Behan uses texts other than classical nationalist prison narratives to express his identity, which often enough is so different from both Republican Army and state-sanctioned ideals that in itself, its expression becomes a form of rebellion. When it comes to his class background, the most prominent of these texts is *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* by Robert Tressall, which “was our book at home, too, and when my mother was done telling us of the children of Lir and my father about Fionn Mac Cumhaill they’d come back by way of nineteen sixteen to the *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*” (293). This

⁴³ McMahan 73.

book, written by an Irishman utilising his experiences as a painter in England,⁴⁴ connects Brendan by way of being a kind of ‘working-class bible’ to Tom Meadows, while at the same time reflecting on his own life in exile. The high regard with which the working-class is treated in *Borstal Boy*, as well as the views expressed by Tom Meadows are ways in which Behan retains the spirit of rebellion, now not necessarily for the 32-county republic but more so for a socialist Ireland devoted to freedom and equality, including the six northern counties: “Tom took the IRA very seriously and was very much against it. But he said he to me that he was also against the British upper-class and the Royal Family. [...] He said it was the fault of the British boss-class that the Irish were forced always into terrorism to get their demands which he allowed were just and right” (293-294).

Another text that accompanies a defining moment in *Borstal Boy* is the biography of Oscar Wilde by Frank Harris.⁴⁵ This book Brendan encounters in the hands of a fellow inmate who clearly models himself on the famous dandy:

he had the same name as a famous English novelist [...] it turned out that he was a nephew of this novelist. Another claim to distinction that he had was a cigarette holder and a civilian tie of rose colour. He spoke with a languid elegant accent and, through being Number Two labour, worked with some other delicate subjects making stockings with Miss Vasser. He was altogether as decadent as our frugal means allowed (243).

It is because of this boy’s flamboyance that Brendan is “not so much surprised to see” (244) him reading a book about Oscar Wilde. Brendan’s sole objective in this scene is to make himself known and liked by another boy, who is in charge of Hollesley Bay’s library: “I was always hoping to get into chat with him, for I wanted to get a book, and he had them” (243). His further treatment of Oscar Wilde is, therefore, interesting. Upon seeing the book the “novelist’s nephew” (244) is reading, Brendan’s mind wanders; he conjures up a speech about Wilde’s mother, Frank Harris and his own family’s involvement in Irish rebel activities.

⁴⁴ Emmet O’Connor, “The Autobiography of the Irish Working Class,” *A History of Irish Autobiography*, ed. Liam Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 211-212, Cambridge Core <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/history-of-irish-autobiography/4CE4C02E8650335B004C064F6D29F6DE>> 2 Jan. 2021.

⁴⁵ Frank Harris, born in Ireland to Welsh parents and later in life citizen of the United States, as a child was sent to live in Wales when his father discovered his son’s sympathies for the Fenian cause and lived a life in many ways opposed to societal conventions. Not only was he a fierce believer in Irish independence, he also wrote and talked about taboo subjects freely, not least in his biography of Oscar Wilde. The way he portrayed his contemporary and friend was highly unusual for his times, but ‘rebel’ that he was he did it anyway since, as he indicates in the introduction to the book, nobody else would.

See: Bridget Hourican, “Harris, Frank,” *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Dec. 2009

<<https://www.dib.ie/biography/harris-frank-a3818>> 5 April 2021, and

Frank Harris, *Oscar Wilde, his Life and Confessions* (New York: Harris, 1916) iii-vii, archive.org

<<https://archive.org/details/oscarwildehislif01harruoft/page/vi/mode/2up>> 5 April 2021.

However, possibly afraid of coming across as too anti-English because of his in-depth knowledge of these issues, he holds back: “All this I knew but I didn’t say it [...], only: ‘I was born a few hundred yards from where Wilde was born. His mother was a great old rebel, and Frank Harris was a bit of a rebel too. I used to think that Oscar Wilde was sent to the nick for being an Irish rebel but I believe now that it was over sex’” (245). This belief he has gathered from his mother’s assertion that “they brought him down the same as they did Parnell” (244).

