

BRENDAN BEHAN: A LATE MODERNIST WRITER *ENGAGÉ* IN POSTWAR PARIS

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Abstract: Building on findings presented in the radio documentary *Brendan Behan in Paris* (RTÉ, 2019) about Behan's time spent in the city during the late 1940s and early 1950s, this article explores the relationships that Behan forged in Paris, including with Albert Camus and the literary magazine publisher Sindbad Vail, who would become the first to publish Behan's work internationally. It further explores the significance of the timing of Behan's arrival into postwar Paris, and his affinity with the philosophical ideas that were circulating there at the time. The article illustrates how Behan's literary engagement with the city and its intellectuals in the postwar period is both anticipated and reflected in his work, including the vigorous debate between Sartre and Camus on the meaning of freedom, justice, and the nature of violence and revolution. Through this we see Behan as a writer immersed in and familiar with the dominant trends in European, and especially French, writing.

Keywords: Brendan Behan, Sindbad Vail, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, *Points*, Shakespeare and Company, "After the Wake," *Merlin*, postwar Paris

Send "the Maupassant in the French because I'm learning it now,"¹ wrote a twenty-year-old Brendan Behan from Arbour Hill prison in 1943 to his cousin, Séamus de Búrca. Of course, Behan was already familiar with the French writer from childhood, introduced to him, along with many others, by his father, Stephen. Throughout his work, Behan demonstrates his familiarity and engagement with the dominant trends in European, and especially French, writing. It was an interest that was nurtured in his family home, that he would advance while in prison, and would immerse himself in following his arrival in Paris in 1948. Not leaving aside

¹ E.H. Mikhail, ed., *The Letters of Brendan Behan* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 24.

its revolutionary history, Paris for Behan was the city of Rabelais, Zola, and the above-mentioned Maupassant, whom his father had read to him as a child, and of the writers he would read as an adult: Villon, Flaubert, Proust, Genet, Colette, Sagan, Sartre, and Camus. Paris was where Joyce found his publisher in Sylvia Beach, where Oscar Wilde had died, and where Samuel Beckett now lived. Post-World War II Paris for Behan was also where publishers, writers, artists, and jazz musicians gathered and enjoyed the intellectual freedom that the city offered.

This article explores the significance of Behan's literary engagement with Paris and its intellectuals at a time when the city was coming back to life after the devastation of World War II and reinstating itself as the centre for intellectual thought and artistic expression. The article discusses the relationships that Behan forged there, including with Albert Camus and Sindbad Vail, the literary magazine publisher who was at the heart of the late modernist project. It further illustrates Behan's affinity with the philosophical ideas that were circulating there at the time, including the vigorous debate between Sartre and Camus on the meaning of freedom, justice, and the nature of violence and revolution, and how these ideas are both anticipated and reflected in his work. In Behan's considerable artistic contribution to this debate, we see how as a late modernist and writer *engagé* he recovers the "socialist orientations" of modernism that John Brannigan has identified in his work.²

Behan arrived into Paris from an Ireland that was newly independent and disappointing to him in its failure to live up to the egalitarian vision of its revolutionaries. He had left behind a Republican movement beset with divisions and had been imprisoned for his Republican activity. During his captivity, he had become disillusioned by an impossible political idealism. Transitioning from a revolutionary to a literary career, the role of art in politics would be central to his interests: "Everyone admires the Paris of the artists," he said. "I love the Paris of the barricades. I love Delacroix, who, I think, represents perfectly these two Parises."³ Behan was determined to get to the writer's city where just such topics were being discussed. From 1948, he spent long periods of time there. He honed his craft as a writer, found a publisher, and pursued the themes in his work that interested him, themes which he could explore more easily in the freedom of Paris

² John Brannigan, "Bohemian Behan: Late Modernism, Sexual Politics, and the 'Great Awakening' of Brendan Behan," in *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019), 47.

³ Brendan Behan, "The Only Thing I Blame Paris for," *L'Express*, 9 April 1959, 36. Reproduced in translation in *Brendan Behan: Interviews and Recollections*, vol. 1, ed. E.H. Mikhail (Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1982), 125-27.

than at home. Behan was respected as a writer in Paris, and that recognition inspired his confidence and creativity.

In prison, Behan had continued to write in Irish and English and develop his interest in European writing. Just months after his 1943 letter asking for French literature to be sent to him, he was transferred to the Curragh Camp where he joined fellow Republican prisoner Máirtín Ó Cadhain, one of Ireland's most innovative and important writers, and someone who would come to regard Behan "as one of the few important poets in the contemporary Irish language,"⁴ placing him alongside Seán Ó Ríordáin in his review of *Nuabhéarsaíocht 1939-1949* (1950),⁵ Seán Ó Tuama's seminal anthology of modern poetry in Irish, to which Behan was the youngest contributor. Besides mastering Russian while at the Curragh, Ó Cadhain was honing his French and would tutor Behan in language and literature. Along with Eliot and Pound, Ó Cadhain's reading at the time included Villon, Rabelais, Racine, Flaubert, and Maritain, as well as the Russian writers Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenyev, Dostoevsky, and Gorky.⁶ His modernist masterpiece *Cré na Cille* would be published just a few years later in 1949.

Behan was also tutored and mentored in jail by the Kerry schoolmaster Seán Ó Briain. Ó Briain became one of Behan's closest friends and it was to him that he dedicated his modernist poem "Jackeen ag Caoineadh na mBlascaod" (1948). Significantly, Ó Briain introduced Behan to Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*, and Behan's early interest in a literature of resistance and subversion can be traced back to Merriman's epic. Already a skilled Irish speaker from his schooldays,⁷ Behan committed the poem to memory and translated it into English. Ó Briain tutored Behan and the other prisoners in the poems of Dáithí Ó Bruadair, Aodhagán Ó Rathaille, Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, and Pádraigín Haicéad.⁸ A direct link can be made between the style of these poets and Behan's modernist poetry. Behan adopted the accentual verse of the major seventeenth-century Gaelic poets, such as Haicéad, Ó Bruadair, and Ó Rathaille, and the style of Ó Súilleabháin

⁴ Declan Kiberd, "Introduction," in *Brendan Behan: Poems and a Play in Irish*, ed. Proinsias Ní Dhorchaí (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1981), 9.

