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**TELLING IT LIKE IT IS (AND ISN'T):  
RECREATING THE SELF IN BRENDAN BEHAN'S  
*BORSTAL BOY***

**Abstract**

This paper argues that, in *Borstal Boy*, Brendan Behan uses the form of the Irish prison memoir to deconstruct the political orthodoxies and sexual attitudes both of English colonialism and Irish nationalism and to replace them with a vision far more complex, hyphenated and tolerant. Although the work is based on Behan's experience as a young teenager sent to England on an I.R.A. bombing mission, then arrested and incarcerated in an English prison, Behan is not overly concerned with autobiographical authenticity. He uses his prison experience ironically to dramatize a microcosm in many ways freer and more loving than the nominally free world beyond its boundaries. In essence Behan uses the autobiographical subject as a social text that valorizes the solidarity of "we."

**Key words**

*Anglo-Irish; Catholic; censorship; class; colonial domination; colonialism; cultural imperialism; homosexuality; identity; imprisonment; nationalism; prison memoir; prison narrative*

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***Borstal Boy*: Autobiography, Fiction, Drama**

Brendan Behan never wrote anything in which he did not ironize, satirize, radicalize, challenge, subvert, or mutilate conventional expectations. *Borstal Boy* (1958), generally agreed to be Behan's best prose work, is no exception. Although the book nods in the direction of conventional autobiography, using first person narration to depict Behan's actual arrest at the age of sixteen as an I.R.A. bomber and his subsequent incarceration in an English penal institution, Phelps's

careful study of the manuscript revisions testifies to Behan's efforts to bring to his life 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. In other words, in *Borstal Boy* Behan creates out of the raw materials of his early life a transgressive work of fictionalized non-fiction.

This revisionary process is not a value-free exercise. Behan's transgressive imagination works on several levels, interrogating conventional beliefs and the literary forms in which these beliefs are often expressed. From the bare-bones facts of Behan's early life, that is, from his initial arrest, to his imprisonment in an English borstal, to his ultimate expulsion from Britain, Behan uses this experience to demolish the assumptions of both Irish nationalism and British colonialism. England is the enemy, the colonial Other, but, for Behan, the Ireland that emerged out of the anti-colonial struggle under the leadership of Eamon De Valera (Toiseach [or Prime Minister] of the fledgling Republic from 1937–1948, then from 1951–1954, and again from 1957–1959) was too exclusionary and repressive. In its place, Behan sought a more pluralistic and tolerant society, one that resembled the world he found temporarily in borstal. In their earlier studies, from differing perspectives, Kearney, Schrank and Hogan examine these issues.

However ironic, borstal becomes, for Behan, a space in which the ecstatic and the robotic, the transcendent and the absurd, the tragic and the carnivalesque cohabit and interact, producing enough positive energy to allow Behan to replace his previous allegiances (political, social, cultural) with a broader recognition of a world in which boundaries are permeable and borders frequently breached. Borstal is, in short, a site of liberation from the confinement of multiple orthodoxies.

As part of this revisionary process, Behan questions and complicates conceptions of autonomy and individuality so crucial to autobiography. Consistent with his rejection of such imprisoning categories as nationality, Behan rejects the prison of the isolated individual consciousness. In *Borstal Boy*, Behan works hard to demonstrate that identity is primarily socially derived and interactive. In so doing, he decenters the self and fashions a narrative in which the partially fictionalized autobiographical "I" is displaced, at least in part, by the dramatic interplay of "we." To further this end, Behan relies on many of the techniques of the theater. Dialogue, for example, constantly interrupts narrative flow. Characters talk, argue, shout, curse, speechify, recite and sing, and it is from these interactions that Behan's mature attitudes emerge.