As Schrank indicates,

The mature Behan, like the reader, and like Behan’s mother, knows that Parnell’s fall involved an extra-marital affair. Wilde’s fall was tied to his homosexuality. But, for Behan, these technical differences are less important than that allegations of sexual impropriety are so often used in Irish politics, both pre- and post-Independence, to enforce a standard of conformity and to limit the impact of heterodox views.⁴⁶

Indeed, the other boy intends to shock Brendan with the revelation of Wilde’s crime: “‘you don’t know really what he was in for? [...] I’ll tell you exactly,’ said the novelist’s nephew, with his grin, and he did tell me exactly. ‘What do you think of your Irish rebel now?’ said he” (245). Instead of taking the bait and dismissing Wilde’s Irishness or potential for rebellion because of his homosexuality, “Behan accepts ‘that every tinker has his own way of dancing’ (1982: 240), an inclusive, non-denominational attitude toward Wilde and an acknowledgment too that rebellion takes many forms,”⁴⁷ as Schrank argues. By likening Wilde to Parnell, thereby “insisting on the homosexual Wilde’s claims as both Irish and rebel, and seeking to insert him into the pantheon of masculinist Irish patriot prisoner martyrs, Behan rejects the hegemonic practices of the Irish as well as the British,”⁴⁸ she continues. Moreover, Behan aligns Brendan with Wilde in the process: “when I’m finished you shall have a loan of the book, and then read the life of your distinguished fellow-Patrick by another distinguished fellow-Patrick,” (245) Brendan’s interlocutor tells him, indicating that in some way Brendan fits into this list of “distinguished” Irishmen. Indeed, throughout *Borstal Boy*, Brendan is, not unlike Wilde, a rebel, prisoner and man of ambiguous sexuality. Ríóna Ní Fhrighil comments on Behan’s Irish language poem “Oscar Wilde” that “the trace of admiration and affection for one who openly contravened the sexual mores of the time is daring and hints at the narrator’s ambiguous attitude to sexuality,”⁴⁹ a claim that can just as easily be applied to this section of the autobiographical novel.

⁴⁶ Schrank 181.

⁴⁷ Schrank 183.

⁴⁸ Schrank 183.

⁴⁹ Ríóna Ní Fhrighil, “Brendan Behan’s Irish-Language Poetry,” *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) 109.

Brendan's ambiguous sexuality is a theme throughout *Borstal Boy*. It is most present in the tender moments, the fights and the songs he shares with Charlie. Homosexuality is also presented as something common in prison, while at the same time being a punishable offence in both England and Ireland. Indeed, upon entering Hollesley Bay, Brendan and his friends observe the supposed relationship between the "Part-Worn screw" and his assistant, the prisoner known as Geordie:

It was almost as if the screw was trying to make up a quarrel they'd been having earlier in the day, before we came. It seemed a funny position, a screw trying to coax a prisoner into good humour. I said this to Joe, and of course he had his answer straight away. 'The course of true love never runs smooth,' said he, giving his views on the matter. 'I wouldn't doubt you,' said I, laughing. [...] 'You dirty-minded old bastard.' 'He is that, and all,' said Charlie, 'and you're a fughing sight worse than he is. You've got a bit of education,' said he. 'Well, you must admit,' said I, 'it does look a bit like that.' 'Damn-all to do with me,' said Charlie, 'once the sod doesn't try that lark with me. Or any other bastard either.' 'I'll consider your application,' said Joe (204).

In the autobiographical novel such jokes about homosexual relationships in prison or borstal are common, most often attributed to Joe, who is also the one to most often boast of his sexual relationships with girls outside of prison. However, Charlie's sensitivity when it comes to any allusions to homosexual relations becomes apparent in light of these comments. Since he is quick to tell others to stop including him in sexual banter of this kind, it is remarkable how relaxed he is around Brendan. Shortly after speaking out about not wanting anyone to "try that lark" with him, the boys enter the showers: "'Paddy,' Charlie shouted from next door, 'come in and soap my back, will you?' 'I will,' shouted Joe, 'I'm good at that, I am.' 'You stop where you are,' said Charlie. He stood under the water, the light down his back muscles faintly gleaming" (205). Charlie will only allow Brendan, who he has already formed a bond with in Dale Street and Walton, to see and touch him while naked.

Even the first encounter between Charlie and Brendan is marked by a certain physicality:

There was a boy in a sailor's uniform, a little older than I, but lighter built. I took my place behind him, innocently admiring the back of his neck. [...] 'Fix that vest, will you, Pad? Just shove it down a bit.' He turned around, and I shoved down an inch of his vest that was showing above his blouse. [...] He put his hands in my trouser pocket. 'No bottle, Paddy, that one's got an 'ole in it. [...] I'll put the paper inside your shirt, so's as that old bastard of a grass-'opper won't tumble it.' He put the News of the World next to my skin, putting his hand round me (10-11).