⁵ See Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *As an nGéibheann* (Dublin: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1973), 201.

⁶ Cathal Ó Háinle, "Aitheasc Luan na Tríonóide 2002: Máirtín Ó Cadhain," *Trinity Monday Memorial Discourses 1895-2022*, 5, <https://www.tcd.ie/Secretary/FellowsScholars/discourses/>.

⁷ As discussed in the present volume by Brian Ó Conchubhair, as well as noted through anecdote in Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1997), 24, and evidenced in Behan's ability to conceal jokes at the nuns' expense in the school essay he wrote in Irish aged nine for his friend Teresa Byrne – see Mikhail, ed., *The Letters of Brendan Behan*, 4.

⁸ Interview by the author with Austin Ó Briain, 2017.

and Merriman of the eighteenth century, and combined such characteristics with thoroughly modern themes, including the philosophy of existentialism. If his predecessors blended the conventions of bardic poetry and accentual verse as a response to their contemporary social and political upheavals,⁹ so too did Behan adopt traditional modes for contemporary concerns. Characteristic of his work, the “consonantal correspondence,” “vowel assonance,” and alliteration bind “together for the ear the sense of the words [and] the verbal unity of the poem.”¹⁰ In the poem that he dedicated to Ó Briain, “Jackeen ag Caoineadh na mBlascaod,” Behan captures the isolation that would lead to the 1950s evacuation of the Blasket Island inhabitants in this way: “Séideadh na gaoithe ag luascadh go bog leath-dhoras, / ‘San teallach fuar fliuch, gan teine, gan teas, gan cosaint.” (“And the wind sougning, softly a half-door swinging / By cold wet hearths, their fires forever extinguished.”)¹¹ He repeats the process in his satirical take on existentialism in “L’Existentialisme” in 1952: “A fhir faire, tá ag siúl falla – / foirgnimh falaimh” (“Watchman, walking the wall – / of an empty hall.”)¹² While Behan was clearly drawing on the Irish literary tradition, in “L’Existentialisme” he was now combining it with contemporary trends in European writing that he was experiencing in Paris.

The period between 1948 and 1952 is an incredibly productive one for Behan, and it is no coincidence that this corresponds to the years when his engagement with Paris was at its height. Three of his poems are set in Paris: “Buíochas le Joyce” (1949),¹³ “Oscar Wilde” (1949),¹⁴ and the above-mentioned “L’Existentialisme” (1952). Two of his short stories were published there, namely “After the Wake” (1950) and “Bridewell Revisited” (1951). Behan’s work of this period became increasingly experimental. In *The Quare Fellow*, which he had started in 1946, we see him develop the play’s expressionism; and in *Borstal Boy*, which he got down to writing in earnest in Paris, we see Proustian aesthetics emerge in the complex pattern of association that Behan establishes to create solidarity amongst the borstal boys. The 1942 version of his prison experience, “I Become a Borstal Boy,”

⁹ Seán Ó Tuama, ed., *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Portlaoise: The Dolmen Press, 1981), xix.

¹⁰ Ulick O’Connor, *Brendan Behan* (London: Abacus, 1970), 130.

¹¹ Brendan Behan, “Jackeen ag Caoineadh na mBlascaod,” *Comhar* 7, no. 10 (October 1948): 10. Translation by Valentin Iremonger, included by Behan in *Brendan Behan’s Island: An Irish Sketch-book* (London: Hutchinson, 1962), 70.

¹² Brendan Behan, “L’Existentialisme,” *Comhar* 11, no. 3 (March 1952): 8. Translation by Colbert Kearney in *The Writings of Brendan Behan* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977), 60.

¹³ Brendan Behan, “Buíochas le Joyce,” *Comhar* 8, no. 8 (August 1949): 14.

¹⁴ Brendan Behan, “Do Sheán O Súilleabháin” [later entitled “Oscar Wilde”], *Comhar* 8, no. 8 (August 1949): 14.

is a considerably more conventional account and a distance aesthetically from the autobiographical novel that would eventually be published in 1958. In his early writing we see him develop many of the devices and themes that would become so much part of his later work. For example, the device of the unseen character with whom we sympathise in his short story "A Woman of No Standing" (1950) would become central to *The Quare Fellow*. The title character of each work has no voice and either makes no appearance, as in *The Quare Fellow*, or an appearance only at the close of the story, as in "A Woman of No Standing," yet each are vehemently judged by the other characters.¹⁵

Much has been speculated about Behan's activities in Paris, and much of the myth was created by Behan himself. He claimed that he wrote pornography while there, saying "hunger makes pornographers of us all."¹⁶ Certainly, like many in postwar Paris, he was mostly very poor during his early days in the city, living on his wits, and foraging for food along the Paris streets: "if you go along windowsills in Paris, you're always sure to find something. People have a habit of leaving odd pieces of food up on the place."¹⁷ The experience often left him feeling worn out, especially when attempting to write. The manuscript that he refers to here is *Borstal Boy*: "The principal difficulty in writing a book is getting someplace to write it if you haven't got any money. I didn't have any dough. I'd no place to go [...]. I lost the bloody manuscript of it lots of times. So weary, just looking for a place to sleep, I forgot the goddamn thing."¹⁸ Behan did work as a house painter at this

¹⁵ Brendan Behan, "A Woman of No Standing," *Envoy: A Review of Literature & Art* 3, no. 9 (August 1950): 30-32; Brendan Behan, "The Quare Fellow," in *The Complete Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1978). Besides other work, Behan also commenced his articles for *The Irish Press* in 1951, making indirect reference to "After the Wake" and *Points* in the very first article. These are collected for the first time in their entirety in John Brannigan's *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023).

