

## “LITERATURE AND THE HACK”: BRENDAN BEHAN AND THE NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract: Between 1951 and 1956, Brendan Behan published more than one hundred articles in *The Irish Press* newspaper, which have now been collected into a single volume, *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*. The collection augments the critical appreciation of Behan's talents as a writer, but it also raises important questions for the late modernist period of writing, about the relationship between “Literature,” as a distinct and valued art form, and writing for newspapers, which is often regarded as ephemeral or minor work. This essay examines some of Behan's own reflections and characterisations of this relationship between literature and the newspapers in his writing.

Keywords: Brendan Behan, newspapers, modernism, Irish literature

In 2023, to mark the centenary of his birth, Lilliput Press published a volume of Brendan Behan's prose entitled *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*.<sup>1</sup> It is a complete collection of the newspaper articles that Behan wrote for *The Irish Press*, mainly between the years 1953 and 1956, with just a small number of additional articles from other newspapers included. The collection of his newspaper writings adds significantly to the works by Behan that are available in print, and perhaps augments our understanding of Behan's qualities and capacities as a serious writer, even if Behan's literary reputation is likely to remain centred on his plays, *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*, and his autobiographical novel, *Borstal Boy*. The volume of his newspaper writings contains, taken as one body of work, his longest word count, and represents perhaps his most sustained period of writing. This essay explores the relationship between Behan's literary

<sup>1</sup> Brendan Behan, *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, ed. John Brannigan (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2023).

reputation and his newspaper articles, placing this relationship into the wider context of critical debates about the legacies of modernism. Behan wrote in a period that has become increasingly defined as late modernism, in which writers continued to build on modernist literary innovations, while also chafing against some of the critical myths of early twentieth century modernism. Behan’s relationship to modernism has been the subject of much recent work, most notably by Deirdre McMahon, John McCourt, and Maria DiBattista.<sup>2</sup> This essay will focus on Behan’s newspaper articles as an important body of work in his navigation of the social role of writer within this context.

Behan stages a contest between the idea of literature as an art form, and writing as an ephemeral discourse, in one of his articles for *The Irish Press*, entitled “Dialogue on Literature and the Hack.” This article features Behan as self-named protagonist in a pub down by the Dublin markets, surrounded by the fictional Dubliners he developed in these columns. In this scene, a character called the Rasher Cambel, whom Behan refers to ironically as “the Dolphin’s Barn genius,” accuses Behan of being a “hack.” The word “hack” can be traced back to the sixteenth century in English, where it appears to be a shortened version of “hackney” and was used to refer to a workhorse, usually of a poor or worn-out kind. Behan references this meaning of the term in the article, when he responds to the accusation of being a hack by shivering his nostrils and making a whinnying sound. In the eighteenth century, “hack” became associated with any person who was engaged in dreary and laborious work, and subsequently, it was used to refer to “a person who hires himself or herself out to do any kind of literary work; (hence) a writer producing dull, unoriginal work, especially to order.”<sup>3</sup> Described in this scene, then, as a “hack,” Behan does not take the insult easily – he responds to the Rasher Cambel in robust terms, telling him “I was a hack [...] before you came up.” There follows this exchange which draws upon some of these meanings of the word “hack”:

#### SLIM SHEAF OF VERSE

“That hack,” said the Rasher looking straight at me, “attacked a friend of mine. A friend of humanity’s. A real writer – not ...,” he shouted, defiantly, “one whose name will be found on the flyleaf of thick volumes, but whose more delicate moods ...”

<sup>2</sup> See John McCourt, ed., *Reading Brendan Behan* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019) for essays by Deirdre McMahon, John McCourt and Maria DiBattista.

<sup>3</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “hack (n.2),” 15 December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6141522510>.

