

“GAEL AN TAOBH THUaidH”: THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN BRENDAN BEHAN’S JOURNALISTIC WRITING¹

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2024.67.3>

Abstract: The article explores Behan’s journalistic output in Irish as well as the role of Irish in his English articles for *The Irish Press*, published between 1951 and 1957. It pays attention to instances of multilingualism, heteroglossia, and hybridity in the corpus, further corroborating the idea of Behan as a fundamentally multilingual writer, who did not entirely abandon Irish even after choosing English as his main artistic medium. This can be also seen from the range of literary references to Irish-language works made in the articles. Behan’s ideological positions are highlighted, including his mistrust of the official use of Irish, his admiration for the Aran Islands, and his keen effort to connect Irish to working-class Dublin and the province of Leinster in general. In a bold move, Behan uses Irish to build bridges not only between Ireland and France, but also between Irish Catholics and Protestants, and ultimately between Ireland and England. The language emerges not merely as a marker of national identity or a remnant of a pre-colonial past, but as a hybrid interface enabling the author to reach out across various cultural divides.

Keywords: Brendan Behan, Irish language, hybridity, multilingualism, journalism

While Brendan Behan gained his fame primarily as an Anglophone writer, his engagement with the Irish language was multi-faceted and manifold. Over the decades, a degree of critical attention has been devoted to this dimension of the author’s work, especially to the considerable qualities of his early Irish-language

¹ This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project “Beyond Security: Role of Conflict in Resilience-Building” (reg. no.: CZ.02.01.01/00/22_008/0004595).

poems;² the relation of *An Giall* to *The Hostage*,³ as well as the use of Irish in *The Quare Fellow*.⁴ In an earlier article co-written with James Little, I have argued that the typical view of Behan as an author who simply switched from Irish to English is overly simple.⁵ It is more enlightening to see him principally as a multilingual and heteroglossic writer who merely changed the main medium of his output – out of a desire to gain a larger audience, but also for artistic reasons. Despite his proficiency and wide reading in Irish, his stylistic command of the language was not sufficient to create the heteroglossic tapestry that characterises his mature writing. Moreover, the medium of Irish denied him the opportunity to incorporate various dialects of English, which are an inherent marker of his style. Yet, Irish remained an often-used ingredient in his English texts, serving not merely as an embellishment, but as a vehicle to convey important meanings, more often than not undermining established authority.

Behan’s Articles in *Comhar*

This tendency is apparent not only in his literary texts, but also in his journalistic writing, which is the subject of the present article. Some early examples of Behan’s journalism can be found in the Irish-language journal *Comhar*, which had already been publishing his poetry since the mid-1940s.⁶ As the former editor of *Comhar*, Riobard Mac Góráin, has reminisced,

Bhí de nós ag Breandán Ó Beacháin a rá nach raibh ach dhá iris ann a bhféadfadh sé bheith ag brath orthu a shaothar a fhoilsiú nuair a bhí sé ina scríbhneoir óg gan aird. Ba iadsan *Points* i bPáras agus *Comhar* in Éirinn.

² Colbert Kearney, “An Rannaire: Filíocht Bhreandáin Uí Bheacháin,” *Scríobh* 3 (1978): 44-57; John Brannigan, *Brendan Behan: Cultural Nationalism and the Revisionist Writer* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 61-67. Ríona Ní Fhrighil, “Brendan Behan’s Irish-Language Poetry,” in *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019), 93-116.

³ Brannigan, *Brendan Behan* 102-106. Cliona Ní Riordáin, “Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage*: Translation, Adaptation or Recreation of *An Giall*?” in *Reading Brendan Behan*, 117-26.

⁴ Richard Rankin Russell, “Brendan Behan’s Lament for Gaelic Ireland: *The Quare Fellow*,” *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 73-93.

⁵ James Little and Radvan Markus, “Coercive Confinement and Irish Languages: Ó Cadhain, Behan, Heaney, Okorie,” *Review of Irish Studies in Europe* 5, no. 2 (2022): 25, <https://doi.org/10.32803/rise.v5i2.3073>.

⁶ Ní Fhrighil, “Brendan Behan’s Irish-Language Poetry,” 93.