¹⁶ Mikhail, ed., *The Letters of Brendan Behan*, 114.

¹⁷ Sylvère Lotringer interview with Brendan Behan, Dublin, 1961, Sylvère Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive, Series X1 Audio, MSS.221/repositories/3/ resources/1762, Box 85, Media ID 221.0211 and 221.0212, reel 221.0212t1, 36:58-37:11, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Library (hereafter cited as Lotringer interview, 221.0212t1 or 221.0212t2 as appropriate to denote reels). Interview extracts used in this article are reproduced with kind permission by Semiotext(e). Extracts from the audio interview were broadcast for the first time in the radio documentary *Brendan Behan in Paris*, prods. Deirdre McMahon and Tim Desmond (RTÉ *Documentary on One*, 2019), <https://www.rte.ie/radio/doconone/1071608-brendan-behan-in-paris>. Lotringer published the interview as "The Thin Man: An Interview with Brendan Behan" in the *Field Day Review* 1 (2005): 3-27.

¹⁸ Lotringer interview, 221.0212t2, 07:48-08:08, audio. See also McMahon and Desmond, *Brendan Behan in Paris*.

time and joined the *section bâtiment* of the union – the *Confédération Générale du Travail*. Given how little he was earning overall, it must have been tempting to join the daily queue of hungry writers who waited outside the apartment of Maurice Girodas, who was publishing erotic literature under his Olympia Press Traveller's Companion series. The publisher certainly paid well: "between ten and thirty thousand francs at a time."¹⁹ Enormous sums for the time, and, undoubtedly, too much for a writer to resist during this period of widespread poverty. John Calder paints the picture of the daily routine: "A line would gather outside Girodias's door every morning, waiting for the publisher."²⁰ However, no pornography by Behan has ever emerged. There has been speculation that Behan was referring to his short story "After the Wake," a tale of homoerotic seduction. However, this literary masterpiece can in no way be described as pornography. What Behan did do in Paris was find himself a publisher.

Sindbad Vail and *Points* Magazine

Following in a long tradition of writers who sought inspiration and patronage in Paris, Behan took his early work to the French capital – to the epicentre of postwar modernist thought, and to the publisher Sindbad Vail, who was about to launch his literary magazine *Points*. As the son of Peggy Guggenheim, Vail was steeped in modernism, and given Behan's literary interests at the time, that would have been important. Vail was part of an artistic, literary circle in Paris that included the esteemed editor of *Horizon* magazine, Cyril Connolly. His father was the writer and artist Laurence Vail. When Sindbad Vail launched his late modernist magazine in 1949, he and Connolly would trade tips on new writing, with Connolly sending writers from *Horizon* to Vail to be published in France and vice versa. Behan had sent early work to Connolly, and it is not hard to imagine that his name came up for discussion. When Vail presented the idea for his literary magazine to an assembled group that included his wife, Jacqueline Ventadour, Cyril Connolly, Connolly's former wife – the art critic Jean Connolly (now Vail's stepmother²¹) –, and Laurence Vail, he received much encouragement from the *Horizon* editor, including promotion of *Points* through his magazine.²²

Points was the first postwar literary magazine in France to offer the opportunity of publication to young writers in English as well as French. The American

¹⁹ John Calder, *The Garden of Eros: The Story of the Paris Expatriates and the Post-War Literary Scene* (London: Calder Publications, 2013), 67.

²⁰ Calder, *The Garden of Eros*, 67.

²¹ Following her separation from Cyril Connolly in 1939, Jean Connolly married Laurence Vail in 1946.

²² Interview by the author with Jacqueline Hé lion, 2016.

novelist Iris Owens²³ remarked that the magazine “was one of the first signs of French culture picking up after the war.”²⁴ Of course, the new bilingual *Transition Forty-Eight* magazine had launched in 1948 under the editorship of George Duthuit – a reincarnation of the influential, pre-war *transition/Transition* founded by Maria and Eugene Jolas.²⁵ However, Duthuit’s idea was to bring the best new French writing in translation to an anglophone readership.²⁶ Contributors included Sartre, Eugene Jolas, and Georges Bataille. *Points* was different. Vail’s aim was to “publish French and English young writers who had not been published before.”²⁷ Jacqueline Hélon (*née* Ventadour), who was married to Vail at the time, and involved in his literary enterprise, recalls that this, of course, “was not quite the case for Brendan, but then he [Vail] did make exceptions.” Vail immediately recognised the genius of Behan’s writing. “He was very impressed by Brendan,” recalls Hélon, “his writing was wonderful. So vivid and [...] strong.” Hélon recalls that when her husband advertised in the international and French press, “manuscripts came pouring in from everywhere.”²⁸ Behan sought out Vail and not long after one of his most important works, “After the Wake,” appeared in *Points* 8 in 1950.

It was quite a coup for Vail to secure “After the Wake” for his magazine. Behan did not present the story in Ireland because of its theme of homosexuality, which was, of course, then criminalised in Ireland, and would not be decriminalised until 1993. Had it not been for Sindbad Vail, it can be said with confidence that one of Behan’s finest prose works may have been lost to literature, especially given the many scripts that Behan lost along the way.²⁹ By publishing the story, Vail preserved it. As is covered in some detail in the radio documentary *Brendan Behan*

²³ Pseudonym “Harriet Daimler.”

²⁴ Mary Dearborn, *Peggy Guggenheim: Mistress of Modernism* (London: Virago Press, 2005), 330-31.

²⁵ The literary journal was originally titled using the lowercase *transition* but changed to *Transition* from issue 21 on. See David A. Hatch, “Beckett in Transition: Three Dialogues, Little Magazines, and Post-War Parisian Aesthetic Debate,” *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui* 15 (2005): 55 n1.

²⁶ Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (New York: De Capo Press, 1999), 394.