"The same again, men?" asked Mister Moo.  
He was waved away.  
"But whose happiest sentiments may be found..."  
"In the slim sheaf of verse," murmured Crippen.  
The Rasher nodded. "How did you know, red..."  
"Redolent of the faintest faerylike feeling," muttered Crippen.  
"Genius," said the Rasher respectfully, "how did you know?"  
"Never mind poor Brending Being," said Crippen. "He doesn't know what he writes."  
"How so?" asked the Rasher.  
"Sad case," said Crippen, looking at me, with commiseration, "only went to school half the time, when they were teaching the writing – can't read."<sup>4</sup>

In this scene, as is characteristic of many of his articles in *The Irish Press*, Behan makes himself the butt of self-deprecating humour, centred on his pretensions of being a writer. The jibes against him are self-mocking allusions to his education (he left formal education at the age of fourteen), and to his social class. He is not expected to have the intellectual capital to "know what he writes." The "hack" writer is contrasted to the "real writer," who expresses "delicate moods" and "happiest sentiments" in "the slim sheaf of verse." Of course, by this time Behan had produced his own "slim sheaf of verse," although it was never collected and published in one volume in his lifetime. But in these newspaper columns, one might say that Behan was indeed hiring himself out and producing work to order. He had begun to write these articles on an occasional basis in 1951, but they became a regular feature in late 1953 when the new editor of *The Irish Press*, Jim McGuinness, commissioned him to write a weekly column. He was paid five pounds a week to write his articles, which were published in the Saturday edition. McGuinness had specifically set out to bring more literary writers to the newspaper for feature articles and columns, and Behan was given freedom to write about whatever he liked. His literary work immediately preceding this period of writing for *The Irish Press*, was the serialised novel *The Scarperer*, which was also published as a newspaper commission in *The Irish Times*. It is understandable, therefore, in the mid-1950s, that Behan might have been thinking hard about what it meant to be a writer living on his earnings from newspaper publications, and writing "to order," as it were.

<sup>4</sup> Brendan Behan, "Dialogue on Literature and the Hack," in *A Bit of a Writer*, 352.

As has been established, the distinction between the “real writer,” or literary artist, and the “hack writer” is one with a longer history, but it became the focus of much critical attention in the early twentieth century. Early critical receptions of modernist literature exaggerated antipathy towards the journalism of the newspaper, and the supposed ephemerality of emergent forms of broadcast media. Ezra Pound expressed this view in memorable terms in his book *ABC of Reading* (1934), when he wrote “Literature is news that STAYS news.”<sup>5</sup> Pound explained this distinction in terms of durability of interest: “I cannot, for example, wear out my interest in the *Ta Hio* of Confucius, or in the Homeric poems.”<sup>6</sup> Newspapers, in contrast, were disposable forms of writing to Pound, written to be consumed once as cheap and transient entertainment. Art was distinguished from the newspaper on two grounds – firstly, the artist strived for posterity, and the very notion of the modernist avant-garde implied that the artist was not even writing for the readers or audiences of their own time; and secondly, the artist created works that were of minority or elite interest, disdaining the popularity possible through newspapers. Yet, it was a critical myth that modernism emerged in antipathy towards newspapers. In his book, *After the Great Divide* (1986), Andreas Huyssen still argued that “Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture.”<sup>7</sup> However, the studies of modernism that emerged in the 1990s challenged this myth through what Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz describe as “vertical” examination of the supposed dichotomy between “high” and “low” art, to show that “modernist writers absorbed and remade forms of mass culture rather than merely disparaging them.”<sup>8</sup>

The news metaphor as used by Pound to distinguish literary culture was not itself new, but it was newly energised by developments in newspaper publication.

<sup>5</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 2010), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), vii.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 744. For examples of new modernist studies work on literature and the mass media, see Patrick Collier, *Modernism on Fleet Street* (London: Ashgate, 2006); Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Katherine Biers, *Virtual Modernism: Writing and Technology in the Progressive Era* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Bartholomew Brinkman, *Poetic Modernism in the Culture of Mass Print* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), and James Staman, *Competing Stories: Modernist Authors, Newspapers and the Movies* (Washington: Lexington Books, 2019).