[Brendan Behan used to say that there had been only two journals that he could rely on to publish his work when he was a young writer without attention. These were *Points* in Paris and *Comhar* in Ireland.]⁷

The first of the articles was published in April 1951 and contains Behan's account of the unfinished pilgrimage to Rome that he undertook with Anthony Cronin the year before.⁸ Apart from entertaining anecdotes and a description of the falling out between the two friends, the article is remarkable for mixing languages – alongside Irish we can find numerous phrases in French, and occasional English words. In addition, the German phrase, “Stadtluft macht frei” [the city air liberates], is employed in a variation on Behan's constant theme, i.e. extolling the virtues of the city as opposed to the countryside, in defiance to the ideal Ireland as imagined by Éamon de Valera.⁹ An exquisite example of multilingual interplay appears when Behan gives, in Irish spelling, an approximation of the French pronunciation of the English name of the Irish capital: “Dubleadh, Irlande.”¹⁰

In 1952 and 1953, there followed a series of six articles, entitled “Pléascáin i Sasana” [Explosives in England]. These focus on the IRA bombing campaign in England in 1939-1940; although they are arguably not reliable as a factual account,¹¹ they contain many seeds of the approach applied later in *Borstal Boy*, often veering away from history and ideology to humorous anecdotes and vivid personal encounters. Despite the militant theme, they occasionally show sympathy with ordinary people in England and cast ironic doubt on Behan's youthful commitment to the cause. A good example is an account of a Republican parade on O'Connell Street on Easter Sunday, 1939, where Behan and his friend, Cathal Goulding, were appointed as overseers. Behan dealt rudely with some English tourists who were taking pictures from the top of a tram, forcefully taking films out of their cameras. In retrospect, he notes the Lancashire accent of one of them and understands “nach raibh aon fhuadar faoin bhfear seo ach éaló ar feadh cúpla lá ó dheatach Rochdale nó Bolton” [that this man merely strove to escape for a few days from the Rochdale or Bolton smog].¹² He concludes by a critical

⁷ Riobard Mac Góráin, “Breandán Ó Beacháin: ‘Nach bhfuilimse in ann Gaeilge a scríobh?’” *Comhar* 43, no. 3 (1984): 10. Translations of Irish-language quotations in this article are my own unless stated otherwise.

⁸ Máiréad Ní Chinnéide, “Saothar Próis Gaeilge Uí Bheacháin,” *Comhar* 69, no. 4 (2009): 22.

⁹ Breandán Ó Beacháin, “Na hOilithrigh,” *Comhar* 10, no. 4 (1951): 21.

¹⁰ Ó Beacháin, “Na hOilithrigh,” 22.

¹¹ Ní Chinnéide, “Saothar Próis,” 22-23.

¹² Breandán Ó Beacháin, “Anonn go Sasana,” *Comhar* 11, no. 12 (1952): 24.

assessment of his own role in the event: “Sin baois agus buaileam sciath na hóige.” [That is the folly and braggadocio of youth.]¹³ There is evidence that Behan planned, as a follow-up on this series, to publish an Irish-language book on his experience in English prisons.¹⁴ He, of course, wrote *Borstal Boy* instead, but it is of note that in 1956, *Comhar* published an anecdote describing Behan’s encounter, in Liverpool jail, with the famous hangman Albert Pierrepoint.¹⁵

The *Irish Press* Articles: Multilingualism and Literary References

Simultaneously with his work for *Comhar*, Behan wrote English articles, sketches and essays for *The Irish Press*, starting in August 1951. These short texts, including the weekly columns which he produced from 1953 to 1956, were recently edited by John Brannigan under the title *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan’s Collected Short Prose* (2023), and the present study is greatly indebted to this invaluable source. Three of Behan’s *Irish Press* articles were written in Irish (although they did not make it into the collected volume), which further testifies to the author’s commitment to the language in this period.¹⁶ In the analysis that follows, significant use will be made of these, as they contain much that is relevant to the themes of this study. There is no denying, however, that Behan’s main journalistic output was in English, as amply illustrated by the 109 articles in Brannigan’s collection.

It is a definite feature of Behan’s multilingual style that most of the *Irish Press* articles in English contain, in some form or another, Irish words, phrases or whole passages. Again, this happens alongside the use of French (especially in articles describing Behan’s experience in Paris) and the virtual omnipresence of various dialects of English (or Hiberno-English). Out of the articles, only a bare minimum contain well-known phrases (*a grá, a chara, ná bac leis*)¹⁷ which might have been

¹³ Ó Beacháin, “Anonn go Sasana,” 24.

¹⁴ Cian Ó hÉigeartaigh and Aoileann Nic Gearailt, *Sáirséal agus Dill 1947-1981: Scéal Foilsitheora* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2014), 115-29.

¹⁵ Breandán Ó Beacháin, “Cúrsaí Croiche,” *Comhar* 15, no. 5 (1956): 13-14. All in all, Behan wrote eight articles for *Comhar* under his own name. In addition to it, Ní Chinnéide claims that he is the author of an article on Maud Gonnet from June 1953, signed “An I.R.A. Nua” [the new IRA]. Ní Chinnéide, “Saothar Próis,” 23.

¹⁶ Breandán Ó Beacháin, “Smaointe ar Árainn,” *Irish Press*, 9 August 1954, 2; “Oighreacht an Ghaeil sa Litríocht,” *Irish Press*, 17 March 1955, 2; “Micheál Ó Maoláin,” *Irish Press*, 21 August 1955, 2. Irish Newspaper Archives.