As McMahon indicates "the scene is followed by one in which language expresses homoeroticism as they communicate through the walls of their cells, with 'lips [and] mouth to

the spy-hole.”⁵⁰ Their communication is, of course, partly through song. The fact that Brendan chooses to sing a song about “Bonnie Prince Charlie,” his “china’s” namesake, is no coincidence. Indeed, as Ní Fhrighil points out about a similar situation in “After the Wake,” “The narrator exploits the ambiguities of the oral song tradition in Irish where men sang women’s songs and vice versa, the narrative of the songs being free enough to allow for reinterpretation from various perspectives.”⁵¹ By taking on the voice of the female figure of Ireland mourning her “Bonnie Prince” Brendan can serenade Charlie, without endangering either of them: “beautiful, lightsome, awesome boy, / [...] Walk my love, walk surely / White as new lime, your thighs and hips, / Your clustering hair, and your sweet-bitten lips, / My last blaze of strength would die well in their kiss” (16). Moreover, the fact that the song, although printed alternately in Irish and English, is sung only in Irish by Brendan functions as a safety net, hiding his budding attraction to the other boy not only from outsiders, but also from Charlie himself: “Good old Paddy, but I couldn’t understand it” (16). Despite the special connection the boys share, their relationship is only expressed through such coded language and hints. This is because, despite the joking in the homosocial environment of Borstal, homosexuality is not officially condoned. During the Hollesley Bay Eisteddfod, Brendan meets Ken Jones, who has been caught attempting to “scarper” and has, as a result, spent some time in solitary confinement. With him are two boys, who “[t]he nightwatchman caught [...] kipped in together. [...] they fell asleep on the job” (275). These euphemisms of course allude to their being punished for having had sex, which is neither allowed in the confines of Borstal, nor ‘outside.’

In an early manuscript of Behan’s, according to O’Sullivan “probably written about a year after his release from Borstal, and serving as a sort of work-in-progress towards *Borstal Boy*,”⁵² there is a passage which discusses homosexuality in Borstal much more explicitly than anything actually published in *Borstal Boy*:

I loved Borstal boys and they loved me. But the absence of girls made it that much imperfect. Homosexuality (of our sort) is not a substitute for normal sex. [...] The youth of healthy muscle and slim-wrought form is not the same as the powdered pansy (who I hasten to add, as good as anybody else, has every right to be that and a bloody good artist or anything he wants to be).⁵³

⁵⁰ McMahon 70.

⁵¹ Ní Fhrighil 106-107.

⁵² O’Sullivan 69.

⁵³ O’Sullivan 69.

Regarding this excerpt, Cronin argues: “There is the distinction between ‘situational’ homosexuality, to which any man may, in specific circumstances, temporarily resort and some more ‘innate’ homosexuality, which is confined to identifiable types of men.”⁵⁴ This can, of course, be read as a kind of defence mechanism, a way to acknowledge that there was sex in *Borstal*, but it did not mean that any of the boys were actually gay. After all, in the social climate in which *Borstal Boy* was published, to say even this much could result in grave consequences. In the final version of *Borstal Boy*, thus, homosexuality is present, but subtly so. Yet, while in the unpublished manuscript Behan claims to have only succumbed to same-sex activities because of a lack of women, the relationship between Brendan and Charlie in the autobiographical novel tells another story.

Although Brendan is reluctant to risk his physical safety for his Republican cause when called upon by Callan, he hurries to Charlie’s defence when his hot-headedness endangers him: “Hanson went over to him in a bad temper and drew on him. ‘Leave him alone!’ I shouted. To tell nothing but the God’s truth before I even knew I had shouted anything. [...] I got up from the table, and went towards him in a rush” (153). Later, he deflects by claiming that:

It might be thought that I went for him over him going for Charlie, my china, but was not altogether true, either. My main reason for going for him was, I think, that I was trying to build up, in a small way, of course, a reputation as a terror, so as blokes would have heard about me before I got to Borstal and would leave me alone (154).

However, this contradicts his earlier statement, where he claims to have attacked Hanson unthinkingly, instinctively protecting Charlie, it seems. The contrast between Brendan’s calculated avoidance of physical altercations in defence of the IRA and his automatic impulse to get into a fight for Charlie’s sake takes on a layer of irony when considering their respective military participation. Indeed, Brannigan argues, “the fact that he has been suspected of planning to blow up a naval dockyard and proceeds to have homoerotic relations with a naval rating emphasises the transgressive potential of same-sex relations in relation to the homosocial discourses of imperialism and nationalism.”⁵⁵ Instead of the heterosexual masculinity expected of military men, both boys share an emotional relationship that not only helps alleviate their respective feelings of isolation and homesickness in confinement, but also surpasses any other friendships they have and contradicts all claims of the relations between the boys being based on necessity or lack of better options.

⁵⁴ Cronin 86.

⁵⁵ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 142.