The invention of the popular newspaper is often credited to Alfred Harmsworth when he launched the *Daily Mail* in 1896, which was explicitly designed to “interest the mass of people,” and for the first time extended the scope of newspapers to encompass fiction and what became known as “human interest stories.”<sup>9</sup> This development was, according to John Carey’s famous critique of the elitism of modernism, the background against which modernist writers and artists increasingly defined their art, even when contradicted by their practice. Carey argues that this began with Nietzsche, who expressed contempt for “every kind of culture that is compatible with reading, not to speak of writing for, newspapers,”<sup>10</sup> and became an orthodoxy professed by many of the most prominent modernist authors in English, including Lawrence, Eliot, Yeats, Woolf, and Forster. In Carey’s view, disdain for the newspapers was not just about commercialism, but was indicative of animosity towards the so-called masses, towards democracy, and towards the rise of a general reading public. Modernism became associated with formal experimentation, cultural allusiveness, and aesthetic difficulty, and this, Carey argues, was a deliberate response to mass education and mass literacy – the masses would have their hack writers, only the intellectual elite would understand and appreciate literature. Hence, Carey argues, even though Joyce would present his newspaper-reading character, Leopold Bloom, without any sense of authorial disdain, he appears in a novel which is famously one of the most difficult modernist works for the so-called “general” reader to access and understand.<sup>11</sup>

The idea that modernism, even in terms of style, could be defined as a reaction against newspapers contrasted sharply with how Matthew Rubery describes the relationship between literature and journalism in the nineteenth century: “the transformation of news during the nineteenth century profoundly influenced literary narrative.”<sup>12</sup> No antagonism existed between the novelist and the journalist when, as Rubery shows, “the prose written by Victorian novelists bore some relationship to the periodical press in terms of style, subject, or source.”<sup>13</sup> The crossover of styles, narrative techniques, subject matter, and voice between

<sup>9</sup> John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber, 1992), 6; Allison Pease, “Modernism and Mass Culture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 199.

<sup>10</sup> Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers*, 5.

the novel and newspapers was not just a matter of two rapidly ascendent forms of representation competing with each other for readers – newspapers increasingly carried fiction in serial instalments, while novels were increasingly drawing upon the format of newspapers as part of their narrative techniques. Unsurprisingly, writers moved between writing fiction and journalism interchangeably, a particular exemplar being Dickens (who was a favourite of the Behan household). Yet this relationship did not end with the arrival of modernism. Behan was familiar with the ways in which Joyce engaged with newspapers, cinema, and new media technologies, for example. He was also well acquainted with Flann O’Brien (Brian O’Nolan), both personally and with his work as a writer, and was aware of how O’Brien had established a literary reputation as a modernist novelist at the same time as he had adopted the persona of “Myles na gCopaleen” in his column in *The Irish Times*, “The Cruiskeen Lawn.”<sup>14</sup>

Prior to the early 1950s, Behan’s literary publications followed a pattern of appearing in small circulation, self-consciously literary magazines, and thus in a way that was recognisably similar to the myth of the modernist aesthete. His own “slim sheaf of verse,” published in Irish in small journals in the late 1940s, with what Declan Kiberd has described as “their socialist message and modernist perspective,” would have “offered a new intellectual challenge to a traditionalist Gaelic readership.”<sup>15</sup> In the pages of *Envoy*, published in Dublin by John Ryan, and *Points*, published in Paris by Sindbad Vail, Behan’s work appeared beside such authors as Alexander Trocchi, David Gascoyne, and Samuel Beckett, who saw themselves as continuing the legacy of modernist literary experimentation. As Deirdre McMahon’s work has shown, Behan gravitated towards Paris as a literary city, and specifically as the place where he could connect with the traces and surviving remnants of the modernist writers of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>16</sup> The literary

<sup>14</sup> See Paul Fagan’s chapter, “Secret Scriptures: Brendan Behan in the *Cruiskeen Lawn*,” in *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt, 163-84. Catherine Flynn’s work on *Cruiskeen Lawn* has explored how Flann O’Brien navigated the relationship between literature and public discourse: see “The Full Little Jug: Flann O’Brien and the Irish Public Sphere,” in *Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities*, ed. Paul Fagan, John Greaney and Tamara Radak (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 223-36.