¹⁷ John Brannigan, ed. *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan’s Collected Short Prose* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023), 40, 215, 344. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text. The first of the expressions, *a grá*, lacks the lenition required by

employed to give the text an ‘Irish flavour.’ If a single word or short phrase is used, it seems to be more an expression of a mind that is accustomed to think in two (or several) languages and happens to come across the right concept in an idiom that is not the primary medium of the text. Behan refers, for instance, to “the light and *aerach* [gay] days of my youth” (216), or states that he chose “*sli ordha na measardhacta*” [*sic*; the golden path of moderation] when deciding what song to sing in the company of Orangemen (49). Most of the Irish passages, though, are much longer, and even then rarely accompanied by a translation. The result is that Behan’s articles are truly macaronic texts, fully understandable only to those well versed both in English and Irish.

The importance of Irish in the articles is further underscored by the fact that they frequently quote or refer to Irish-language literature from the seventeenth century to the author’s present. Behan references eighteenth-century songs like “Cill Cais” (19) and “Sliabh na mBan” (25, 268, 291), as well as the nineteenth-century diary *Cinmlae Amhlaoibh Uí Shúileabháin* (290). Special attention is devoted to Brian Merriman’s *Cúirt an Mheán-Oíche*, which, according to an Irish-language article from March 1955, Behan encountered at school, although the instruction did not go beyond the innocuous prologue. He then searched for the rest of the poem in the National Library, where he read it along with its German translation, a macaronic experience par excellence. Later in the article, he criticises the Clare County Council that they would not let a memorial be built on Merriman’s grave, on account of the perceived immorality of the poem.¹⁸

Behan further quotes the opening lines of the poem in two English articles (63, 272), the second time accompanying them by his own Irish-language quatrain in praise of the poet written in the style of the *Cúirt* itself. The latter article, published in July 1955, also contains a passage from the beginning of Merriman’s masterpiece in Behan’s own translation, fairly similar to the one that appeared later in *Borstal Boy*. The only significant difference is the rendering of the line “An séithleach searbh gan sealbh gan saibhreas,”¹⁹ which appears as “Let hopeless eyes, long stuped in gall” (272) in the article, but as “Let a withered old ballocks, but rich, in gall” in the novel.²⁰ The latter translation is not only closer to the letter of the original, but also to its irreverent tone. The appearance of the passage in

Irish grammar (*a ghrá*). Such grammatical mistakes abound in the articles (as opposed to those in *Comhar*), no doubt due to the absence of an Irish-language editor.

¹⁸ Ó Beacháin, “Oighrecht an Ghaeil,” 2.

¹⁹ Brian Merriman, *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, ed. Liam P. Ó Murchú (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1982), 19.

²⁰ Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy* (London: Arrow Books, 1990), 310.

The Irish Press in 1955 is an interesting piece of evidence concerning the history of Behan’s translation of the *Cúirt*, the manuscript of which, as he admits in the same article, had already been lost.²¹ Yet, Behan retained the opening passage in memory and developed it between 1955 and 1958, when *Borstal Boy* was published. Or was he merely more outspoken in a book published in London as opposed to an article in a major Irish newspaper?

Behan’s web of reference, however, is not limited to eighteenth-century masterpieces. He is at equal ease discussing modern works like Mícheál Breathnach’s *Seilg i measc na nAlp* (1917), Peadar Ó Laoghaire’s *Mo Sgéal Féin* (1915) or Liam Ó Rinn’s *Mo Chara Stiofán* (1939) (125, 358, 250). Substantial passages in two articles are devoted to a story from Tomás Ó Máille’s collection of articles *An Ghaoth Aniar* (1920) about the possible real-life inspiration for Christy Mahon in J.M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (251-52, 254-56).²² This outreach testifies to Behan’s wide reading in Irish-language literature, initiated at school, widened in the Irish prisons, and continued even during the years in which he wrote predominantly in English. His statement from a 1954 article, “I have never done much for the Irish language, beyond what I wrote and was paid for” (148), seems, in this light, overly modest.

Ideological Positioning

In a number of the *Irish Press* articles, Behan positions Irish within the ideological discourses of the time. As in his other writings, he is suspicious about the official role of the language, including (somewhat paradoxically, given the way Behan himself mastered Irish) its status as an obligatory subject at school. In “Oighreacht an Ghaeil sa Litríocht” [The Gaelic Literary Legacy], the 1955 article referenced above, he ironically states that he is one of the “Gaeilgeoirí éigeantacha” [compulsory Irish speakers] and admits that he did not especially enjoy the Irish-medium schooling that he went through, despite his gratitude to the education system for exposing him to the gems of eighteenth-century poetry.²³ Elsewhere, he notes the distrust of the inhabitants of Dublin’s Northside towards state

²¹ According to Ulick O’Connor, Behan recited the full translation in 1952 in McDaid’s pub in Dublin, but lost the manuscript in a fight in the Conservative Club in York Street three days later. See Ulick O’Connor, *Brendan Behan* (London: Granada, 1979), 122. In the article, though, Behan claims that the manuscript was mislaid by his fellow painter during a reconstruction of a church in the same street (272). From this it appears that the story about the manuscript’s loss had at least two versions.