²⁷ Jacqueline Hélon in McMahon and Desmond, *Brendan Behan in Paris*. Further quotations are from the same documentary.

²⁸ Jacqueline Hélon in McMahon and Desmond, *Brendan Behan in Paris*, and interview with Hélon, 2016.

²⁹ For example, as discussed here, Behan recalls losing his *Borstal Boy* manuscript in Paris. Beatrice Behan recalls the manuscript for *An Giall* being left in Ibiza, fortunately later to be found. See Beatrice Behan with Des Hickey and Gus Smith, *My Life with Brendan* (London: Leslie Frewin Publishers, 1974), 117, 124.

in *Paris*, a later, edited version of "After the Wake" appeared in the *Points Short Story Anthology* in 1955. Here, the concluding lines which explicitly describe one man getting into bed with another have been removed, along with other important imagery. Behan had created a powerful tableau in the 1950 original which neatly unites the story's opening and concluding lines. This original version culminates with the male narrator imagining the watchful eye of his friend's deceased wife as he "slip[s] down beside"³⁰ him in the marital bed. We are told that the wife has cotton wool "protruding from her nostrils" (56) evoking a ghoulish and cartoon-like image of steam as she fumes from her coffin in the next room. Her mouth is "half-closed" (56) and, therefore, half open, possibly in surprise, and her teeth are "bared" (56). Behan had opened his story by envisioning her response had she known about her husband and his friend: "she'd feel angry, not so much jealous as disgusted, certainly surprised" (52). We are now given the physical manifestation of that reaction as the story concludes. Even if the outcome of the campaign of seduction at the heart of the story may be obvious to the reader in the 1955 version, the effect of the edit is to disrupt an otherwise meticulously crafted story, and thereby deny a full appreciation of Behan's structure and narrative control. By 1955 Behan was becoming a well-known writer and enjoying the success of *The Quare Fellow*. No doubt he had to consider the potential backlash in this conservative era to his representation of a gay relationship now that the story was to be given wider circulation in book form. The only reproduction of the unedited, original version of "After the Wake" from *Points* 8 is by Denis Cotter, who published the story in limited edition in Ireland in 1978 in his collection *Brendan Behan: Poems and Stories*.³¹ That came fourteen years after Behan's death and remains the only publicly available record of the original story in Ireland today.

For Behan, *Points* magazine offered a much-needed outlet for his work and introduced his writing to an international readership. Being published in *Points* provided an important context for Behan. As Brannigan notes, not only was he now placing his work alongside other late modernist writers, such as David Gascoyne and Alexander Trocchi; as Peggy Guggenheim's son, Vail had a direct

³⁰ Brendan Behan, "After the Wake," in *Points: The Magazine of Young Writers* 8 (December 1950 – January 1951): 56. Further references to this edition are included in the text in parentheses.

³¹ Denis Cotter, ed., *Brendan Behan: Poems and Stories*, design by Frank Miller (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 1978). The 1955 edited version is published in Peter Fallon's *After the Wake* (1981), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume IV: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (2002), and Sinéad Gleeson's *The Art of the Glimpse* (2020). The full collection of *Points* magazine is available on microfilm from the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

connection for Behan to that great generation of modernist artists and writers.³² Being published by Vail in *Points* “established Behan’s own sense of what he could achieve as a writer. It established a kind of literary credibility for his work.”³³ That affirmation was repeated in 1951 when Vail published Behan’s short story “Bridewell Revisited,” the story that would largely become the opening pages of *Borstal Boy*.

Behan had in fact tried to get “Bridewell Revisited” published in Ireland, but it was refused by *The Bell*. In the face of this rejection, he turned, once again, to Vail. Behan was not the only Irish writer to approach Vail when work had been refused in Ireland. Of Irish censorship Vail would later comment: “We are lucky that their bigotry is our fortune.”³⁴ When Iain Hamilton of Hutchinson Publishers read the same opening pages in 1957, he said he knew he had “the beginning of something extraordinary.”³⁵ Vail readily accepted “Bridewell Revisited” and the story was published in *Points* 11-12 in the winter of 1951. “I think there’s a key turn in Behan’s work around 1950, ‘51,” says Brannigan, “and it’s all to do with *Points* magazine.”³⁶ Hélicon describes Vail as a “pioneer,” a spirit he shared with his mother. The influential editors and writers of the literary magazine *Merlin* (1952-1956) all had early work published in *Points*. Founding editors Jane Lougee and Alexander Trocchi, Richard Seaver, Patrick Bowles, Christopher Logue, and Austryn Wainhouse all featured alongside writers such as David Gascoyne and Herbert Gold, with the latter two sharing *Points* 8 with Behan in 1950. Of course, *Merlin* writers Richard Seaver and Patrick Bowles would come to translate Beckett’s work.

Behan’s work of this time displays a new confidence, and it would become increasingly experimental. It was during this period that he explored the imagist form and Japanese haiku, as seen in his poem “Uaigneas” (1950).³⁷ He would never again write so explicitly in his published work about homosexuality as he did in “After the Wake.” When it came to the prospect of the story’s wider, international circulation, he changed the ending. That decision came later, once he was back in Ireland. In the preceding period of freedom in Paris, a clear turning point in his

³² John Brannigan in McMahon and Desmond, *Brendan Behan in Paris*.

³³ Interview by the author with John Brannigan, 2019.

³⁴ “Notes by the Editor,” *Points* 13 (Spring 1952), 5. Vail made the comment when he published “Asylum for the Blind” by Domhnall O’Conaill, who had been unable to publish his short story in Ireland.

³⁵ Iain Hamilton, “Among the Irish,” *Encounter* 23 (October 1964): 36-37. An extract is also published in *Brendan Behan: Interviews and Recollections*, vol. 1, ed. E.H. Mikhail, 88-90.

³⁶ Interview with Brannigan, 2019.

