

The Thin Man

An Interview with Brendan Behan

Sylvère Lotringer

I did this interview in Dublin in January 1961; it has never been published before.¹ At the time I was twenty-three and my spoken English was still rudimentary.

- 1 The interview was transcribed by the writer Mark von Schlegell; footnotes by the editors.
- 2 The well-known poet Derek Mahon.
- 3 *Les Lettres françaises*, no. 1022, 26 mars au 1er avril, 1964.
- 4 The Théâtre National Populaire at the Palais de Chaillot facing the Eiffel Tower was a major avant-garde institution at the time and a huge theatre.

I was writing regularly for *Les Lettres françaises*, a weekly literary magazine close to the French Communist Party, but somewhat more liberal; my boss was Louis Aragon. I was also very involved with the students' movement against the French war in Algeria. I had come to Ireland to gather material for a long essay on James Joyce for the twentieth anniversary of his death. In Dublin I met with friends of Joyce, like Padraic Colum, who graciously took me for a tour of Eccles Street, the National Library, the bars mentioned in *Ulysses*, and the famous tower. That was, of course, long before the regular Joyce 'tour' had been initiated.

Behan was a well-known figure in Paris then. *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage* had been a resounding success on the stage. His *Borstal Boy* had just been published in French and I was about to review it. I decided to get some background information directly from Behan. He was kind enough to meet me at his home on a Sunday morning. He seemed a little dazed at first, although already smoking a fat cigar. We sat in his living room, which looked a bit disorderly. On the floor there was a half-eaten carcass of an animal, a chicken probably, lying on a plate.

Behan's eyes were red and puffed up, his face a bit crumpled. He must have stayed up pretty late the night before.

Our conversation wasn't exactly meant to be an interview, although it turned out to be one. It was a strange interview really. Although Behan was full of goodwill, he was obviously trying *not* to talk about *Borstal Boy*, which he didn't seem to remember very well. As a consequence, he kept introducing anecdotes about the history of Ireland, the IRA, the Communist Party, his years in prison, and the time he spent in France as a young writer. I didn't mind a bit. These digressions became the main story, regularly framed by the mostly unanswered questions, circling back time and again to where we began. So the exchange ends up having some kind of a shape, a digressive structure *à la* Sterne or Diderot. While in Dublin I stayed with a fellow student, Derek, at Trinity College. Derek accompanied me to Behan's house and shows up occasionally during the interview.²

When Behan died in 1964, I put together an *hommage* to him for *Les Lettres françaises*.³ It had a short piece on Behan by Sean O'Casey on the front page, and inside, a short note by Joan Littlewood, the director and producer, who in effect had made Behan famous by her productions of *The Quare Fellow* (1956; with Gerry Raffles) and *The Hostage* (1958), and a longer piece by Georges Wilson, then director of the Théâtre National Populaire (TNP).⁴ It also included the translation of a

Brendan Behan,
summer 1952.
Photograph:
Daniel Farson/
Hulton Archive/
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scene from *The Great House*, Behan's last play (written for BBC radio). I wrote two different pieces for the issue, one a general presentation of Behan's work and life, 'Laissons hurler les Loups ...' [Let the Wolves Howl ...], and the other 'L'Homme maigre' [The Thin Man]. This latter piece, from which our present title is taken, included some quotations, in French, from the 1961 interview.

From 'L'Homme maigre' (1964):

Il est assis dans son fauteuil, col ouvert. Il n'arrête pas de parler, passant outre sa toux et un léger bégaiement. Ma présence lui fait plaisir. Elle lui rappelle la France. Sorti de prison, il n'a eu qu'un désir, gagner Paris. Il y arrive en 1948, sans travail, sans argent. Il me cite Emerson: «La plupart des hommes vivent dans un état de désespoir tranquille». En privé, continue-t-il, je suis une personne

plutôt morose. «Je n'ai rien d'un exhibitionniste. Je préférerais de loin être tranquille. Je me trouve placé dans une situation qui ne me plaît qu'à moitié. Vous savez, dans chaque homme gros, il y a un homme maigre qui cherche à s'échapper.»

He is seated in his armchair, his collar wide open. He speaks in a husky, halting voice which occasionally catches and starts again. He's clearly pleased to have me here; I remind him of France. When he got out of prison, he had wanted one thing only — to get to Paris. He arrived there, without a job or money, in 1948. At one point he quotes Emerson: 'Most men live a life of quiet desperation.' In private, he assures me, he's a rather gloomy person. 'I am not at all an exhibitionist. I wish I were. I find myself in a situation I don't exactly like. You know, inside each fat man there's a thin man who's trying to escape.'



In Paris with a poster for the 1959 French adaptation of his play *The Quare Fellow*. Photograph: Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

5 *I Knock at the Door* (1939) was the first volume of O'Casey's *Autobiographies* 6 vols. (1939–54).