²² Tomás Ó Máille, *An Ghaoth Aniar* (Dublin: Comhlucht Oideachais na hÉireann, 1920), 93-98.

²³ Ó Beacháin, “Oighreacht an Ghaeil,” 2.

employees coming from other parts of the country, noting that “We have never met a civic guard or a teacher or a doctor in the hospital that spoke like ourselves.”²⁴ This refers primarily to the difference in the dialect of English, yet as an example of a teacher’s speech Behan uses the Irish phrase *Sin amach do lamh* [*sic*; stretch out your hand], presumably applied before the administration of corporal punishment (24). The connection of Irish (or any other language) with authority clearly does not meet with Behan’s approval.

Seemingly more in line with the ideology of de Valera’s Ireland is Behan’s emotional attachment to the Blaskets and the Aran Islands. At the same time, though, he dissociates the islands from the idealization of rural life as practiced by de Valera, and even in an Aran setting, does not hesitate to claim: “I suffer from the national disease, agrophobia or fear of agriculture” (29). Like J.M. Synge before him, he connects the islands with freedom and artistic inspiration, imagining them as a paradise for writers, “the Shangri-La of the Irish intelligentsia” (192). Behan talks about the Aran islanders’ respect for art in various forms, mentioning that they take writing “as seriously as any other sort of work” (30). With satisfaction, he notes: “Nowhere else have I found it so easy to sit down at the typewriter, and work away, without feeling that I was in any way regarded as a criminal lunatic of idle tendencies.” (31) In contrast to Synge, however, purity of culture or language does not play a role in this high appreciation: Behan is happy to reproduce the mixing of Irish and English in the islanders’ speech (26) and report on a “hooley” on Inishmore which included “half-a-dozen European nationalities” (358).

A further difference lies in the fact that while Synge attempted to portray the islanders as virtually untouched by modernity, Behan seconds their wish for modern technological improvements, such as trawlers which would allow them “to go out a few miles and catch the fish that lie off their shores” (28). In an Irish-language article from August 1954, devoted wholly to the praise of Aran, he notes the use of “fluorescent lighting” in some of the houses, following the islanders’ own hybrid speech pattern in leaving the phrase in English. In a retort to those who would prefer to see the islands as premodern, Behan laconically states: “Bhoil, pé rud a d’fhág Dia de dhíth ortha ní hé an tuiscint, an mheanmacht, nó an dul-ar-aghaidh é.” [Well, whatever God left them lacking it is not understanding, intelligence or progress.]²⁵ In this approach to the Gaeltacht as a place in need of modernization, Behan was likely inspired by his friend and mentor, the celebrated Irish-language writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain, whom he knew from Fianna Éireann and the IRA and encountered again in the Curragh Camp in 1944 at the onset of

²⁴ For a discussion of this passage, see also Brannigan, *Brendan Behan*, 68.

²⁵ Ó Beacháin, “Smaointe ar Árainn,” 2.

his writing career.²⁶ Through much of his life, Ó Cadhain vehemently argued against the tendency of making Irish-speaking areas a ‘museum’ of old ways of life and campaigned for economic improvements in these regions.²⁷ These observations provide an important context for Behan’s sentimental attachment to the Aran Islands as well as the depopulated Blaskets, expressed in the poem “Jackeen ag Caoineadh na mBlascaod” [A Jackeen Lamenting the Blaskets],²⁸ or in the following statement in one of the *Irish Press* articles: “thank God that Aran had lasted up to my time, anyway. That I hadn’t died without seeing it.” (28) This sentiment is, in essence, defiant of the Irish state, which neglected the economic development of the offshore islands and oversaw the evacuation of the Blaskets in 1953.²⁹

Making Irish at Home in Dublin and Leinster

Despite his love of the islands, Behan stays a “jackeen” at all times and devotes much space to the subtle, highly nuanced and often ambiguous connections between Irish and Dublin, especially the Northside. Despite the ideological tensions, these links do exist, if only for the fact that in Behan’s time many Dubliners were just a few generations removed from native Irish speakers. Behan remarks about his great-grandmother that “she spoke good Irish” and that “there was good Irish in the County Meath,” from where she stemmed, at least until the 1860s (205). Remnants of the original language then survived in the ordinary Dubliners’ English in various forms. An intriguing portrayal of Dublin use of Irish appears in one of Behan’s comic sketches that quite frequently appeared in the columns. In this particular instance, the character “Crippen” claims that he has composed poetry in Irish, disparaging Behan’s own claim to the knowledge of the language by arguing that “it’s only the new stuff they have in schools. Dots and

²⁶ Ó Beacháin, “Micheál Ó Maoláin,” 2; Maitiú Ó Néill, “Faoi Ghlas ag Gaeil,” *Comhar* 30, no. 10 (1971): 8. There is also evidence that Ó Cadhain admired Behan’s poetry: see Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *As an nGéibheann: Litreacha chuig Tomás Bairéad* (Dublin: Sáirséal agus Dill 1973), 201. Ó Cadhain’s influence on Behan is also discussed in Brannigan, *Brendan Behan*, 62.