This is further emphasised by the frequent conflicts between Brendan and Charlie in especially Part Three of *Borstal Boy*. Cronin agrees that

the emotional intensity of Brendan's relationship with Charlie is registered by Charlie's recurring anger and hurt when Brendan is cultivating his friendships with the other boys; given the elliptical quality of the text, Charlie's responses appear rather bafflingly opaque to the reader, and thus encourage speculation. Most painfully, this emotional intensity is registered towards the end of the novel in Brendan's mourning.⁵⁶

Indeed, while Charlie seems to think that Brendan does not share his level of affection, this is repeatedly contradicted in the text:

'Well, and he's the surly bastard and no mistake,' said I with bitterness. 'Oh, he's only needled,' said Joe, 'because you could go and work on another party and spend the day away from him. That kid thinks so much of you, Paddy, that if Parry had done you today, Charlie would more nor likely have gone after 'im with a razor blade and shivved him. It's only 'is feelings are 'urt. That's the way 'e is.' But that didn't make me feel much better (263-264).

Brendan, who has just had an altercation with Parry, another prisoner, is more concerned with Charlie's apparent disinterest in that event and his coldness towards him, than with any possible consequences of the fight. As Schrank asserts,

[c]learly, Brendan loves Charlie as much as Charlie loves Brendan, but Brendan recognizes that, for all that is positive in their pairing, such relationships tend to be fixed, narrow, restrictive and exclusionary [...] Behan's impulses are, in essence, anarchic, so he experiences any restriction, whether political, sexual or emotional, as constraint.⁵⁷

Indeed, in the final part of the autobiographical novel, Brendan seems to distance himself from Charlie as a result of his attempts to garner his affection exclusively for himself. However, Brendan might also be hesitant to fully commit to the relationship for a variety of other reasons. For instance, the teenager might not be ready to enter a relationship this serious. At the same time, the adult author might be hesitant to depict in more detail how the relationship between Brendan and Charlie progressed, as it would incriminate him to a large extent. Finally, the boys' time together is necessarily limited and thus allowing Charlie to come too close would eventually lead to heartache.

Of course, this possible attempt to protect his own feelings is not successful. As Cronin observes, Brendan's mourning in the final passages of *Borstal Boy* is another strong indicator of just how deeply emotional his relationship to Charlie is: "I said nothing but 'Thanks for telling us, Mr Smith, and thanks for the bit of snout.' [...] I went on up the road to the camp

⁵⁶ Cronin 88.

⁵⁷ Schrank 177.

site and did sod all for the afternoon [...] and I wasn't minding a word of what he was saying" (366). After Charlie is gone, first released from Borstal, then killed during his naval duty, Brendan no longer seeks connections to other boys and soon after this devastating moment, Behan ends the narrative. Thus, in Borstal Brendan finds friendship and love, both of which help him realise that it is not merely the complete freedom of Ireland that is worth fighting for, but also, perhaps more so, solidarity, equality and the freedom to be yourself.

'My home town:' Becoming a Writer

"Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it."⁵⁸

– Seamus Heaney

In Hollesley Bay, Brendan is put to work on the Garden Party. Despite his family's urban background, he finds the work in the fields enjoyable: "There were gleams of sun coming through the trees and it was sensible work, with a meaning to it" (226). Still, when a warder expects him to be better at digging than the other boys, he resents this stereotype: "'Don't mind looking at these other fellows. You're an Irishman.' I am, said I in my own mind, but I'm not from Connacht" (227). Indeed, Brendan ponders:

I dug a field once with my father, the time of a strike, when the Dublin Corporation gave the men plots of one-eighth of an acre out on Dean Swift's in Glasnevin. My old man [...] talked about the land and how our ancestors came from it and how healthy it was. [...] but, after a while, he got bored, and the next day he got a countryman to dig the plot [...] I asked my grandmother about our ancestors and their land, and she said she was my ancestor and she was no bogwoman but a qualified printeress and had been all her young life and that all our family's land was all in window-boxes (224).

While this is true of the Behan branch of Brendan's family, both of his maternal grandparents came from farming families.⁵⁹ That Behan still chose to include only the urban, working-class side of his family is an indication of his lack of connection to "the land." Thoroughly a city boy, Brendan feels that digging is not his calling and resents being taken for a "bogman." In this context, his comment that this activity has "a meaning to it," in contrast to "sewing those bloody mailbags" (226) in Walton, can be read metaphorically as well. Indeed, in his 1966 poem "Digging" the poet Seamus Heaney takes inspiration from his family's history of digging potatoes and cutting turf, pointing out that he, too, can dig, only with a pen instead of a spade. In the first verse of the poem, he also likens his tool, the pen, to a gun: "Between my

⁵⁸ Seamus Heaney, "Digging," *Poetry Foundation*, 2021
<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47555/digging>> 4 Mar. 2021.