<sup>15</sup> Declan Kiberd, “Introduction,” in Brendan Behan, *Poems and a Play in Irish* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1981), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Deirdre McMahon, “Brendan Behan and European Modernism: A Critical Reassessment of Modernist Aesthetics in the Writings of Brendan Behan, 1942-1958,” PhD dissertation, University College Dublin, 2021. See also Deirdre McMahon and Tim Desmond, *Documentary on One: Brendan Behan in Paris*, RTE Radio One, September 2019, as well as McMahon’s contribution in the present volume.

culture of Paris, albeit considerably different in the immediate post-war years from the Paris of Joyce, Hemingway, Stein, and Fitzgerald, still revolved around bohemian cafes, small publishing presses, and little magazines. Yet, when Behan returned to Dublin in the early 1950s, the outlets for his work were of a notably different character. He began making radio broadcasts and writing short radio plays for Raidió Éireann, the national radio station. He started writing for *The Irish Press* in 1951, then his serialised novel *The Scarperer* (a crime fiction) appeared in *The Irish Times* in 1953, and finally he wrote on a regular basis with *The Irish Press* from 1953 to 1956.<sup>17</sup>

One conclusion we might expect Behan to have learned from his time in Paris is that the artist of small magazines and small presses was also the artist of meagre diet and poor lodgings. The newspapers and radio, modern means of mass communication, may not have been the vehicles of artistic posterity, but they at least paid enough for the artist to eat and drink. The problem of how to make money from writing literature is clearly a preoccupation of Behan's in a way that highlights the socio-economic assumptions behind the myth of the modernist artist, aloof from the demands of mass media. Behan began his first article for *The Irish Press*, published in August 1951, by setting out both his literary credentials, and what we might call his social context:

The boss on the painting job says to me one morning: "Behan, I believe you are a bit of a writer."

Remembering: "Mr. Behan handles a delicate subject with sensitivity and taste, permitting but a negligible excess towards the end; he has the rare gift of knowing when to restrain his narrative and when to let it go forward so that his tensions are always controlled and his irony never heavy-handed; but above all he has inherited the virtue of his race of writing as he talks and talking as he sings in word arrangements, sensuous, syntactical." (*The Hudson Review*, New York, Summer, 1951.) I modestly assent.

"Well, write this." And he hands me a time-sheet.

I fill it in. Syntactically. "Assisting generally inside. Twelve hours." Sensuously. "Plus two hours travelling time."

"And take these." He hands me my three cards. Unemployment Insurance, Wet-Time and National Health. One to go away, the second to stay away, and the third not to come back.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> John Brannigan, "'For the Readies': Brendan Behan, Crime Fiction, and the Dublin Underworld," *Eire-Ireland* 49, no. 1-2 (2014): 92-105.

<sup>18</sup> Brendan Behan, "To the Mountains Bound," in *A Bit of a Writer*, 3.

In this passage, there is the same self-mocking depiction of Behan as a literary author, one whose sensitivity and taste is praised in international literary magazines, but whose pretensions mean nothing in the altogether more pragmatic and materialistic economy of working-class labour. The story which Behan chooses to tell, therefore, in his first venture into newspaper publication in Dublin, is one of a writer capable of attracting the commendations of the international literary world for his style, but still materially dependent upon a social world defined by time sheets and precarious employment. Behan here highlights, in other words, the strained relationship between social class and cultural productivity. John Fordham, in his book on the working-class modernism of Liverpool Irish author James Hanley, argued that there is “something qualitatively distinct about a working-class perspective which, because of its habituation to the extremes of social experience, finds adequate expression particularly in non-realist forms.”<sup>19</sup> This is a line of argument which would be equally productive in contextualising the expressionism of Behan’s *The Quare Fellow*, or the non-realist and ludic forms adopted in *The Hostage*.

There is another kind of labour, therefore, taking place in this passage. Behan jokes at the end of this scene, after he has been dismissed from his job as a housepainter, that he is “no longer a force in contemporary painting.”<sup>20</sup> Here, Behan clearly hints at his navigation of this acute cultural tension between the image of the modernist aesthete, the artist autonomous from the social world of production and labour, and the role of the newspaper writer. Never allowing his readers to forget that there was a writer at work in these columns, Behan conspicuously performed the intellectual work of writing, while also deflating its literary and intellectual value. He occasionally even refers in his columns to others by Benedict Kiely and Francis MacManus, “round the corner there,” on the “more literary page” of the newspaper, as if his own column was less literary.<sup>21</sup> This might seem ironic in retrospect in that Kiely and MacManus would not come to enjoy the same literary acclaim and success as Behan, but at the time they were more established than he was. This strategy of deflating literary pretension extends across the newspaper articles in Behan’s many allusions to writers and artists, which are usually made for comic rather than intellectual purposes:

<sup>19</sup> John Fordham, *James Hanley: Modernism and the Working Class* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Behan, “To the Mountains Bound,” 3.