²⁷ See, for instance, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, “Béaloideas,” in *Ó Cadhain i bhFeasta*, ed. Seán Ó Laighin (Dublin: Clódhanna Teoranta, 1990), 129-69; Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh, *Ag Samhlú Troda: Máirtín Ó Cadhain 1905-1970* (Dublin: Coiscéim 2002), 154-55 *et passim*.

²⁸ Breandán Ó Beacháin, “Jackeen ag Caoineadh na mBlascaod,” in *Nuabhéarsaíocht*, ed. Seán Ó Tuama (Dublin: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1950), 106.

²⁹ Diarmaid Ferriter, *On the Edge: Ireland’s Offshore Islands: A Modern History* (London: Profile Books, 2018), Kindle edition. See especially Chapter 2, “The Islands and the Irish State, 1922-53.”

dashes." (112)³⁰ Two poems in Hiberno-English follow, interspersed with Irish terms and interjections such as "Pillaloo," "shillelagh," "Na Backlesh," and "Musha, and allanna, astore, tiggín too." (112-13) While the poems have more than a tinge of the stage Irish about them, they are at the same time a celebration of living, heteroglossic, hybrid speech, not subject to any imposed rules – a kind of speech that Behan knew well from the Dublin ballads that he enjoyed singing.³¹

A touching encounter between Behan's 'school Irish' and the vestiges of the language in Dublin English vernacular can be found in an account of his grandmother, who addressed her cat as *lanna walla*,³² "under the impression that she was speaking to the beast in the Irish language" (375). She further maintained that *bruteen* was an expression for a little cat,³³ vehemently refusing Behan's claim to the contrary (375). The passage is, despite the difference in tone, reminiscent of Joyce's "Eveline," where the protagonist's mother utters, in a fit of mental illness, the non-sensical but Irish-sounding words "Derevaun Seraun."³⁴ In his analysis of Joyce's short story and the ensuing account of the language shift from Irish to English, Barry McCrea puts emphasis on the language loss and the resulting trauma.³⁵ Behan, on the other hand, seems to rejoice in the humour of the situation and relishes in the mixture of languages and language registers that the shift has brought about:

"Me poor *llanna walla*," she'd croon, and the old cat would wag his head slowly, "sure it's the queer *drisheen* I'd be after begrudging you," upon which she would produce a piece of Herr Youkstetter's good Irish black pudding, and this happened regularly, though Beeshams was restricted to Sundays and Patrick's Day in Lent.

(375-76)

³⁰ This refers to the Gaelic script, where dots were placed above consonants to mark lenition, and to the frequent use of hyphens in Irish orthography.

³¹ An account of the influence of orality and vernacular speech on Behan can be found in Colbert Kearney, "Brendan Behan and the Oral Tradition of Dublin City," in *Féile Zozimus, Vol. 2: Brendan Behan: The Man, The Myth, The Genius*, ed. Vivian Uíbh Eachach and Dónal Ó Faoláin (Dublin: Gael-Linn, 1993), 37-54.

³² The expression is apparently based on the Irish words "lán a' mhála" [a full bag], with the meaning "something to think about, a 'bellyful.'" J.J. Hogan and Patrick C. O'Neill, "A North-County Dublin Glossary," *Comhar* 17, no. 1/2 (1947): 274.

³³ The Irish expression "brúitín" means "mashed potatoes."

³⁴ James Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1926), 41.

³⁵ Barry McCrea, *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in Twentieth-Century Ireland and Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 20-46.

Behan not only shows that Dublin has an Irish-language heritage, but that it can also boast of a long history of revivalism. In this, he specifically focuses on his native area, the Northside. Much of his views can be gleaned from his 1956 Irish-language obituary for the revivalist and trade union activist Mícheál Ó Maoláin.³⁶ The article starts with a reminiscence of Máirtín Ó Cadhain's speech to the nationalist youth organization Fianna Éireann, where he claimed that there was substantial similarity between the people of the Gaeltacht and the inhabitants of the Northside, presumably as regards their poverty and (actual or potential) revolutionary tendencies.³⁷ Behan supports the connection between the Northside and the Gaelic revival geographically and historically at first, noting the number of important establishments around Mountjoy square, such as the seat of Edward Martyn's Irish Theatre, the headquarters of the Gaelic League, as well as a number of halls for Irish dancing. This is followed by a description of a typical Northside "Gael" ("Gael an Taobh Thuaidh"), from the 1920s or 1930s. Such a person would, obviously, use Irish at every opportunity, but would differ from more conservative revivalists by revering Jim Larkin and disagreeing with the clergy on a number of social and political issues. There would be a certain tension between such a "Gael" and native speakers from the Gaeltacht. While Gaeltacht people would, perhaps rightfully, complain that they are welcomed on account of their Irish and not their person, they might be equally deterred by the local radical mixture of "Willie Rooney agus Tom Paine." Against this background, praise is heaped on Mícheál Ó Maoláin, a native of the Aran Islands and a radical himself, who was accepted in the Northside as one of the "laochra Gaelacha" [Gaelic heroes].³⁸