⁵⁹ O'Sullivan 3.

finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.”⁶⁰ “Digging,” thus becomes a metaphor for another kind of labour, one that can uncover truths and weaponize words, namely writing. Applying this metaphor to *Borstal Boy* can throw light on Brendan’s development from devoted Republican to writer, committed to expressing through language his own uniqueness and thereby rebel against the coloniser, as well as the oppressive elements of the Irish state. In other words, in *Borstal Boy*, Behan is “digging” through layers of ideology and prejudice to uncover writing as a tool for rebellion and becoming famous better fitted to his character than Republican military action.

Even though there are few instances in the book of Brendan actually writing, he is very well read, especially for a teenage working-class boy. In Part One of *Borstal Boy*, for instance, he criticises the newspaper serial: “The serial was a full page. Not Hemingway or Liam O’Flaherty, I thought, settling myself in comfort, and inclining my head to condescension. It was entitled, ‘No Star is Lost’, and was a lot less interesting than the rest of the paper” (15).⁶¹ Moreover, in Hollesley Bay, Brendan ponders the landscape, so very different from his home:

It was flat and foreign and I missed the mountains, for you can see them any side of you, even from the middle of Dublin but now, in the sun, this countryside was rich and fat and, walking down the road, I felt quite proud of it. [...] It was like the front bit of ‘The Midnight Court’ we learned at school (310).

Even though he is beginning to feel no longer as foreign to his surroundings, Brendan still compares them to Ireland and conceptualises even what does not directly remind him of familiar landscapes through an Irish poem: “No shadow or doubt on the lightsome day. / It’d gladden the heart in a broken man” (310). To be able to feel somewhat at home makes up for at least some of the pain of exile experienced in Walton. As Brannigan mentions, Brendan “bolster[s] his sense of ‘Irishness’ by appropriating the materials of his ‘foreign’ surroundings.”⁶² However, the in-depth knowledge of “The Midnight Court,” which Behan partially translates himself here,⁶³ as well as the proficiency in Irish needed to do that, were not, as indicated, acquired in school, but rather in Arbour Hill, where Behan would spend a further prison term after his release from Borstal.⁶⁴ This is a clear indication of Behan using his grown-up perspective to paint his young self as much more aware of his true calling as a

⁶⁰ Heaney, “Digging.”

⁶¹ If this is James T. Farrell’s *No Star is Lost*, this is ironic, as Farrell wrote about Irish American immigrants and expressed his Trotskyism in his writing. Young Brendan, however, is more interested in the scandalous articles in the rest of the paper, despite his continuous assertions that he is a socialist as well as a Republican.

⁶² Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 145.

⁶³ Ulick O’Connor 122-123.

⁶⁴ O’Sullivan 108.

litterateur than he might have actually been. Furthermore, due to Brian Merriman's poem, which is a satirical take on 18th century sexual politics, "having something of Rabelais' joyous frenzy,"⁶⁵ as Ulick O'Connor puts it, the scene in which Brendan enjoys a moment of freedom within the confines of Borstal becomes a rebellion against his home's strict Catholic morality, as well as against his imprisonment and the negative feelings tied to it.

That Behan has Brendan conceptualise his present through literature of someone else's creation mirrors how he will later process his experiences in his own writing. He further indicates his future as an author throughout Part Three of *Borstal Boy* by showing Brendan aligning himself with a tradition of Irish writers. For instance, he tells Inspector O'Sullivan that his name, Behan, is "a very Irish name, sir. Literary family once prominent in South Leinster, Irish form, 'Ó Beacháin'" (22). The literary history of his family name may be a coincidence, but that he is able to recite the related entry from *Sloinnte Gael agus Gall* or *The Names of the Irish and the Norman* implies an interest in books and language that goes beyond anything expected of a sixteen-year-old working-class IRA member. Indeed, in Hollesley Bay, Brendan enters the library and reflects on the Irish authors to be found there: "There was Shaw and O'Casey there. *John Bull's Other Island* and *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*. These were like a visit from home. I knew Juno, and I knew Fluther Good in the *Plough*. The preface to *John Bull's Other Island* I knew almost by heart" (251). While it may seem unlikely for the teenager to have actually read and committed to memory even such difficult passages as George Bernard Shaw's preface, judging from what O'Connor refers to as the Behan family's "general awareness of culture, literature and music, that would have been rare enough even among the better-class families of the city,"⁶⁶ it is not impossible. Indeed, Brendan's oldest half-brother Rory Furlong recalls Stephen Behan reading to the family: "He read the preface of *John Bull's Other Island* to us so often that Brendan knew it off by heart by the time he was twelve."⁶⁷