<sup>21</sup> Brendan Behan, “The Tinkers Do Not Speak Irish,” in *A Bit of a Writer*, 283.



BALLAD TIME

I struck up, to the air of the *Rising of the Moon*, and vehemently:

“They told me Francis Hinsley,  
They told me you were hung...”

“Good on you,” said the old man, his hand on his ear, for fear he’d miss one word.

“With red protruding eyeballs...”

“More luck to me one son,” said the old man, in tears of content.

“And black protruding tongue...”

“Ah, your blood’s worth bottling,” screeched the old man.

“Is that one of Yeats’s?” asked Crippen.

“No, that was written by Evelyn Waugh,” said I.<sup>22</sup>

These are familiar jokes in Behan’s repertoire – he frequently jokes about Evelyn Waugh, often misassigning gender, which was based on the fact that Evelyn Waugh was briefly married to Evelyn Gardner, and there was a widespread if puerile joke that they were “he-Evelyn and she-Evelyn.”<sup>23</sup> In the same article, we are told that Waugh was known as the “Bardess of Belcuddy.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, although his comment that the song was “written by Evelyn Waugh” seems like a comic misattribution, Behan was right – these lines come from Waugh’s novel, *The Loved One*, and they are based on a poem by Eton schoolmaster, William Johnson Cory, about Heraclitus (“They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead”).<sup>25</sup> Behan’s ingenuity here is to set the lines to the tune of “The Rising of the Moon,” which they suit perfectly, and so give the impression that Waugh is an Irish balladeer. Yeats is sometimes treated seriously, usually for his 1916 Rising poems, but more often is the comic butt of misattribution, such as when one character says, “I was going to ask Behan here, this honorary journalist, whether he was familiar with that poem by Yeats that begins, ‘Oh, to have a little house ...’”<sup>26</sup> Of course, this is not one of Yeats’s at all, but a poem wearily familiar to at least some generations of Irish schoolchildren as Padraic Colum’s “An Old Woman of the Roads” (“Oh, to have a little house / To own the hearth and stool and all! / The

<sup>22</sup> Brendan Behan, “Here’s How History Is Written,” in *A Bit of a Writer*, 93.

<sup>23</sup> David Lebedoff, *The Same Man: George Orwell and Evelyn Waugh in Love and War* (New York: Random House, 2008), 51.

<sup>24</sup> Behan, “Here’s How History Is Written,” 94.

<sup>25</sup> William (Johnson) Cory, “Heraclitus,” in *The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1900*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 908.

<sup>26</sup> Brendan Behan, “Our Budding Genius Here,” in *A Bit of a Writer*, 315.

heaped up sods upon the fire / The pile of turf against the wall!").<sup>27</sup> It is evident from passages like this that Behan is engaging his readers in a very deliberate and knowing performance, which simultaneously rewards readers for their literary and cultural knowledge, while also undercutting or ironising the affectations of literary discourse.

There are a number of ways in which we might begin to delineate how Behan's turn to writing for newspapers, as well as perhaps other mass media, in the 1950s, was not just the consequence of a writer in search of a regular income, but part of a conscious exploration of the meanings of cultural and artistic production in the context of postwar social democracy. Tyrus Miller, in his book *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars*, argues that the modernist attempt to maintain a distinction between the "high calling of art" and mass forms of culture, became increasingly strained as modernism itself became "susceptible to banalization and vulgarizing imitation."<sup>28</sup> Behan was frequently drawn in his own writings to the ways in which high modernist artists had become mythologised and commercialised, either for a growing academic industry seeking to know, for example, whether or not Yeats liked parsnips, or a public audience willing to buy drinks to hear songs and stories about Joyce. If Yeats and Joyce could be dragged into the realm of popular forms of entertainment, then perhaps art after modernism needed to re-examine the supposed antipathy between high and popular art. Miller sees this as a crucial impetus for the interwar turn towards what he defines as late modernism: "late modernist writing weakens the relatively strong symbolic forms still evident in high modernist texts. It reopens the modernist enclosure of form onto the work's social and political environs, facilitating its more direct, polemical engagement with topical and popular discourses."<sup>29</sup> Miller was writing mostly about authors emerging in the late 1920s and the 1930s; by the time Behan was writing in the late forties and early fifties, this process of re-examining the relationship between high art and popular culture had a more urgent social problem to consider, of how art functioned in relation to democracy.