Elsewhere, Behan searches for the connection between the Northside and Irish on the basis of nationalism and anti-colonial sentiment. When commenting on the Irish-language literature he had studied at school, Behan notes that the anti-Cromwellian sarcasm of the poet Dáibhí Ó Bruadair or the death of the English prophesied in the folk quatrain "Do threasgair an saol" [The world defeated] naturally appealed to a boy whose native neighbourhood experienced the atrocities of Bloody Sunday during the War of Independence.³⁹ He is even able to exploit the link for practical, charitable purposes: his plea for financial contribution to help the inhabitants of the Northside affected by the Tolka floods in December 1954 features a paragraph in Irish, in which he mentions that the famous Irish scholar Seán Ó Donnabháin (John O'Donovan, 1806-1861) used to live in North Strand, close to the river. Behan includes several lines from

³⁶ Ó Beacháin, "Mícheál Ó Maoláin," 2.

³⁷ Behan's reflection of this perceived similarity is explored in Brannigan, *Brendan Behan*, 64.

³⁸ Ó Beacháin, "Mícheál Ó Maoláin," 2.

³⁹ Ó Beacháin, "Oighreacht an Ghaeil," 2.

O'Donovan's own poem on the topic of poverty and the shame that follows it, indirectly commenting on the plight of the working-class flood victims (186).⁴⁰ The paragraph, like most of the other instances of Irish in Behan's articles, is left untranslated, being clearly directed at Irish speakers in order to awaken their compassion. Behan's effort to connect Dublin and Irish could be fruitfully put into the context of the contemporaneous debates about the representation of the city in Irish-language literature, which can be traced back to the Irish-language revival itself. Importantly, Philip O'Leary contends that the continuing existence of anti-urban sentiment in Irish-language prose "was outweighed in the 1940s by a more balanced and realistic view of the towns and cities,"⁴¹ and given Behan's involvement with Irish in this decade, he must have been aware of the trend.

A part of Behan's agenda is to correct the idea of the province of Leinster, Irish cities in general, and Dublin in particular, as anglicized places, not fitting ideal images of nationhood. One of his examples is the attitude of some "nationally minded citizens," associated with the Gaelic League, to the old Dublin ballads, deprecating them as "stage-Irish" and "coarse" – a stance that, in Behan's view, made his mother's generation ashamed of singing them (261). Yet, as Behan contends, these ballads were often set to ancient tunes and in some cases preserved the memory of events, such as the Phoenix Park murders of 1882 (261), avoided in more respectable songs. Interestingly, Behan compares the disappearance of the ballads to the trauma of the loss of Irish in the countryside, making the poor parts of Dublin an inverted image of the disappearing Gaeltacht (261).⁴² While Behan's remarks are deliberately provocative and it remains unlikely that the Gaelic League pursued any formal policy on the matter, one can find a corroboration of his view in the approach of the Irish Folklore Commission, which, barring exceptions, deliberately neglected urban areas when collecting folklore.⁴³ As an example of the attitude that Behan was standing against, we may quote the opinion of the Commission's founder, Seámas Ó Duilearga: "Here as elsewhere the shoddy imported culture of the towns pushes back the frontiers of the indigenous homespun culture of the countryside [...]"⁴⁴

⁴⁰ The information as well as the poem are taken from the 1947 book "Síoladóirí" by "Bráthair Críostamhail" (Micheál Mac Confhormaoil) on John O'Donovan and another famous antiquary, Eugene O'Curry. This further testifies to Behan's wide reading of contemporaneous Irish-language literature.

⁴¹ Philip O'Leary, *Writing Beyond the Revival: Facing the Future in Gaelic Prose 1940-1951* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2011), 138.

⁴² See also Brannigan, *Brendan Behan*, 92.

⁴³ Micheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, Ideology, Methodology* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2016), 447-50.

⁴⁴ Ó Duilearga's introduction to Seán Ó Súilleabháin's *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (1942), qtd in Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission*, 447.