Clearly then Behan's autobiographical work shows the same resistance to conventional expectations in its form as it does in its substance. *Borstal Boy* grows out of Behan's life, but it is not a literal record of that life. For Behan, the truth of his life was not confined to factual accuracy; its truth resides as well in the imaginative reconstructions that the facts enabled. The rest of this paper examines the ways by which Behan transforms the conventional autobiographical form of Irish prison writing into a hybrid work in which fact and fiction collaborate to challenge the social and sexual orthodoxies of both Ireland and Britain.

### Autobiography as Irish Prison Narrative / Irish Prison Narrative as Homoerotic Love Story

Life writing in Ireland has frequently and understandably, given its long history of resistance to English colonial domination, taken the form of the prison memoir. Classics of this sub-genre of the autobiography include John Mitchel's *Jail Journal* (1854), Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa's *Prison Life: Six Years in Six English Prisons* (1874), Michael Davitt's *Leaves from a Prison Diary* (1885), Thomas Clarke's *Glimpses of an Irish Felon's Life* (1922) and John Devoy's *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* (1929), all widely known in Ireland (Brannigan 2002: 127–129). Theirs is a masculinized discourse of heroism born of suffering and endurance. Indeed, these prison accounts implicitly and sometimes explicitly make the case that martyrdom is as important to the liberation of Ireland as rebellion (Brannigan 2002: 131–133).

Behan's *Borstal Boy* appears, at the start, to embrace this traditional Irish form of life writing. Quickly, though, consistent with Behan's overall strategy of transgression, Behan deconstructs the assumptions underlying the conventional Irish prison memoir. The bravura nationalist rhetoric Behan exploits at the time of his arrest measures the intensity of his desire to be considered a worthy successor to the established male line of imprisoned martyrs in the struggle for Irish independence. Behan's subsequent references to Mitchel's and Clarke's jail writing reinforce his early attachment to the nationalist prison tradition and its written expression.

However, Behan's oratorical flourishes are increasingly subjected to his own deflationary irony and are soon replaced by language and behavior that express, embody and perpetuate the strong bonds of affection he develops for many of the other boy prisoners, especially Charlie Millwall. Behan comes to feel that he would "sooner be with Charlie [and his other English friends] in Borstal than with my own comrades and countrymen any place else" (1982: 114–115).

It is particularly difficult to retain unmediated patriotic and nationalist attachments when so many of the prisoners and guards refuse to give nationality any standing. As one guard remarks: "Well, Paddy or Taffy or Jock is all bleedin' one to me" (Behan 1982: 88). This remark certainly reflects the prevailing attitude among the majority of guards and prisoners. Categories of national identification do not, as it turns out, operate as infallibly and persistently as Behan assumed at the start of his borstal experience.

In his retrospective recreation of that experience in *Borstal Boy*, Behan makes that newly acquired insight central to his narrative strategy. He reinvents the Irish prison narrative as a homoerotic romance in which differences of nationality, religion, language and politics do not exactly disappear, but they do not occupy stage center. So it is possible for Croydon-born English Charlie Millwall to become Dublin-born Irish Brendan Behan's closest friend. They eat together; they entertain each other; they sleep close by one another. They appear to mate. There is nothing extraordinary in this arrangement. Charlie and Brendan's coupling is little different from many of the other close partnerships that form among the boy

prisoners, and occasionally between prisoners and guards. These relationships run the gamut from covert to overt homosexuality. They express real affection, sexual need, and, for many of the boys, sexual expedience given the limitation of available sexual partners. *Borstal Boy* is then yet another masculinized discourse, but of a very different sort from that found in the traditional Irish nationalist prison narrative. Within Behan's redesigned prison narrative, the solidarity created by shared suffering and imprisonment brings with it friendship and love that transcend difference and subvert mainstream sexual mores.