This was a particular problem for the working-class writer: disdain for mass literacy and education was hardly a tenable or desirable position for a writer who had "only gone to school half the time."<sup>30</sup> The economics of cultural production

<sup>27</sup> Padraic Colum, "An Old Woman of the Roads," in *Collected Poems of Padraic Colum* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1953), 90.

<sup>28</sup> Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and Art between the World Wars* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 30.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, *Late Modernism*, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Behan, "Dialogue on Literature and the Hack," 352.

also meant that there was an obvious gap between the class position of the working-class writer and the affordability and cultural accessibility of the theatre or the hardcover book. Behan spoke about this dilemma in a later interview, after he had become famous, when he said that the Irish were not his audience:

the only people I don't like here are the theatre-going public; what passes for society here.... But the ordinary people I like ... taxi-drivers, house-painters, bookies' runners ... they're the people I care about. And in any country they don't buy books very much and they don't live by books or by literature, except newspapers with the racing results.<sup>31</sup>

This was from an interview broadcast in 1960, by which time Behan had become an international star, feted in theatres and on television in London and New York, an experience which contrasted sharply with what he perceived was a begrudging reaction to his work in Ireland. He had struggled with rejection from the major Irish theatres, and the banning of his book, *Borstal Boy*. Yet his comment on the Irish audience that he did care about not buying books or going to the theatre, but instead living by “the newspapers with the racing results” is a pointed reference to the socio-economic conditions of readership from a writer who did write so regularly, and substantially, for newspapers.

In this context, we might think about the relationship between newspapers and these different classes and categories of readers, and to place Behan's articles into the form of the newspaper (in a way that anthologising them in a collection works against). *The Irish Press* had commenced publication in 1931 and was founded by Éamon de Valera.<sup>32</sup> De Valera was a former commander in the 1916 Rising, led the anti-treaty forces in the Irish Civil War against the new state, and in 1931 was the leader of the Fianna Fáil party, in opposition to the government. He would go on to serve as both Taoiseach and President of the Irish Republic, dominating the politics of mid-century Ireland. *The Irish Press* was founded to fill a gap in newspaper publication in Ireland. *The Irish Times* had a long association with the Anglo-Irish and Protestant Ascendancy and was a Unionist newspaper; *The Irish Independent* was a nationalist newspaper but was associated with the strongly middle-class conservatism of Cumann na nGaedheal, the party which formed the government after the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty. Against the perceived bias of these

<sup>31</sup> Brendan Behan, “Meet the Quare Fella,” in *Brendan Behan: Interviews and Recollections*, vol. 1, ed. E.H. Mikhail (London: Macmillan, 1982), 145.

<sup>32</sup> “Irish Press,” *Irish Newspaper Archive*, accessed 17 May 2024, <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/irish-press-newspaper-archive>.

papers, de Valera pledged that *The Irish Press* would deliver “The Truth in the News,” the motto printed in English on its masthead alongside the Irish motto, “For the glory of God and the honour of Ireland,” and that it would be a “good newspaper.”<sup>33</sup> The latter pledge could be taken as code for the anxiety that newspapers coming from England contained immoral and irreligious content, and that *The Irish Press* would be a popular but not sensationalist or indecent newspaper. At its peak it reached sales of two hundred thousand copies, and was associated, of course, with the Fianna Fáil party, which formed the government for much of Behan’s lifetime. This is one way of contextualising the column that Behan wrote; namely, despite his own dissident communist and Republican politics, he was co-opted into a newspaper with strongly conservative and pro-government roots. However, this is not yet to appreciate the newspaper as an aesthetic and cultural form.