Sylvère Lotringer: *How did you come to write Borstal Boy?*

Brendan Behan: Actually, I forget the fucking thing.

Did you enjoy writing it?

If you write a book and it goes off while you're working on it, it's the happiest time of your life. A writer will never spend better time than when he's working. Provided he's got money, he's going to get food and he's going to get a certain amount of sex. He doesn't even need a lot of that. Proust said one time that the two greatest allies that a writer has are chastity and water.

You had water?

Gotta have a woman knockin' round the place. Well, it's preferable. Say if you were two blokes about nineteen or twenty you'd probably get on OK together. But usually a woman is better. I got no prejudices one way or the other. But you got to have heat. You've got to have a reasonable amount of drink, if you're able to drink. Yeah, when I started to write I was OK. I could drink a good jar. Good to live in France — in Paris — because you meet other writers.

It's only in Paris that one meets writers?

A young writer needs a small time in France because, first of all, he doesn't know whether he's a writer at all or not. I mean, coming home and announcing to your friends that you're a writer is rather like changing your name. All of a sudden you come in and say, 'Listen you guys, from now on my name is Chuck' or 'I want to be called Lefty.' Well, it's a bit embarrassing at the start, isn't it? The same way when you're a writer, you've got to get everybody used to your being a writer. Someone says to you, 'What are you?' You say, 'Well, I'm a writer.' I never said it. I just had people say it for me. Actually, I didn't think I'd ever be anything else. I decided long since that I would not be anything else.

You wrote Borstal Boy in France then?

Sure, some of it in France. I wrote some of it at the Hotel Louisiane, at the corner of the rue de Bucy. And this proprietor — the patron of the hotel — was a great soccer man. He was very much interested in association football — what you call football or soccer. He was very sympathetic to my work, which he couldn't read of course. But I wrote it then, all over the place.

How did you come to write it?

The principal difficulty in writing a book was getting some place to write it if you didn't have any money. I didn't have any dough and 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. But how did I come to write it? Don't know how I came to write it ... I just wrote it, that's all.

Was it difficult to start?

Well, I'll tell you, I made a number of false starts. I started it off by writing some old bullshit, by writing an orderly progression of events in time. I think my writing was fundamentally influenced by Joyce. But the writing of *Borstal Boy*, in form, I think, was finally decided by my reading Sean O'Casey's *Autobiographies* ... One of them, *I Knock at the Door*, where he brings in characters and sometimes they've got phoney names and sometimes they've got real names.⁵ He doesn't worry very much about time; he just tells you the story. And tells you what happened as he imagines it had happened. O'Casey's a great man. O'Casey could have done anything in the world of letters. I can't think of anyone anyplace to compare O'Casey to, except possibly Victor Hugo, whom I don't read very much. Hugo was born in rue de Florentine. Which is up by the Luxembourg — let me see, my memory! — in rue Pascal, I think. It's in the middle of the rue Saint-Jacques, you know it?

The fascist militia from the Law School is further up in rue Saint-Jacques and we keep fighting them. The police are in on their side. They want to keep Algeria French.

Well, Hugo was born there in what had been a convent which was sacked. They did away with the convent during the Revolution. I'm all for convents, but if you can't have a revolution without sacking convents, well then, sack the convents. That's hard, but it's fair.

You left Ireland just after they let you loose?

Sure. I was out for a bit. I was released in 1946 in Ireland. Then I was arrested in England in 1947 and I got four months, because somebody had escaped from jail. A man called Richard Cohen, alias Timmons. Or Timmons alias Cohen.⁶ I came to France at the end of '48 or '49, I forget which. But I had been to France on little trips before. I'd been to Rouen on horse boats. I used to go with sailors. They knew me — used to give me a lift over. But I finally arrived in the Latin Quarter and I didn't know any French. I said to a fellow, 'Where's the Latin Quarter?' He said, 'Comment?' I said, 'Where's the Latin Quarter?' I had never learned any French at school so I didn't know any. Finally, I looked along the métro to see if it said *Quartier Latin*. I'd have probably called it at the time 'Quarter Latin.' I didn't see anything, but I did see Saint-Michel. Everyone knows Saint-Michel. So I got a métro. I think it was ten francs at the time. How much is it now?

Forty-five francs.