³⁷ Brendan Behan, “Uaigneas / Loneliness,” *Envoy: A Review of Literature & Art* 1, no. 2 (January 1950): 24.

literary career is evident. In this surge of experimentation, he created work that would inform all that came after.

Behan and Beckett's Shared Publishing House in Paris

It was through Vail that Behan came to share his Paris publishing headquarters with Beckett. Vail also knew Jérôme Lindon, soon to become Beckett's publisher at Les Éditions de Minuit. When Vail was looking for office space for *Points* in 1948, Lindon rented two rooms to him and the two companies subsequently shared a building on the corner of Boulevard Saint-Michel and Boulevard Saint-Germain, where No. 75 became the *Points* address, and No. 22, Boulevard Saint-Michel the location for Éditions de Minuit. Vail recalls the pleasant office with its "three large windows [...] at the angle of the boulevards St. Michel and St. Germain, right in the heart of the Latin quarter."³⁸ When Lindon moved his operation to No. 7, Rue Bernard-Palissy in 1951, where it still exists today, Vail and *Points* moved with him. Despite being home to one of the most important and respected publishing houses in France, the modest, period building that is home to Les Éditions de Minuit remains largely unchanged since the early 1950s when Behan and Beckett were frequent visitors.

Behan's interaction with *Points* was at its height when Lindon published Beckett's *Molloy* in March 1951. Following the publication of "After the Wake" in 1950, Behan was now negotiating with Vail for publication of "Bridewell Revisited." Vail recalled the frequent visits by Behan to the *Points* office³⁹ where he would climb the steep, narrow stairwell, the same modest entrance used by Beckett. Thanks to the recognition by Lindon of Beckett's genius, his rise to becoming one of the most important writers of the twentieth century had begun. Behan, too, was succeeding in establishing his career through a Paris publisher.

Behan and Beckett became friends.⁴⁰ Vail also came to know the elder writer: "Sindbad did talk to him quite a lot," Héliion recalls.⁴¹ Many years later, the *Points*

³⁸ Sindbad Vail, "Notes by the Editor," *Points* 18 (Winter 1953-1954): 3.

³⁹ O'Connor, *Brendan Behan*, 146.

⁴⁰ In his groundbreaking 1994 study of Beckett and Behan, besides discussion of the significance of their meeting in Paris, Anthony Roche presents a compelling relationship between Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Behan's *The Quare Fellow*. In so doing, Roche reclaims Beckett as an Irish playwright while simultaneously revealing the international and avant-garde characteristics of Behan's work. See Anthony Roche, "Beckett and Behan: Waiting for Your Man," in *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 13-41. See also the discussion of Behan and Beckett in Deirdre McMahon, "Brendan Behan: Modernist Writer," in McCourt, ed., *Reading Brendan Behan*, 63-80.

⁴¹ Interview with Héliion, 2016.

publisher would take his daughter, Karole Vail, to Les Éditions de Minuit to buy the full collection of Beckett's books, and soon after, to dinner with the author.⁴² Back in 1951, as Lindon announced that further works by Beckett were forthcoming, he proudly displayed *Molloy* and *Malone meurt* in the Éditions de Minuit large picture window on the tiny Rue Bernard-Palissy. As he entered the building and passed the prominently displayed work by his compatriot, Behan must have felt a sense of pride and excitement about the opportunities that Paris offered him as a young writer. The fact that his publisher shared the same building as the revered Les Éditions de Minuit would also not have been lost on Behan. Respect is steadfast for the company's clandestine activity during Nazi occupation, when it continued underground in order to publish Resistance literature, including, famously, the novel *The Silence of the Sea* by the company's then owner, Jean Bruller, publishing under his pen name, Vercors.

Behan, the *Merlin* Group, and Shakespeare and Company

During this early 1950s period in Paris, Behan also associated with the influential group of international writers and editors connected to *Merlin* magazine, which followed *Points* into the literary world. As discussed, founders Jane Lougee and Alexander Trocchi, along with Richard Seaver, Patrick Bowles, and Austryn Wainhouse, all enjoyed seeing their work into print after Vail published it in *Points*. Following its launch in 1952 from Lougee and Trocchi's apartment at 8, Rue du Sabot, *Merlin* published early works by Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, and Pablo Neruda. The *petite* Rue du Sabot is adjacent to Rue Bernard-Palissy and in close proximity to Les Éditions de Minuit. It was while on his way to the Rue du Sabot that Seaver spotted Beckett's work in the window of Lindon's publishing house. Behan attended the frequent gatherings in the Rue du Sabot with other impoverished writers who enjoyed Trocchi's good cooking as much as the intellectual conversation.⁴³

The magazine would later transfer its operation to George Whitman's Shakespeare and Company bookshop,⁴⁴ another favourite haunt for Behan, where he would become part of an important group of writers who assembled for the shop's frequent literary gatherings.⁴⁵ For writers, the bookshop became a nurturing

⁴² Interview by the author with Karole Vail, 2019.

⁴³ Calder, *The Garden of Eros*, 50-53, 77.

⁴⁴ Then called Librairie le Mistral. The bookshop was renamed Shakespeare and Company in 1964. See Krista Halverson, ed., *Shakespeare and Company Paris: A History of the Rag & Bone Shop of the Heart* (Paris: Shakespeare and Company, 2016), 85.