For Marshall McLuhan, poetics was the key mode through which to understand the newspaper as a form. In McLuhan’s terms, a page of news could be read as “a symbolist landscape”: “any paper today is a collective work of art, a daily ‘book’ of industrial man, an Arabian night’s entertainment in which a thousand and one astonishing tales are being told by an anonymous narrator to an equally anonymous audience.”<sup>34</sup> The newspaper was a modernist work in its drawing into an orchestrated simultaneity stories and images pulled from diverse and disparate places and discourses. Cattle prices, floods, fires, and strikes – the newspaper front page was based on the entire technical apparatus of modernity to bring such disparate changes and events into the consciousness of the modern citizen, and to make them the subject of public concern. Events in Ireland were brought into sharp coherence with reports of the machinations of Cold War politics, or cultural events, such as the bicentenary of Mozart. The reader’s attention and emotional investment is pulled and shoved across the page and across the globe. Headlines set the tone and condense the story. The images can illustrate the stories or pull the reader somewhere else. Likewise, there are radically different discourses at work across every page, from the affective and aesthetic language of advertising to the quick, visual humour of the cartoon. The “news” takes its place in a discursive and visual carousel of serial stories, car advertisements, fashion advice, crosswords, radio schedules, book reviews, court reports, finance, shipping, tractor advertisements, gossip columns, sports, racing results, bookie’s odds, personal advertisements, and death notices. There are

<sup>33</sup> “Irish Press.”

<sup>34</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951; Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 3.

a thousand and one stories in every newspaper, every day, but what is significant about the form of the newspaper is the way in which it brings its readers into contact with the idea of a simultaneous and shared experience. Rubery argues: "If possession of a novel implies an unbridgeable aesthetic experience varying in intensity from one reader to the next, a newspaper in hand suggests a reassuring affiliation among fellow recipients who may have digested the identical contents that very morning."<sup>35</sup> Behan's column took its place in this eclectic but shared form: "Dialogue on Literature and the Hack" employs the same typographical and technical conventions of newspaper storytelling – the headline and sub-headings, the short paragraphs, the smart, quick lines of the opening, and the flippant, throwaway gag of the conclusion. Behan was demonstrating the art of the hack even as he was probing its meaning. Here, Behan was writing for a community of readers which he understood to include both the poets and journalists among whom he was drinking, and the taxi-drivers, housepainters and bookies' runners whom he knew he might reach here among the racing results, but not through his books or plays.

There are ways, therefore, in which the newspaper as a medium was an extension of the late modernism of Behan's work. There was potential in newspaper writing for a populist aesthetic, even if at the same time Behan recognised that newspapers could be pernicious instruments of ideological discourse. This danger is clear from the ways in which newspapers are depicted in some of his writings. In *The Quare Fellow*, the brutal hanging of a human being is shown to be reduced in the language of newspapers to a few lines: "Condemned man entered the hang-house at seven fifty-nine. At eight three the doctor pronounced life extinct."<sup>36</sup> This is described by the prisoners as "a lot of mullarkey," and they proceed to remind the audience throughout the play of the gruesome details of the man's last hours and horrific final moments.<sup>37</sup> The same newspapers who reduce his death to the clinical language of fact are shown at the end of the play to be willing to pay the prisoners for smuggling out the man's letters, which can supply their columns with more sensationalist stories.<sup>38</sup> In *The Hostage*, the newspaper functions as the shaping narrative of the logic of murder and reprisal which sustains war and violence. The English soldier held hostage by the IRA becomes aware of the significance of the boy held by the British in a Belfast jail

<sup>35</sup> Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers*, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Brendan Behan, "The Quare Fellow," in Brendan Behan, *The Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 1978), 45.

<sup>37</sup> Behan, "The Quare Fellow," 45.

<sup>38</sup> Behan, "The Quare Fellow," 124.

from the papers, which are “full of it over here – headlines that big.”<sup>39</sup> Yet, there is also the sense that for the newspapers this is mere sensation, the headlines merely attracting sales – Miss Gilchrist attempts to sooth Leslie’s panicked reaction to the headline which implies his own death in reprisal, by reading an article from the *Daily Express* about the domestic life of the Queen: “Within the Palace Walls. So much is known of the Queen’s life on the surface, so little about how her life is really run. But now this article has been written with the active help of the Queen’s closest advisers.”<sup>40</sup> Leslie is destined to become just another story in the newspapers, as Miss Gilchrist suggests when she says, “Poor Boy! Do you know, I think they ought to put his story in the *News of the World*. Ah, we’ll be seeing you on the telly yet. He’ll be famous like that Diana Dors, or the one who cut up his victim and threw the bits out of an aeroplane.”<sup>41</sup> Leslie’s death, tragic and pointless, can already be measured in a few short column inches, even before it has happened.