It is not only the loving relationships that develop between Behan and the other borstal boys, who are overwhelmingly British, that subvert the conventions of the Irish prison memoir: it is also the language in which that love is expressed. I want to comment here on the insistent use of the word "china" in *Borstal Boy*. From the phrase "china plate," the term "china" is Cockney rhyming slang and is used to mean "mate," which might be any casual male friend. The term as it is used in *Borstal Boy*, however, strongly implies "special male friend" and carries the subtext of homosexual bonding. Behan's easy incorporation into his own speech (and prose) of Cockney and other British slangs and dialects (as well as the homoerotic shading of some of the terminology) signals Behan's diminishing attachment to the high rhetorical tradition of Irish nationalism and its literary form, the prison memoir, expressed as it is, ironically, in the cadences of formal English.

Whatever its specific Cockney meaning, "China" in standard English usage refers to a country in Asia that is neither Britain nor Ireland. In a work so preoccupied with Irish and English nationality, to have so many of the characters so frequently use "china" is to carry into the text this geographical space as well. The insistent use of the term in *Borstal Boy* further helps to blur existing national identities. Indeed, the term "china" as well as its meaning in the narrative create for Irish Brendan and his English friends and lovers an apparently deterritorialized emotional geography that is, for them at any rate, empty of either nationalist or colonialist inflection.

But the use of "china" does even more. It reminds readers that cultural translations and appropriations are frequent and on-going. "China" is particularly apt for inscribing the migratory and porous realities of cultural production. Fine bone china, often now thought of as the preserve of such European manufacturers as Limoges and Spode, was first made in China in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, hence the term. The European adaptation of the Chinese art of making what Europeans would later call "bone china" reinforces Behan's presentation of culture as communal and inclusive.

### ***Borstal Boy*: Homoerotic Love Story as Prison Narrative**

Charlie and Brendan meet and pair in lock-up. Later, they are transferred together to borstal. In the face of the initial hostility of some guards and some prisoners towards Behan, Charlie literally watches Brendan's back. When the Church

excommunicates Behan, Charlie comforts and diverts him. Behan in turn offers Charlie songs, laughter, and joy. In time, though, Behan finds his relationship with Charlie constricting. When Behan seeks to widen his circle of friends, Charlie reacts with hurt, anger and jealousy. Eventually, Behan and Charlie reconcile. Charlie is discharged before Brendan and returns to the British navy. Soon thereafter, Brendan learns that Charlie is dead, killed when his ship is torpedoed by the Germans in the Strait of Gibraltar. Brendan is devastated. Clearly, 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.

The same ironic impulse that drives Behan to introduce homoerotic love into (and so subvert) the conventional Irish prison memoir impels him to demonstrate the degree to which the bonds of affection are more than just descriptive metaphor. For Behan, the bonds of affection are indeed a form of bondage, even if voluntary. Behan's impulses are, in essence, anarchic, so he experiences any restriction, whether political, sexual or emotional, as constraint. What he seeks, even in the seemingly inhospitable terrain of borstal, are free and open unions.

His gut rejection of constraints enables Behan to give the autobiographical prison narrative another ironic twist. After he morphs the Irish prison narrative into the shape of a homoerotic love story, he reshapes the homoerotic love story into a variation of the prison memoir. It is, of course, in both versions, substantially different from those prison writings produced by earlier imprisoned Irish nationalists. What these manoeuvres underscore is both the oversimplifications inherent in essentialist categories and the degree to which Behan journeys beyond conventional boundaries.

### **Oscar Wilde in *Borstal Boy*: Anglo-Irish Homosexual as Irish Rebel**

Behan's uses of Oscar Wilde in *Borstal Boy* take his deconstruction of the conventional Irish prison memoir and his demolition of exclusionary categories several steps further. Behan insists on inserting Oscar Wilde into the pantheon of patriotic Irish prison martyrs. In so doing, Behan is able to remind his readers by implication and nuance of the sexual repression and literary censorship at work in the Irish Republic. 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. Behan's point, quite simply, is that genuine freedom requires more than the removal of British rule, however onerous it was.