⁴⁵ Whitman adopted the name from the renowned pre-war bookshop owned by Sylvia Beach, original publisher of *Ulysses*.

environment, often providing a bed for the night. Besides Behan, the Irish contingent of frequent visitors included Aidan Higgins, Brian Coffey, and Séamus Ó Néill.⁴⁶ Desmond O'Grady arrived in 1955 and made the bookshop "the anchorage of [his] new life in Paris."⁴⁷ Behan once slept in one of the beds reserved for writers in the library: "A most civilised custom,"⁴⁸ he enthused. From Whitman's library collection he borrowed *End As a Man* (1947) by Calder Willingham, a book that had created scandal in its depiction of homosexuality in military school in the US South.⁴⁹ The many international visitors to the shop included James Baldwin (or "Jimmy,"⁵⁰ as Behan called him), Anaïs Nin, and Richard Wright. Sylvia Beach attended dinner at the bookshop along with James Jones. Brecht arrived and left with thirty books.⁵¹ Later, the Beat writers, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso joined Alan Sillitoe and J.P. Dunleavy for the many literary gatherings. Henry Miller arrived in the late 1950s, Langston Hughes in the 1960s. Julio Cortázar described Whitman's enterprise as "the most humane bookshop in the world."⁵²

Behan and Camus

Behan also befriended Albert Camus. In this respect it is particularly worth considering the postwar Paris that Behan arrived into and his affinity with the philosophical ideas of the day. Behan arrived just as Paris was grappling with rebuilding the very foundations of its society in the wake of the horrors of World War II and Nazi occupation. At the centre of that effort were culture and the arts. Arriving into Saint-Germain-des-Prés in 1948 was to land in the epicentre of intellectual debate around the nature of freedom and justice. At the centre of this very public debate were Camus and Sartre, two of France's leading intellectuals.

At thirty-five, Camus was ten years older than Behan. He delighted in Behan's re-enactment of scenes from Joyce.⁵³ They shared an interest in soccer. Camus once invited him on a trip to England for a football match, but Behan refused because

⁴⁶ Calder, *The Garden of Eros*, 115.

⁴⁷ Qtd. in Halverson, ed., *Shakespeare and Company Paris*, 110.

⁴⁸ Qtd. in Brian Behan with Aubrey Dillon-Malone, *The Brothers Behan* (Dublin: Ashfield Press, 1998), 181.

⁴⁹ Behan's library card, filled out by Whitman, which is likely from 1952, forms part of the Shakespeare and Company archive. See also McMahon and Desmond, *Brendan Behan in Paris*.

⁵⁰ Brendan Behan, *Brendan Behan's New York* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), 39.

⁵¹ Calder, *The Garden of Eros*, 114; Halverson, ed., *Shakespeare and Company Paris*, 100, 101, 120.

⁵² Calder, *The Garden of Eros*, 115; Halverson, ed., *Shakespeare and Company Paris*, 80-131.

⁵³ O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 146.

the expulsion order that prohibited him from entering the country following his term of imprisonment there was still in place. Behan and Camus drank together in the Hotel La Louisiane with Behan's friend and *Irish Times* Paris correspondent Desmond Ryan.⁵⁴ Behan came to know Camus just as he was receiving international acclaim for his novel *The Plague* (1947), and following publication of the press articles where he set out his position and ultimate opposition to capital punishment.⁵⁵ Stuart Gilbert's English translation of *The Plague* was published in 1948 and it is not hard to imagine that Behan read it. Reading the novel alongside Behan's work, the similarity of themes is striking, including human response to crisis, as seen particularly in *The Plague* and "A Woman of No Standing," and an opposition to capital punishment, as seen especially in both Camus's novel and *The Quare Fellow*.

Behan called Sartre the high priest of existentialism, but Camus, too, held extraordinary intellectual sway. Like Sartre, Camus had been a member of the French Resistance – he joined in 1943. It was around this time that he became editor-in-chief of *Combat*, the clandestine newspaper of the Resistance.⁵⁶ He subsequently became "one of the most influential voices on the non-Communist left demanding that an important role be given to the Resistance in postwar French governments – for all factions within the Resistance, including Communists."⁵⁷ By 1945, *Combat* enjoyed a daily circulation of nearly 200 000.⁵⁸

As Behan arrived into Paris in September 1948, public attention turned to two articles which appeared in the literary magazine *Caliban*, one by Sartre in October, and another by Camus in November.⁵⁹ As is well documented, Sartre and Camus disagreed on the nature and limitations of violence, revolution, the relation of history and ontology, and the writer's commitment and responsibility to the political issues of the day. One month after Behan's arrival, the opposing sides of Camus and Sartre were focused on revolution and the nature and limitations of violence. 1948 was also the year in which Sartre's screenplay *In the Mesh* was published, and its theme, as Ronald Aronson puts it, was a tentative dramatisation of what would become Sartre's argument that "there is no way to transform a violent

⁵⁴ Brendan Behan, *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* (London: Arrow Books, 1991), 211-12.

⁵⁵ See Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, ed., *Camus at Combat: Writing 1944-1947* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), including David Carroll's "Foreword," xvi.

⁵⁶ David Carroll, "Foreword," in Lévi-Valensi, ed., *Camus at Combat*, vii-viii.

⁵⁷ Carroll, "Foreword," ix.

⁵⁸ Patrick Baert, "The Sudden Rise of French Existentialism: A Case-Study in the Sociology of Intellectual Life," *Theory and Society* 40, no. 6 (2011): 633.

⁵⁹ Ronald Aronson, "Sartre, Camus, and the *Caliban* Articles," *Sartre Studies International* 7, no. 2 (2001): 1.

and oppressive world without becoming violent and oppressive oneself.”⁶⁰ Camus disagreed.

For an Irish writer who had been actively involved in the Republican movement, and who was now interrogating just such questions, the intellectual discourse in Saint-Germain-des-Prés was stimulating indeed. As is borne out in his work, Behan was now trying to make sense of his role in an organisation whose leadership under Seán Russell had sought support in the late 1930s from Nazi Germany in its efforts to achieve independence for Ireland.⁶¹ Writing from postwar Paris, Behan makes direct reference to Russell in his short story “Bridewell Revisited,” in a bitingly satirical passage that also invokes Nazi Germany through his reference to Baldur von Schirach,⁶² a leading Nazi official who, at the time of Behan’s writing, was serving out his twenty-year sentence for war crimes. Schirach does not make it into *Borstal Boy*. Once again, it seems, the freedom of expression that Behan could enjoy through the pages of a little magazine was tempered when it came to the wider circulation of his work in book form.