Yet, for Behan, newspapers also continued to retain a promise, however fleeting, of connection. In *Borstal Boy*, Behan’s first encounter with Charlie Millwall involves a copy of the *News of the World*, last week’s copy to be precise, which Charlie offers as a gift and tenderly places inside Behan’s shirt.<sup>42</sup> The exchange is described in detail for the opportunity it presents for Charlie to touch Behan. Behan settles in his prison cell afterwards, opening the newspaper “luxuriously,” and reading first a “consoling story” about a magistrate who had been sentenced to prison for sexual offences, then the crossword, before turning to a full-page serial story.<sup>43</sup> It is clear that for Behan the newspaper is not simply about news, but about stories, and about exchange. Charlie’s gift of this reading material cements their relationship; Behan thanks him shortly afterwards by singing a love song in Irish, “A bhuachail aoibhinn aluinn-ó, / Ba leathan do chroí is ba dheas do phóg” [My lovely boy, how wide was your heart and sweet was your kiss].<sup>44</sup>

There is another way of reading Ezra Pound’s famous saying that “Literature is news that STAYS news.” Perhaps it too is not necessarily as clear a distinction between literature and newspapers as it was once supposed after all. McLuhan certainly thought that the newspaper as an art form could be understood as a work as complex as the cubism of Picasso or the symbolism of Joyce: “As a daily cross-section of the activities and impulses of the race the press is an inclusive image

<sup>39</sup> Brendan Behan, “The Hostage,” *The Complete Plays*, 180.

<sup>40</sup> Behan, “The Hostage,” 181.

<sup>41</sup> Behan, “The Hostage,” 217.

<sup>42</sup> Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy* (London: Corgi, 1961), 19-20.

<sup>43</sup> Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 24.

affording possibilities of varied orchestration.”<sup>45</sup> Darren Wershler argues that to understand newspapers through the lens of poetics afforded the potential to regard newspapers not as dispensable or ephemeral, but as a continuation of literate forms of art: “Long after its subject matter has lost its immediacy, the material and formal properties of a poetic text, and the manner in which it circulates through culture, impart crucial information about how it continues to make meaning.”<sup>46</sup> For Behan, it was clear that newspapers were part of cultural circulation in ways that were never entirely as intended or predicted, never as ephemeral as they might appear. There was perhaps a different rhythm to working-class literacy in relation to newspapers than the commodity-based version of daily consumption and disposal. Earlier we saw that Behan began his first newspaper article with a scene in which he is dismissed from his job as a housepainter. I conclude this essay with a scene from his articles in which it is explained why getting fired from his job was a constant risk for Behan. His boss, Janey, has sent him upstairs to lift the linoleum from the floor and scrape the wallpaper off the walls to prepare the room for painting:

#### AN ANXIOUS MOO

This was a hazardous business for me. I never could resist reading old newspapers, and for me to raise a piece of old linoleum was like opening the door of a library.

I promised myself that I would only read a little bit, that I would just glance at the papers before I threw them into the snow outside, but when I raised the linoleum and saw the headline *Viceroy's visit to Grangegorman. Vicereine waves green linen handkerchief, scenes of mad enthusiasm*, I was lost and read it inch by inch, through the serial *Pretty Kitty*.

For new readers: Lord Maulverer has fallen in love with pretty Kitty Hackett, daughter of Honest Tom Hackett, a country butcher. She helps her father in the slaughterhouse and one day, she is busily gutting, when an anxious moo is heard.

Till at last Janey came into the room, and caught me there. The old English drop-pattern paper unscarred by hand of mine as I bent over the morning paper for Tuesday, 12 June 1901.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “Joyce, Mallarmé, and the Press,” *The Sewanee Review* 62, no. 1 (January-March 1954), 51.

<sup>46</sup> Darren Wershler, “News That Stays News: Marshall McLuhan and Media Poetics,” *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2011), <https://doi.org/10.3998/3336451.0014.208>.

<sup>47</sup> Brendan Behan, “My Great Red Racing Bike,” in *A Bit of a Writer*, 349.

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