Oscar Wilde is introduced as a biographical subject a little more than half way through *Borstal Boy*, when Behan encounters a group of borstal boys, one of whom is reading Frank Harris's *Life of Oscar Wilde*. From the start of this short episode, Behan underscores the constructedness of Wilde's identity. Frank Harris,

the nameless boy and Brendan Behan all have versions of the imagined “Oscar Wilde,” and these versions differ, reflecting as they do the differing social and sexual interests of the parties. Irish born, English educated, American adopted Frank Harris, author of a scandalously bacchanalian, sexually exuberant and only sometimes true autobiography, *My Life and Loves* (1922), focuses in his *Life of Oscar Wilde* (1916) on the later years of Wilde, treating Wilde’s homosexual relationships and highlighting his trial and imprisonment. In so doing, Harris occludes Wilde’s Irish roots. Working from a partial understanding of the selectivity of Harris’s text, the nameless boy focuses on the version of Wilde that best serves his own interests, that is, Wilde as an English dilettante. Behan’s “Wilde” is an Irish rebel not so very different from Behan himself. In the first instance, then, the uses to which Behan puts the Harris biography provide further support for Behan’s beliefs that memoirs easily become fiction and that identity is a social (and literary) construction.

Before Behan can integrate the story of Wilde’s life into his variant reading of the tradition of Irish prison writing, Behan has to rescue Wilde from the efforts of the British, here represented by the nameless borstal boy who is reading the Wilde biography, to make Wilde their exclusive cultural property. The ensuing discussion between Behan and the boy about Wilde (and to a much lesser degree, about Harris) occupies only three pages (1982: 238–40), yet the passage is central to Behan’s concerns about colonial domination, cultural imperialism, sexual repression, the role of class, and the emancipatory possibilities of (auto)biographical literature. Despite the brevity of the conversation, it provides Behan with an opportunity to explore the inconsistencies, confusions and contradictions inherent in the essentialist categories of British and Irish identity politics.

### A. Cultural Imperialism: Appropriating Wilde

The boy reading Harris’s *Wilde* is nameless, but anonymity does not deprive him of political, cultural, class and sexual definition. Behan presents him as a self-identifying prototypical member of the British ruling class, consciously embodying a spectrum of neo-colonialist attitudes that range from a commitment to the superiority of Britain, particularly its upper class, to an easy, unreflective appropriation of the Anglo-Irish Wilde as a member of the British elite and an icon of the upper-class British gay community. Reinforcing the boy’s imperial zeal is his physical possession of the Wilde biography (which, at least at the start of the interaction with Behan, he shows no sign of wanting to relinquish) and his confidence that his reductive reading of the text is privileged. Behan’s presentation of the boy is an important reminder of all that is most offensive in the colonial mentality.

This boy’s effort to establish himself as a superior being is clear from Behan’s presentation. Although a borstal boy, a carceral subject no different in actual position from that of the other borstal boys, the boy reader of Harris’s *Life* chooses to set himself apart by embracing the appearance, attitude and speech of the upper-

class British colonial oppressor. Behan notes his “thin-lipped Black-and-Tan officer’s grin” (1982: 238) and concludes that “all that he was short of was a swagger cane and a toothbrush moustache” (240). Each detail of Behan’s description and commentary provides another layer of colonial disdain to the boy’s overall unpleasantness. Behan’s references to the hated Black and Tans and to the absent (though implied present) swagger stick and Hitler-style moustache make clear the prototypical fascist/colonialist identity that the boy reading *Wilde* assumes and conveys.

The boy treats as an affront Behan’s effort to engage him in a conversation about the book and to have opinions about Wilde. He behaves as if Behan has forgotten his place at the bottom of the imperial power structure which locates the nameless boy, because British and arrogant, at the top. And because the boy has the same name as a famous British novelist, who Behan likewise declines to name, and is that novelist’s nephew, the boy also mistakenly believes he has a monopoly of cultural capital. Seen another way, the boy believes implicitly that working-class Irish Behan is insufficiently worthy and informed to discuss with him the life of upper-class, decadent, British Wilde. The boy is unable to see not only that Behan has the capacity to understand Wilde and that Behan brings to the task knowledge and information that the boy lacks, but that Behan has as much right as he does to grapple with Wilde’s identity, which is far more complex than the nameless boy (nephew to a famous writer) allows.