Whether true memory or fictional ploy, Brendan's intimate knowledge of these works lends gravitas to his own subsequent claims to being a natural writer when preparing his submission for the essay competition of the Eisteddfod:

I could write for ten miles about my native city [...] it wasn't a matter of what I'd put in but what I'd leave out. I could put in it a bit about James Joyce because, in one short week as a dairy boy, at the age of ten, I delivered milk to his sister in Mountjoy Square. And Yeats and O'Casey and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, whose house in

⁶⁵ Ulick O'Connor 122.

⁶⁶ Ulick O'Connor 14.

⁶⁷ Ulick O'Connor 14.

Dorset Street I passed every day on the way to the Tech, and Wilde and Shaw (267-268).

When thinking of what to write for the topic “My Home Town,” (266) he mostly considers famous writers who have shared the city with him. Additionally, he mentions: “I had written and published pieces in verse and prose, in various illegal and semi-legal Republican and Left Wing papers and magazines, since I was twelve and I was quite confident I would win this essay competition” (268). Through this simple act, he fashions himself as another one of those writers for which Dublin is known, while, however, also implying that his writing up to this point had solely been used to further his nationalist cause. When he does indeed win the essay competition, he realises that his talent has a benefit other than the one hundred cigarettes he is awarded as a price: “What surprised me was the generality of the applause, for I did not think I was so well known” (281). Since Behan’s involvement in the IRA was in part motivated by his desire to make a name for himself, this turn of events opens up another way for him to achieve acclaim, one that does not entail any further prison sentences, namely writing. As already indicated, this is the insight of the mature Behan writing *Borstal Boy*, rather than the teenage Brendan, who would actually go on to shoot at the police during a Republican outing only little over a year later.

Brendan’s gradual turn from desiring to be known as a Republican hero to someone who aims to quench his thirst for fame by writing about his experiences as a Republican soldier, rather than by continuing them, is also hinted at throughout the novel by contrasting moments of Republican failure with moments of literary satisfaction through reading. Most prominently, this happens during Callan’s insurrection in Walton. Brendan is reading Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, “thankful that Callan had let the night go past without starting a heave” (131). He focuses on his reading, occupying his mind and stopping it from wandering to the two condemned men whose execution Callan has been protesting:

I could read when I was four years old [...] and was always very fond of reading, but every one of the prisoners was the same with regard to their books, which were the principal and only thing we enjoyed; well the only thing we enjoyed with official permission. [...] This night, I decided, I could lawfully allow myself a few pages extra, as a matter of that, and as much as I could read before I went asleep, and forgot everything (132).

His blissful reading is interrupted, of course, by Callan’s shout: “U-u-u-u-up the Rep – u-u-u-u-u-u-ub – lic!” (133). Quickly, Brendan feigns participation, and returns to bed: “Callan was getting done. They’d burst open his door and were on top of him. They’d be round to my door in a few seconds, for a look in the spy-hole. And where was I, when they did come round? In

bed reading Cranford” (134). By contrasting his reading, of an English novel at that, with the other man’s rebellious act, Behan foreshadows what becomes clearer over time: that Brendan is not a fighter so much as a reader and a writer.

Indeed, it is his fear of being hurt as a result of voicing his indignation over the execution that keeps him from supporting Callan’s protest. Instead, he tries not to seem rebellious, while feeling unhappy about his cowardice: “I sat with my legs in my mailbag sewing my cell task, and thinking of sadness and sorrow and shame, and hoping that my demeanour was a peaceable one” (131). Brendan already once openly questioned the execution, during his meeting with the Walton priest, and he remembers the violent punishment given to him too well to risk another such beating. Yet, when he goes to trial the next day, he feels safe enough to express his Republican convictions again:

By plantation, famine, and massacre you have striven to drive the people of Ireland from off the soil of Ireland, but in seven centuries you have not succeeded. [...] there is but the one settlement to the Irish Question, and until the thirty-two-county Republic of Ireland is once more functioning, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace. God save Ireland. No surrender (136).

Despite his reluctance “to stand up for the cause” the previous night, he is proud to have spoken these words in the adversary’s country:

I shouted ‘Up the Republic!’ across the court and right into his face, and went down the stairs in good humour [...] the world would know that my two comrades now lying in the clay this few hours past were not so soon forgotten. Thousands had marched in mourning all over Ireland and in the United States, but I was the only one privileged to stand up for the cause ennobled by these humble men openly and defiantly in the midst of our enemies (137).