In his 1945 New York lecture, Sartre had famously rejected the notion of ‘art for art’s sake’ and called for *engagement*. According to his philosophy, writers had a responsibility to engage with their political moment to produce a literature of commitment: “Every word has consequences,” he said, “every silence, too.”⁶³ Behan, like Camus, was a naturally committed writer. However, for both Behan and Camus this would be on their own terms. Camus was sceptical about the absolute nature of Sartre’s call to action. He was concerned for writers’ freedom. By all means writers should “depict the passions of the day,” the “drama of our time.”⁶⁴ However, this should not be enforced: “if this is to become law, a function, or a terror, where is the merit?”⁶⁵ Relinquishing such freedoms seemed to Camus to contradict Sartre’s very principle, and – with freedom and individualism as the cornerstones of existentialism – it is hard to deny Camus’s point.

⁶⁰ Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel That Ended It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 96.

⁶¹ Seán Cronin, *Frank Ryan: The Search for The Republic* (Dublin: Reptsol Publishing, 1980), 182-87.

⁶² Brendan Behan, “Bridewell Revisited,” *Points* 11-12 (Winter 1951-1952): 13.

⁶³ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Presentation des *Temps Modernes*,” *Situations II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 12-13. Cf. Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, 56-61.

⁶⁴ “Encounter with Albert Camus,” interview with Gabriel d’Auberède in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 10 May 1951, repr. in *Albert Camus: Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1987), 353.

⁶⁵ Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 140-41. Qtd. in Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, 58.

While Sartre's idea of the writer's engagement with politics must surely have resonated with Behan, he was also not one to conform to strict ideals. As can be seen in his work of this period, he had vastly broadened his outlook on the codes and constructs of the Republican movement. He also asserted that he "didn't agree with everything that [Camus] said."⁶⁶ If the argument between Camus and Sartre required the intellectual community to take sides, Behan admired both. Along with French writers such as Françoise Sagan, he described Sartre as "the conscience of France," "the true France."⁶⁷ Like Camus, Sartre, and Beauvoir, Behan sought social justice and freedom from the entrapment of poverty: "the world is a prison for anyone who hasn't got any money," he said, adding: "You know what Camus said? He said, the duty of a writer is not to those who are in power, but to those who are subject to them."⁶⁸ Behan was paraphrasing Camus's acceptance speech after the latter won the 1957 Nobel Prize in Literature: "the writer's role is not free from difficult duties. By definition he cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it."⁶⁹ Behan's literary engagement with social justice made an extraordinary contribution to bringing about change. The most obvious contribution, arguably, was his powerful condemnation and exposure of capital punishment which would come later in *The Quare Fellow* (and which was partly written in Paris). However, the social injustice and hypocrisy which he confronts is also highly visible in his poetry and prose published during his Paris period.

In "After the Wake," he exploded the denial of 1950s gay culture by boldly representing its existence in Dublin from the inner city to revered institutions; in "Bridewell Revisited," he interrogated the notion of blind alliances to achieve a political aim; and in "A Woman of No Standing," he privileged the overarching love that exposes a God-fearing conservatism. Colbert Kearney notes that as Behan started to write his masterpiece *Borstal Boy* (of which "Bridewell Revisited" was part), the main theme of his book "was the development of a modern Irish mind."⁷⁰ The quote evokes Sartre's philosophy on the experience of literature as drawing "together author and reader into the collaborative, future-orientated project of human existence, which is always in a state of becoming."⁷¹ Two years

⁶⁶ Lotringer interview, 221.0212t1, audio, 1:17-31; McMahon and Desmond, *Brendan Behan in Paris*.

⁶⁷ Lotringer interview, 221.0212t1, audio, 03:33-43.

⁶⁸ Lotringer interview, 221.0212t2, audio, 43:32-52.

⁶⁹ Albert Camus, "Banquet Speech," City Hall, Stockholm, 10 December 1957, www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1957/camus/speech/.

⁷⁰ Kearney, *The Writings of Brendan Behan*, 59.

⁷¹ Vincent B. Leitch, et al., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2010), 1196.

into his engagement with Paris and its intellectuals, Behan's contributions to social change were those of a writer *engagé*. The jostling positions of Sartre and Camus would both ignite and help to resolve the many questions and concerns that Behan can be seen to interrogate in his work of this period.

"The Execution"

If *The Quare Fellow* (as well as *The Hostage*) reflects the Paris debates, "The Execution" (c. 1942-1946)⁷² anticipates them, concerned as it is with structural and systemic violence. Indeed, "The Execution" sees Behan combine an assiduous attention to form with a political standpoint. The story tells of a group of IRA men who have been tasked with carrying out the execution of a young IRA Volunteer, Ellis. Under interrogation during his first arrest, Ellis has revealed the location of an arms dump. His executioners do not have the stomach for the act, but nevertheless carry out their orders. While "The Execution" presents the violent actions of the group as a product of a governing history and ideology,⁷³ Behan pushes against the notion of such authority at every opportunity in the story by challenging the brutal act through an expressed humanity and empathy with the victim, and, in so doing, undermines the system that demands his execution.⁷⁴ The story is carefully laid out in five distinct sections, which are each underlined by Behan in the original manuscript.⁷⁵ The visceral effects of the story anticipate the expressionism which Behan would explore more thoroughly in *The Quare Fellow*, while his economical use of words to achieve maximum effect also anticipates his work produced in 1950, such as "After the Wake" and the minimalist poem "Uaigneas."

Each section of the story is made up of a series of short paragraphs, and each creates a terminal caesura-like effect in its concluding line to emphasise a theme. The first echoes the overarching voice of officialdom, and here it is reminiscent of Joyce in its evocation of a voice and idiom that is external to the text: "[...] we couldn't let people give away dumps on us or there'd soon be no respect for the

⁷² The original manuscript of "The Execution" is held by Special Collections, Q-1, Boole Library, University College Cork, and is undated.