Even as Behan conveys the boy’s view of himself, Behan undercuts that view. Behan makes clear that the boy is subject to the scrutiny and critique of the under classes. Behan’s refusal to give the boy a name, for example, is a form of retaliation and diminishment. The boy exists in the shadow of his uncle, the famous British novelist, who is likewise not named. By erasing the boy’s name and insisting on his nephew status, Behan places the boy not at the center but at the outer fringes of English cultural life, an anonymous representative of British cultural pretensions, their variegated snobberies and their reactionary politics.

The boy’s homosexuality further complicates and compounds his identity in ways he does not fully appreciate. Behan never states directly that the boy is gay, but Behan’s description allows the reader confidently to infer as much, in part because the boy is so ostentatiously engaged by Harris’s biography of Wilde, with its emphasis on Wilde’s homosexual adventures. Although the boy’s sexual identity is relatively unconventional, at least for the time in which *Borstal Boy* is set, that identity is marked indelibly with the boy’s conventional neo-colonial attitudes and his assumptions of class superiority.

The nameless boy is both autocratic and effete. Coupled with his will to power (his Black-and-Tan officer’s grin and the imagined swagger stick) is his desire to align with the sexual practices and cultural pretensions of a subset of the upper class to which, he believes, Oscar Wilde also belonged. The boy “was altogether as decadent as our frugal means allowed. He was doing his best anyway, and not badly under the circumstances,” Behan thinks (1982: 238). The boy “spoke with a languid elegant accent,” he used “a cigarette holder,” and he sported “a civil-

ian silk tie of rose colour” (238). From Behan’s description, it is clear that the nameless boy is acting out the role of a Wildean dandy. Yet Behan is at pains to emphasize that the boy’s construction of Wilde solely as an upper-class British homosexual is far too simplistic to withstand interrogation. The boy ignores Wilde’s prolonged engagement with the complexities of identity as lived experience and creative expression. The boy also neglects the role of conventional upper-class British society in condemning and imprisoning Wilde, a crucial and telling omission. But perhaps the most telling omission in the boy’s construction of “Oscar Wilde” is his erasure of Wilde’s Irish roots.

## B. Reclaiming the Irish Oscar Wilde

Behan is no acquiescent subaltern. The determination of the nameless boy to dominate provokes Behan, who works hard to extract Wilde from the boy’s possession by contesting almost every element of the boy’s reductionist reading. Behan’s reclamation of Wilde involves a strategy of hyphenation, a redeployment of the boy’s ideological affiliations by subdivision and incorporation into larger compound categories. Behan begins by deconstructing nationality through a genealogical free-for-all.

When Behan encounters the nameless boy and his three companions, Behan notes that the one named MacCann has an educated English accent; Behan, however, stresses MacCann’s concealed Irish connections. MacCann, Behan notes, is the Anglicized version of O’Kane or O Cahawn, a family name with a long and distinguished Irish lineage going back to the ancient Irish chiefs of Antrim. Although this scion of the family has Anglicized his identity, his Gaelic relatives preserve theirs, even in Belfast, where they are “the principal Catholic undertakers [...] with the monopoly of burying fallen I.R.A. men” (Behan 1982: 238). Family connections may be obvious as they are with the novelist’s nephew, or they may be subterranean and obscure as they are with MacCann. Obvious or obscure, ties of kinship speak to commonalities and relationships that cut across national boundaries. Migration, passing, adaptation and mimicry, all represented by MacCann, disrupt neat systems of national classification.