Forgotten is Callan’s solitary rebellion and Brendan’s assertion: “all honour to him, of course; I’ll never deny it to him, but tell them at home how all alone he stood and shouted for the cause all on his own. If he only leaves me out of it” (133). Indeed, although Brendan speaks for the cause when all that is required is words, in situations that could lead to bloodshed, he is all too happy to let others take the limelight.

Moreover, through literature, Brendan finds ways to connect to his home and to express his nationalism which do not include direct threat to himself or others. In the first part of *Borstal Boy* Brendan receives his first in-prison book to read. It is *Under the Greenwood Tree* by Thomas Hardy and despite it being quintessentially English, “this book in a way reminded me of them. All these old West of England men, with the cider barrel and mead and meat and cheese. It was like that at home [...] even their speech when they said ‘carrel’ and ‘traypsing and rambling about’ was like Dublin speech” (72). Thus, the first book he is allowed to read in

jail, is also the first book that helps him escape, through fiction, from prison and back to Ireland. Another book, namely Robert Collis' *The Silver Fleece* he struggles with at first:

Rugby was a game I'd always connected with the English or with the upper-classes. [...] I certainly never thought of Rugby football as having anything to do with Ireland or with Dublin. [...] But reading Collis' book was like meeting someone from home, and I could see Rugby football not as a winter meeting of cricketers, but as a battle fought in the churning mud and myself in the forward line charging for Ireland (251-252).

Suddenly, in exile, the young Dubliner finds a sport that was strange to him at home to be a significant reminder of the country and the community he so misses. When asked whether he thinks the book is good, he answers: "it's good. Good for what ails me," (253) that being, as can be inferred, homesickness. His identification of the sport with Ireland becomes so strong that when offered he decides to participate in the Borstal Rugby team, claiming: "the way that he wrote about the Irish forward line would set your blood pumping like 'Speeches from the Dock'" (352). Indeed, the comparison between the Rugby narrative and Brendan's early inspiration, *Speeches from the Dock*,⁶⁸ could be read as an indication that after months in Borstal, Brendan is ready to replace his IRA activities with another, slightly less violent form of nationalism, namely that which expresses and identifies itself through sports, in this case Rugby. Brannigan agrees that "Behan pulls rugby across the colonial divide, so that a game representing Englishness in Ireland seems to speak the language of anti-colonial struggle."⁶⁹ Thus, a book and its contents once again inspire Brendan into action, but this time it is sport, not warfare that he gets involved in. It is thus not surprising that Behan would later turn his back on the IRA, while continuing to express his nationalist views in his writing. After Borstal, and especially after his subsequent prison experience in Ireland, risking his life for the cause no longer seemed as appealing. Making a name for himself as a Republican, working-class writer, who was also open to non-heterosexuality, however, did.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Due to the quotation marks used in the quote it may be assumed that in this instance, Behan is referring to *Speeches from the Dock: Or, Protests of Irish Patriotism* by Alexander Martin Sullivan, Timothy Daniel Sullivan and Denis Baylor Sullivan. Published in various editions from 1867 onwards this collection includes speeches by Theobald Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet and Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa.

⁶⁹ Brannigan, *Revisionist Writer* 148.

⁷⁰ Of course, Behan's turn away from physical force nationalism was also motivated by his increasing criticism of the state and the fact that the IRA in the 1950s had become a small, deeply divided group that struggled to find public support. Both of these issues lead to disillusionment and while Behan retained friendships with his former IRA colleagues, he was no longer interested in being a soldier himself.

‘Thanks for coming along’: Conclusion

“And if these are the confessions of an Irish rebel, they are indeed confessions.”¹

Even though this thesis does not include a discussion of Behan’s late works often known under the moniker “talk books,” this quote from *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* seems a fitting note to end on, as all of his prose works analysed here are indeed in one way or another the confessions of an Irish rebel. Whether Behan writes as a young IRA man, trying to lobby for his cause as he does in “I Become a Borstal Boy” or as a somewhat reformed aspiring professional writer such as is apparent in many of his later works, he is always intent on challenging conventions. He rebels against accepted versions of mid-century Irish selfhood as figured by the de Valera government by writing about his home, the city of Dublin; the Northside community, working-class city-dwellers, Republican soldiers, British Army pensioners, artists, lovers and rebels; and about what has developed into a love-hate relationship with both religion and the IRA. Sexuality and same-sex attraction are also not off limits in his multifaceted oeuvre of short stories, columns and novels. In each of the works discussed in this thesis, Behan reveals part of himself. As Rae Jeffs remarks: “his writing is quite clearly autobiographical. It is all there, either as a whole or in pieces, and there can be no more than a tiny particle of himself that he has not left for posterity somewhere in his writing.”² It has been argued throughout this thesis that Behan uses notions of class, sexuality and nationalism to create identity in his prose works. It has become clear that while this is true, it may more precisely be said that he uses elements of himself, his own class background, his bisexuality as well as his own experiences with nationalism, not always successful nor fulfilling, but never fully strayed from, in order to portray characters that have sprung from his life, as much as some are heavily fictionalised.