⁷³ See John Brannigan, *Brendan Behan: Cultural Nationalism and the Revisionist Writer* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 55.

⁷⁴ See also Kearney: "To a great extent, the young lad dies not because anybody desires his death but because the system demands it." *The Writings of Brendan Behan*, 29.

⁷⁵ These sections are highlighted in Denis Cotter's 1978 publication of "The Execution," along with punctuation as set out by Behan, in *Brendan Behan: Poems and Stories*.

Army.”⁷⁶ That Ellis’s confinement by the group is governed by the system, is left in no doubt. Of the victim we are told: “The poor devil wouldn’t have run if we’d let him.” (7) His role as an IRA Volunteer is steeped in history, and his killing will be a disgrace to his family: “[...] my old man being a ‘16 man an’ all.” (7) The conclusion to the second section of the story sees Behan’s typical use of plain language to deny any euphemism for what is about to take place. Language such as “[I]etting him have it,” “plugging him,” “[k]nocking him off,” is undercut by the last line: “We were going to kill him.” (8-9) This device would become familiar in Behan’s work – such as when Holy Healey in *The Quare Fellow* attempts to pass off hanging as a “sad duty” which prompts the concise retort from Regan: “Neck breaking and throttling, sir?”⁷⁷ Such denial of euphemism is also a feature of Camus’s work. The conclusion to the third section of “The Execution” denies any attempt to attach religious values to the act of killing. As Ellis and the group who are about to shoot him kneel to pray, the narrator remarks: “I tried to pray for his soul. I couldn’t. It seemed awful to think of souls just then.” (9) The penultimate section ends with death: the life of Ellis is “Finished.” (10) The preceding lines have set the scene into slow motion: “As if in a dream I saw Connie eject the empty shells. Kit was picking them off the ground from his Auto.” (10) The scene is then paused, the action halted, once again through Behan’s use of separate scenes. The finale imparts a stark image that eerily expresses humanity encased within a brutal image of the horror that has just occurred: cold, hard earth is shovelled on top of a body that is “quite warm” (10) as the narrator tells us: “I moved a big stone off my shovel – it might smash in his face.” (10) The system in this case has won out, Ellis has received his “death sentence” (9). Yet the sympathy invoked from the reader is compelling, and as in Behan’s later expressionist drama, the effect visceral.

Behan’s questioning of systemic violence in “The Execution” is manifest also in the characters of the story being defined by the guns they hold as if they have been consumed by the system: “You can sometimes judge a fellow by his taste in skits.” (8) Ted Boyle observes that Behan’s employment of the absurd in his work is a way to show “that man is ridiculous when he allows himself to be controlled by a system.”⁷⁸ This would become most pronounced later in *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*, where arbitrary decisions are made around life and death. It is, after all, only the impending death of one youth, the Catholic “boy in the Belfast Jail”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Brendan Behan, “The Execution,” in Cotter, *Brendan Behan: Poems and Stories*, 7. Further references to the story are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

⁷⁷ Behan, “The Quare Fellow,” 67.

⁷⁸ Ted Boyle, *Brendan Behan* (New York: Twayne, 1969), 89.

⁷⁹ Brendan Behan, “The Hostage,” in *The Complete Plays*, 162.

in *The Hostage*, that will determine the death of another, the English soldier, Leslie Williams; in *The Quare Fellow*, the middle-class character “Silver-top”⁸⁰ is reprieved for no apparent reason, while the eponymous quare fellow, a rural butcher, is hanged. This decision goes unchallenged and there is no accountability for it. “We detest arbitrary judgement,”⁸¹ wrote Camus in 1944 – and a similar notion of absurdity appears in “The Execution” where the system is the governing factor. Each work exposes a meaningless and absurd world for its marginalised characters. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Behan would strike up a relationship with Camus, who defined the human condition as essentially absurd in his 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*⁸² and who was now embroiled in a very public intellectual debate on justice and the nature and limitations of violence.

Conclusion

Writing in the wake of World War II, Behan’s concerns for social and political justice were precisely those that had preoccupied him on the streets of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in the company of Camus. The postwar intellectual debates are both anticipated and reflected in his work. Behan returned to Paris in the late 1950s as a celebrated writer. His plays garnered the highest accolades and awards there and attracted involvement in translation, production, direction, music, and performance by such important artists as Boris Vian, Jean-Louis Barrault, Madeleine Renaud, Georges Wilson, Mikis Theodorakis, Arletty, and Simone Signoret.⁸³ In 1969, the stage adaptation of *Borstal Boy* by Frank McMahon was presented as part of the Théâtre des Nations Festival at The Odéon-Théâtre de l’Europe, this time representing Ireland rather than Great Britain (which *The Hostage* had done at the festival in 1959). The play would go on to win the 1970 Tony Award on Broadway, the first Tony Award for an Irish drama. Returning to Behan’s early days in Paris, the recognition that he received as a writer there, combined with the intellectual freedom that he experienced, stimulated the creativity that would lead to his later major works. Paris made perfect sense for Behan. It was here that he was able to develop the themes in his work that interested him and to immerse himself in the philosophical discourse of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and the dominant

⁸⁰ Behan, “The Hostage,” 42.

⁸¹ Albert Camus, “October 25, 1944,” in Lévi-Valensi, *Camus at Combat*, 90.

⁸² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), 1-26.

⁸³ As presented by Virginie Roche-Tiengo during the “Brendan Behan at 100: Legacy and New Directions” conference held at Charles University, Prague in 2023. On Mikis Theodorakis, see *An Buachaill Gealgháireach*, written and presented by Theo Dorgan, directed by Alan Gilsenan, and produced by Kathryn Baird and Sheila Friel (TG4, 2022).

trends in European writing. Just as he did when he requested the “the Maupassant in French” all those years before, Behan knew exactly the direction he wished to take his work in when he went to Paris in 1948.

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