As regards Leinster, Behan regrets that there is no explicit reference to the East of the country in the patriotic repertoire, as opposed to “songs, sneers, jeers and cheers” like “the Men of the West, the gallant South, the North Began, and the North Held On.” As a partial remedy, he quotes from Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin’s famous 1798 song “Maidin Luain Cincíse” [Pentecost Monday Morning], in which the poet praises the Leinstermen for igniting the flame of revolution, although admittedly not mentioning the geographical direction (48). To establish further links between Leinster and Irish, Behan even contributes his own occasional poems. In one of them, he praises the beauty of the Waterford dockside on a wet night, which is, in his view, comparable to the traditional postcard spots, “Killarney or the Glens of Antrim” (14). Another one extols the virtues of the Poulaphouca reservoir, completed in 1947:

Eirighidh a huisce nigh na tíre
Báthtar an bhochtanaid id’ dhoimhneacht
Tonntaibh i gcomhacht, fé shríán i gcomhar,
Neart Éireann id rás, a haibhne. (19)⁴⁵

[Arise, o water, wash the land, / Poverty is drowned in your depths, /
Waves in power, constrained in cooperation / Strength of Ireland in your
race, o river. (391)]

The poem, while admittedly not meeting the standard of Behan’s poetry published in *Comhar*, is remarkable for connecting the theme of Leinster with that of welcomed industrialization. The use of the word “comhar,” originally a compound meaning “ploughing together,” then naturally links the Irish tradition to socialist ideas of cooperation that Behan sympathized with.

Connections to France and England

Many of the articles, in general, give an account of Behan’s travels, and Irish is used to make connections to various locations not only within Ireland, but also beyond the sea. An article in *The Irish Press* from 10 July 1954, in order to celebrate the upcoming Bastille Day, gives a wide-ranging and witty overview of French-Irish relations including an Irish-language poem on the Wild Geese, 1798 songs in Irish and English praising Napoleon and France, Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s opinions on

⁴⁵ The spelling here follows the original article: Brendan Behan, “Journey to the Jewel of Wicklow,” *Irish Press*, 25 October 1952, 6. Irish Newspaper Archives.

Wolfe Tone, a list of French politicians with an Irish background, as well as Victor Hugo's attempt to intervene on behalf of an arrested Irish radical (100-103). The article ends with a macaronic greeting, combining French and Irish, Catholicism and secular Republicanism: *Rath Dé Uirthi* [God bless her] – *Vive la France!* (103) In another article, Behan ventures into the realm of comparative literature, noting formal and thematic connections between the famous poem “Mairg a deir olc ris na mnáibh” [Woe to him who slanders women] by the fourteenth-century poet Gearóid Iarla and François Villon's “Ballade contre les mesdisans de la France,” addressing the detractors of women and of France respectively (145). The conclusion is at hand – Irish should not be seen as an isolated marker of nationality, but a language that has, throughout history, interacted with other languages and is a part of a wider European culture.

While the praise of France is still very much in keeping with the creed of a typical Irish nationalist, what is somewhat less expected is Behan's use of Irish in order to create bridges towards Irish Protestants of English descent and England as such. Behan's conciliatory approach to Protestants, especially in Northern Ireland, runs like a thread through a number of the articles. For instance, he remembers the kindness of Protestant neighbours, many of them Orangemen, to his mother, when she and her first husband had to leave Dublin for Belfast after the 1916 Rising (43). He feels at ease singing songs in a Belfast pub full of Orangemen on 11 July (49) and takes delight in reproducing Northern Irish Protestant accents (57-58). Making an unexpected parallel, he observes about a group of Protestant farmers in Portrush that they would not stay “long [...] strangers on Aran” (58), implying their similarity to the Aran fishermen. This recalls his later claim that the Aran Islanders are, in fact, descendants of Cromwell's soldiers.⁴⁶ The idea, apparently taken from Liam O'Flaherty, is not as surprising as it seems: there was an English garrison on Inishmore between 1587 and 1922, most numerous precisely after the Cromwellian invasion, and scientific studies at the end of the 1950s indeed revealed the English ancestry of many of the islanders.⁴⁷

Elsewhere, Behan makes musical links across the boundaries, noting the fact that a number of Orange songs are set to Irish tunes: “I heard the East Belfast come down the Shankill on the Twelfth, playing ‘Rosca Catha na Mumhan’ disguised as ‘The Boyne Water’ and be damn but I nearly fell in behind them and their King Billy banner.” (320) Irish is used in a similar way, using historical connections in order to bridge the religious divide. An article from April 1955, extolling the

⁴⁶ Brendan Behan, *Brendan Behan's Island* (London: Corgi, 1965), 131, discussed in Brannigan, *Brendan Behan*, 46-47.