The hyphenated identity of the MacCanns may be applied with equal validity to the Wilde family. The Wildes, as Behan is at pains to recall, though probably of English origins, have well-established Irish grounding:

I knew Oscar Wilde’s mother was “Speranza” of the *Nation* newspaper, in 1848, the time of the Young Irelanders. We learned some of her poetry at school. I knew Oscar was sent to jail and for a long time I thought it was because he was a rebel too, and I wondered what songs they had about him. But by this time I had a kind of an idea it was about sex, for once I’d asked my mother what he was sent to jail for and she just muttered, “His downfall – they brought him down the same as they did Parnell.” (1982: 238)

Unlike the Irish-Anglo MacCanns, the Wildes are Anglo-Irish. Still, they advocated a version of Irish nationalism. In this, Behan's first construction of Wilde's identity, he locates Oscar in that tradition, and he associates his fall (based on Behan's mother's explanation) with the same sexual indiscretions that brought down the Anglo-Irish home-rule leader, Parnell.

The connection to Parnell is important, but it is not, as Behan's mother would have the young Behan believe, based on the same sexual indiscretion. 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. Behan's brief biography of Wilde, offered in response to the nameless boy's de-hyphenation and Anglicization of Wilde, is a corrective to the boy's flawed reading, but it too is subject to an ever more complex re-reading. Linking Wilde to Parnell is Behan's way of insisting not only on Wilde's Irish identity but on his position as a rebel worthy of the same respect accorded to other Irish rebel-heroes, a point I return to a bit later.

Having addressed some of the variations of national identities, Behan draws attention to the complexities of religious classification. The Anglo-Irish Wildes, like Parnell, are Irish Protestant nationalists. Behan then reflects on the hostility of the Irish Catholic Church towards the Fenians, thus revising a popular perception that Irish nationalism was almost exclusively Catholic in character and uncritically supported by the Irish Catholic community.

To reinforce the ecumenicism of Irish nationalism, Behan recounts an exemplary anecdote about Pat O'Leary, a Fenian arrested by the British. At the time of O'Leary's arrest, he identified himself as a pagan only to be told that "he had to be either a Catholic or a Protestant, and Pat replied, 'I'll be neither a beggar nor a thief'" (Behan 1982: 239). Even in Irish nationalist circles, narrow schemes of religious classification fail to define political and national affiliation. Behan contests the nameless boy's effort to absorb Wilde into the British world by suggesting that Protestant Oscar Wilde might well be just as much an Irish rebel as pagan Pat O'Leary.

Behan also contests the nameless boy's elitist views of class and culture. The boy assumes that, as the unnamed novelist's nephew, and as an apparent member of the upper class, he has greater cultural sophistication than the lower orders, especially the other borstal boys. Behan makes clear that his working-class family has as impressive a claim to culture as does the nameless boy. Behan makes a point of informing the reader that his father is interested in Frank Harris and has copies of Harris's early works. Behan then notes that his uncle is a well-known song writer who "made the best song of all about the Fenians" (1982: 239). Behan insists that culture is not the monopoly of any elite, nor is it the work of isolated and deracinated individual genius. In Behan's view, culture is a social construction, and it emerges just as easily and successfully from the lives of working peo-

ple, Catholic and Protestant, Irish and English (and all the hyphenated variations in between), as from an upper-class, privileged and self-styled intelligentsia.

By the end of the encounter, the nameless boy acknowledges defeat, but with cavalier aplomb. He tells Behan, “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” (1982: 240). In passing along the book to Behan and conceding the Irishness of Wilde and Harris, the nameless boy relinquishes his imperial control but not his imperial attitude. The nameless boy is forced to acknowledge that he does not own the Harris book any more than he “owns” Wilde. The book is, in any case, a library book. The boy has limited and temporary possession within a system of free circulation, even in borstal.