It is not up to the present author to speculate what Behan could have achieved if he had not been derailed by alcohol and fame, both administered in too high a dosage for him to handle; however, the works he did leave behind are remarkable for their ability to transport the reader to the worlds they picture, the Dublin tenement buildings of “After the Wake” and “The Confirmation Suit,” the confines of Walton prison and the sunshine of Hollesley Bay, as well as the pub of the *Irish Press* columns, where Maria Concepta, Mrs Brennan and Mr Crippen still sit, cradling their pints and screeching their songs. In his short stories, Behan is often critical of Ireland’s puritanism; he depicts working-class traditions that the efforts of the de

¹ Brendan Behan, *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* (London: Arrow Books, 1991) 29.

² Rae Jeffs, *Brendan Behan: Man and Showman* (London: Corgi Books, 1968) 13.

Valera administration almost annihilated, relationships that are frowned upon and ventures into a socialist nationalism that would please neither the IRA nor the government. In his crime novel, *The Scarperer*, Behan experiments with form, accents and plot to create a short, entertaining story which ends in a farcical conclusion. Yet, the way identity, class and crime are intertwined in the novel already shows hints of the societal criticism so crucial to his later plays and autobiographical novel. In *Borstal Boy*, Behan not only tells the story of his own time in prison and borstal at a young age, he also reworks the traditional Irish prison memoir to include emotionally charged same-sex relationships, criticism of the Irish state and Catholic Church, as well as a transformation of the protagonist from a young IRA soldier to a writer ready to face the injustices of the world in his works.

The scope of this thesis did not allow an in-depth analysis of Behan's "talk books," as has already been mentioned. Yet, for future research purposes *Brendan Behan's Island*, *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* and *Brendan Behan's New York* could indeed be of interest. Despite their obvious aesthetic deficiency in comparison to those works Behan produced without the help of a tape recorder, they offer insight into the author's later years and his relationships to his wife, family and peers. In order to be able to properly discuss the particular blend of the real-life author, the literary character and the public persona of Brendan Behan present in these books, however, extensive research into how much of the text is actually Behan and how much of it was shaped by Jeffs as editor and friend would be necessary. Moreover, the topic of song has been lightly touched upon in the course of this thesis. The use of songs, be they Behan originals or music he knew from family or friends, is common to all of Behan's literary output. This is another area of interest for future research.

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Abstract

Class, Sexuality and Nationalism: Identity Building in the Prose Writings of Brendan Behan focuses on Irish author, playwright and rebel Brendan Behan's prose fiction. It uses notions of Irish autobiography, memory and narrativity in order to analyse his collected short stories, his only crime novel *The Scarperer* and his columns, originally published in the *Irish Press*, as well as his most extensive work, the autobiographical novel *Borstal Boy*. Due to the autobiographical nature of most of these texts, throughout this thesis biographies of the author function as co-texts. The aim of this thesis is to find out how Behan uses the themes of class, sexuality and nationalism in order to create identity in his prose. Mostly, the author is critical of his time's accepted version of Irishness, creating characters principally based on himself that do not fit the mould.

Diplomová práce *Společenská třída, sexualita a nacionalismus: konstrukce identity v prózách Brendana Behana* se soustřeďuje na irského autora, dramatika a povstalce Brendana Behana a jeho prózu. Využívá pojmy z teorie irské autobiografie, studia paměti a teorie vyprávění k rozboru Behanových sebraných povídek, jeho jediného detektivního románu *The Scarperer*, novinových sloupků původně uveřejněných v periodiku *Irish Press* i jeho nejrozsáhlejšího díla, autobiografického románu *Borstal Boy*. Protože většina autorových děl je autobiografické povahy, práce využívá ke srovnání existující životopisy autora. Cílem práce je popsat, jak Behan ve své próze využívá témata společenské třídy, sexuality a nacionalismu k utváření identity. Autor se povětšinou staví kriticky k tehdejší obecně přijímané podobě irské národní identity a vytváří postavy inspirované jím samým, které neodpovídají daným vzorům.