Well, it was ten francs then. I got my ten francs worth of métro and I came off at Saint-Michel. And finally I dug up an Englishman and an American. I might knock the English occasionally but I like having them around. I might knock also the Americans. As I'm on the subject of

America, I might say that a great number in France think that being anti-American is a leftist thing, that they're of the *Gauche* if they're anti-American. But as a matter of fact most French anti-Americanism is like English anti-Americanism. It's founded on the fact that the Americans have got more money and have got better manners in a hotel than Europeans. And also they're more sophisticated. A Frenchman will go across to England and he says there's nothing to eat there. There are *plenty* of things to eat in England. And in Ireland. They've got salmon; they've got chicken; they've got beef; they've got mutton — if you're willing to pay for it. Of course, anyone who says they can't eat better in France than they can anywhere else has a hole in their head. But if you fuck around in London, you can get it. London's a big city. Soho's a good spot. You can get food and you can get wine. You can get any goddamn wine if you know anything about wine. Which a great number of French people, of course, don't.

While in France, what did you do for a living?

I worked with French housepainters. The best — the working people of Paris and the housepainters especially. I was a member of the *section bâtiment*, Confédération Générale du Travail. It was in the Place de la République. I remember I was amused by the fact that they were all communists. They had *L'Humanité* and sold it all over the place. And if I went into a French trade union office and they were not selling *L'Humanité*, I'd think it was the wrong fucking office; I'd think it wasn't the proper union. I'm not saying I agree with everything there is in *L'Humanité*. I think a lot of it is silly. A lot of the stuff they write about the United States is obvious bullshit. And they're only playing the game of the French bourgeoisie and the French petit-bourgeois, who hate Americans because Americans are people with dough. I mean

- 6 Richard Timmons, Dublin-born participant in IRA bombing campaign of 1939; sentenced to fourteen years in November 1939 for possession of explosives; escaped from Wakefield Prison in 1947; dismissed from IRA in 1950; further estranged from republicans by writing a series of articles for a British newspaper that claimed to be an authentic account of the bombing campaign.
- 7 Members of Behan's social circle in Paris and Dublin. Michael Heron, associate editor of *Envoy: An Irish Review of Literature and Art* (1949–51); also translator and author of travelogues and books of curiosities. Gaius Stephen Crist, hard-living American; studied in Trinity College Dublin under the GI Bill in the late 1940s; remained in Dublin into the 1950s, where he became ubiquitous in the city's literary circles; the model for Sebastian Dangerfield, the main character in J. P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* (1955).



In a Dublin bar, early 1950s.
 Photograph: Picture Post/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

they're successful capitalists — a few are unsuccessful ones — and they come to France if they go anywhere else. They're courteous and civil to staff in hotels. At least, any of them I've ever seen ... They're a little bit loquacious some of them. Mostly a kindly and a well-disposed people. Anyway, they've got *L'Humanité* everywhere in sight at the CGT. So I went out and I started to work and by this time I had a room with a man called Michael Heron, an Englishman, and a man called Gaius Crist, an American.⁷ And while I'm exceedingly fond of the French, I orbited principally amongst English-speaking French people and native speakers of English in the *Quartier Latin*. Because I'm not Samuel Beckett, I don't love to be funny in two languages. Though I *am* funny in two — I'm funny in Irish and I'm funny in English. But anyway, I worked for a little while as a housepainter. Drank anything I got. Wasn't much.

You liked living in France?

The French system is OK for the French. If you've got a home, if you've got a wife and kids, you don't do too bad. The standard of living is good, as good as anywhere I know. You've got cheap charges and allowances. You've got cheap travel on the métro. Once you're established. Once you're a citizen and you've got a house and so forth and so on. But anyway — about *Borstal Boy*. You want to know about writing it?

No ...

So I'll tell you how to write it. First, to write you've got to have some place to fucking write. You've gotta have paper, you've gotta have ink.

How did you happen to belong to a terrorist organization to start with ...

I was not a member of a terrorist organisation. I was a member of the

Irish Republican Army. It's not a terrorist organization.

I mean ...

The Deuxième Bureau is a terrorist organization.⁸ The Gestapo was a terrorist organization.

It may be true, but that's state terrorism.

So how did I become a member of the Irish revolutionary movement?

Yes. That's what I meant to say.

Well, my grandfather was a member of an organization called the Invincibles, who were peculiar. They used to run off to France whenever they were on the lam — when they were on the run. They did what was called the 'Park Murders'. They stabbed Lord Frederick Cavendish who was a Chief Secretary of Ireland and the other Chief Secretary, a fellow called Burke. They bumped them off in the Phoenix Park in eighteen hundred and eighty-three.⁹ The day before there had been fifteen people, including a child of twelve, murdered in the West of Ireland by England's Royal Irish Constabulary.¹⁰ There wasn't fucking anything said about that, of course, but there were great tears of lamentation for Lord Cavendish — Lord Frederick — and for Mr. Burke. My great grandfather was in the revolutionary movement, the Irish republican movement, which was founded by a Protestant — by a Presbyterian — by people who were fundamentally deists — some of them were under the influence of the French Revolution — by Wolfe Tone, who was a Protestant — by Robert Emmet, whose brother's grave I saw in New York City when I was there.¹¹ And it was a republican movement. My people were republicans; they were socialists. They still are. Brother of mine was a member of the National Executive of the British Communist Party. He went to Hungary —

I don't know the rights and wrongs of the Hungarian situation — but he gave an interview to *The Daily Express*, and then left it. I don't know that he really cares about Hungary, about Russia, about the ordinary people anywhere. I don't think he knows ... I don't think he's sufficiently intelligent to have any heart. I don't think my brother should have done that.¹²

You'd like Ireland to be a socialist country?