Even so, his concession speech is far from total capitulation. In his choice of the Anglicized, upper-class and patronizing “fellow-Patrick” instead of the more common working-class and colloquial “Paddy,” and by avoiding altogether the designation “Irish” (as in “fellow Irishman”), he tries to maintain his attitude of class and cultural superiority. For Behan, however, the boy’s back-tracking acknowledgement of the Irishness of Wilde, however grudging, and his assurance that Behan will be able to read the book are victory enough. The encounter ends with Behan offering thanks and a smile. Behan has gotten the thing he wanted, and is satisfied. His smile is a gesture of reconciliation, a measure of his good nature, despite the nameless boy’s final effort at imperial bravado.

### C. Re-configuring Wilde as an Irish Rebel

Behan’s treatment of Wilde allows Behan to overlap issues of biographical authenticity, cultural appropriation, colonial domination, class consciousness, religious affiliation and sexual politics. Behan sees in the effete, upper-middle-class, Protestant, Anglo-Irish Wilde a kindred spirit, a rebel every bit as authentic as Mitchel and Clarke and the rest, Behan included. Like them, Wilde opposed the repressiveness of British society. Like them, he suffered imprisonment. Like them, he wrote about it.

It is, however, very unlikely that Behan’s efforts to wrest Wilde from the clutches of British cultural imperialism and renew his Irish connections would win him applause in Ireland. In Ireland during the 1930s and 40s, it was generally accepted that true Irish culture was unhyphenated and Catholic, leaving such Anglo-Irish Protestant writers (both living and dead) as Lady Gregory (1852–1932), Yeats (1865–1939), Synge (1871–1909), and O’Casey (1880–1964), along with Wilde, adrift in some cultural no-man’s land. Behan’s insistence that the Protestant Wilde is both Irish and a rebel undercuts both English and Irish efforts at cultural deformation, the English by colonial expansion and the Irish by anti-colonial restriction.

Wilde’s homosexuality was, likewise, an impediment to his being recognized and accepted as an important literary figure, worthy of inclusion in a national literary

canon, in post-Revolutionary Ireland. Wilde becomes one of the touchstones of Behan's concern with the reactionary policies of the Irish government. Even if the young Brendan claims not to know much about Wilde at the time of his encounter with the nameless boy, the older Behan who narrates *Borstal Boy* understands perfectly well that the Republic under Eamon De Valera criminalized homosexuality and censored literary work that it perceived as challenging prevailing religious, political and sexual orthodoxies. As one of the founding fathers of gay literature, Wilde was a sure target for condemnation and censorship in Ireland.

Far from being shocked or embarrassed by Wilde's 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. (One of the delights of Behan's phrasing is the way that it levels Wilde's and the nameless boy's affectations of class. Behan is not blind to imperfections in Wilde's nature; he just does not allow them to detract from Wilde's talent and his tragedy.) By 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.

Whereas the conventional Irish prison memoir assumes that the removal of British political control would usher in an era of freedom in Ireland, Behan suggests that the policies and practices of the Irish Republic are, in their way, just as oppressive as British colonial rule. A more comprehensive and genuine freedom is an on-going process of struggle that requires more than the initial step of removing the colonial oppressor. Behan's use of Oscar Wilde is one of his means for examining and advancing this position.

## Conclusion

One of Behan's most important subversions of the conventional Irish prison memoir is that in prison he finds release from the restrictive social and sexual codes of both England and Ireland. Within the tradition of Irish autobiographical writing, especially Irish prison memoirs, Behan's *Borstal Boy* is unorthodox. Its originality rests in large part on Behan's insertion of issues of sexual orientation into the emerging discourse of Irish decolonization. Behan adds to the desiderata of a genuinely liberated Ireland an acceptance of all sexual orientations and permutations, and a hospitality toward the hybridizing possibilities of literature. Using the forms of life writing, whether biographical sketch, prison memoir, or fictionalized non-fiction, Behan creates in *Borstal Boy* a social text that advocates a hyphenated reality, inclusive in nature, welcoming to all. Perhaps the ultimate transgression of *Borstal Boy* is the insistence that there is no "I" that is separate from the solidarity of "we."

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