⁴⁷ Breandán and Ruairí Ó hEithir, *An Aran Reader* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1991), 5-6.

virtues of spring, starts with a passage from the Song of Songs taken out of the Irish translation of the Bible commissioned by the English-born Protestant bishop William Bedell in the seventeenth century (238). Behan then goes on to praise Irish and Scottish Protestants devoted to the advancement of Irish and Scottish Gaelic, putting them on a par with the exiled Franciscan scholars who produced Irish-language literature in Europe in the same period:

Still, I had to believe that Bedell, Ussher, Carswell, O'Donnell, for all that their work was done in quieter places and with government encouragement, were inspired by a careful, torturous love for the Irish language that has left all Irishmen forever in their debt, whether Queen Elizabeth paid them or not.

(239)

The underlying idea is that the two communities (especially their working-class members) have more similarities than differences and that the unification of Ireland is possible – after all, the differences between the North and South in France, Italy, and England are larger than in Ireland, as Behan argues in another essay (369).

The same reconciliatory attitude is palpable in two articles on Behan's visit to London, published in October 1954. The first one is titled “Beannacht leat a Shomhairle Mhic Sheoin,” which translates as “My blessings to you, Samuel Johnson,” with the famous writer's name jokingly given in a Gaelicized form. Most of the text is a compilation of available evidence about Johnson's relationship to Ireland, apparently gleaned from James Boswell's monumental biography *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1791). Behan quotes in full Johnson's letter to the antiquarian Charles O'Connor, where the English man of letters expresses interest in the Irish literary tradition as well as the possible relationship between Welsh, Irish and Basque. In an interesting slip of the pen, Behan renders the sentence “I have long wished that the Irish literature were cultivated,”⁴⁸ as “I have long wished that the Irish *language* were cultivated” (144, emphasis added), making Johnson an Irish-language revivalist *avant la lettre*. He then puts doubt on Johnson's role in the Ossianic controversy, highlighting the fact that the Doctor erroneously believed that “there are no Erse manuscripts” whatsoever (145). Behan refrains from his own judgment concerning the authenticity of Macpherson's poems: “If they were phoney, it's all the more credit to him surely, if the poems were so good.” (145) On the other hand, he values the fact that Johnson did not merely concern himself

⁴⁸ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, vol. 1 (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1906), 195.

with Ireland's glorious past, but expressed his indignation at the mistreatment of Catholics in Ireland during his own time (145).

The immediately following article goes even further in looking for connections between England and Irish. It mentions the use of the language among Irish immigrants in London's East End until the middle of the nineteenth century, as well as Behan's own experience in Leeds where old people, otherwise speaking "the purest Yorkshire," still greeted each other "*Kay kee will too?*"⁴⁹ (147). Subsequently, Behan deplors the fact that many of the immigrants turn their back on their heritage, recounting his experience in a London 'Irish' pub, where he and his friend were rebuked for speaking Irish (148). An exploration of "the Celt and his tracks on the bank of the Thames" follows, with a mention of the fact that the writer Pádraic Ó Conaire, as well as a number of Irish revolutionaries including Michael Collins, lived in London in the first half of the twentieth century (148). Curiously enough, Behan does not present these connections in any antagonistic way whatsoever, simply including them in the common heritage of both London / England and Ireland. According to Behan, this heritage reaches back to the common Celtic roots of the two countries, a theme that he further expands on by tracing the etymology of London to the god Lud and ultimately to Manannán mac Lir (148-49). Although this etymology strikes the modern sceptic as rather fanciful, it is a further example of Behan's reconciliatory attitude towards England, much akin to the views later expounded on the pages of *Borstal Boy* and other texts.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Behan's journalism, despite its necessary sketchiness and occasional nature, offers a surprisingly modern and nuanced attitude towards the Irish language. A type of revivalism distinct from state ideology is often hinted at – a revivalism that maintains strong linguistic and emotional links with Gaeltacht areas such as the Aran Islands, but at the same time embraces modernity and the city as its natural environment. It welcomes heteroglossia, multilingualism and hybridity, and is content to exist alongside other cultural expressions that were frowned upon by prominent nationalist narratives, such as various forms of Hiberno-English and the Dublin ballad tradition. It is also distinctly non-sectarian, anti-authoritarian and working-class, as seen in Behan's accounts of the Irish-language tradition of Dublin's Northside.

⁴⁹ An anglicized pronunciation of the phrase "*Cén chaoi a bhfuil tú?*," meaning "How are you?"

⁵⁰ See Brannigan, *Brendan Behan*, 19-21 *et passim*.

Behan’s approach to Irish could be, perhaps, most fruitfully grasped in spatial terms. In contrast to those who would like to see the language as a utopia (premodern, precolonial, revivalist, national or other), Behan presents it as a Third Space, the recognition of which, in Homi Bhabha’s words, “may open the way to conceptualize an *international culture*, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*.”⁵¹ In Behan’s journalistic prose, Irish, despite its minoritized status, functions as such a hybrid interface and is thus able to bridge religious and political divides, as well as reach outside of Ireland.

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⁵¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 38. Emphasis in the original.

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