To me the ideal is a socialist thirty-two county republic. It's a very old one; it's not new. Our flag, the flag of the Irish Republic — it's the national flag now — the orange, white and green came from revolutionary France in 1848. It came from the Communards and was brought here by a man named Thomas Francis Meagher who, incidentally, became a big general on the Union side in the American Civil War later on. He led something called the Pennsylvania Line.¹³ But my uncle who wrote the Irish national anthem also wrote a song for the October Revolution in 1917. Radio Éireann was doing a radio programme about him here. Now he's an accepted part of what they call in England 'the Establishment', but they didn't give him very much when he was alive.¹⁴ They gave him a military funeral when he was dead — they gave him a state funeral — and they repaid him for his long devotion to Ireland by having all the traffic lights green for the funeral. Em, I should go and eat something ... (*Goes out the back. A woman's voice can be heard in the kitchen. Behan returns wiping his mouth and sits back in his chair. He's still puffing his cigar.*) Now about this book ...

Un Peuple Partisan. *That's the French title for Borstal Boy.*

By the way, what does *peuple partisan* mean? I know what *peuple* means — means 'the people'. And a *partisan* means 'a partisan'...

8 Deuxième Bureau, the French secret service.

9 Lord Frederick Cavendish, newly-appointed Chief Secretary of Ireland, and Thomas H. Burke, Under Secretary, were stabbed to death on 6 May 1882 close to the Viceregal Lodge in the Phoenix Park, Dublin. The assassins were members of the Invincibles, a small republican grouping. James Carey, a member of the group, turned informer. His information led to the execution of five men in summer 1883; eight others were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. Carey sailed for Australia but was assassinated off the coast of South Africa. His assassin was hanged in London that December. These events loom large in oral histories of Dublin and feature in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

10 On 5 May 1882, the day before the assassination of Cavendish and Burke, the RIC fired into a group of boys in Ballina, county Mayo, fatally wounding twelve-year-old Patrick Melody, a member of a children's band.

11 Thomas Addis Emmet (1764–1827), physician and barrister; United Irishman; brother of Robert Emmet (1778–1803); arrested before 1798 Rising and exiled after it; distinguished lawyer in New York; buried in St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery; there is an obelisk commemorating him in the graveyard of St. Paul's Chapel, Broadway.

12 Brian Behan (1928–2002), activist and author; convicted of juvenile delinquency and sent to the Christian Brothers' Industrial School in Artane, Dublin; emigrated to Britain to work as labourer; joined the British Communist Party; travelled extensively in communist states but split from the party over the Soviet invasion of Hungary; lectured in media studies at the London School of Printing; published works include *With Breast Expanded* (1964), *Mother of All the Behans* (1984) and *Kathleen* (1988).

- 13 Behan here confuses the revolutionaries of 1848 and the Communards of 1871. Thomas Francis Meagher (1823–67), leading figure in the Young Ireland movement; brought the tricolour from Paris in 1848 and adapted it as the flag of Irish nationality; transported to Tasmania after the 1848 Rising; escaped to the US; led the Irish Brigade for the Union in the Civil War; appointed governor of Montana; drowned in obscure circumstances in Missouri River.
- 14 Peadar Kearney (1883–1942), housepainter and songwriter; worked behind the scenes in the Abbey Theatre; fought in the 1916 Rising and was afterwards interned; he wrote many well-known songs, including ‘The Tri-coloured Ribbon’ and ‘The Soldier’s Song’ (1911), adopted as the national anthem of Ireland in 1922.
- 15 Fianna Éireann or Na Fianna, the youth organization of the IRA.
- 16 Tommy Woods (1919–36), Irish republican and member of the International Brigade; killed in action near Córdoba.
- 17 The Blueshirts, popular name for the Army Comrades Association (est. 1932), later the National Guard (1933–36), a half-cocked fascist organization associated with the new Fine Gael party; led by Eoin O’Duffy (1892–1944), retired Free State general and ex-Garda commissioner; O’Duffy’s theatrics became an embarrassment to the party leadership, which ousted him in 1935; the following year some seven hundred supporters followed him to Spain to fight on behalf of Franco.
- 18 Behan may here be referring, *inter alia*, to Diana Mitford (1910–2003), wife of Bryan Walter Guinness (1905–92); married in 1929, Mitford deserted Guinness for British fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley (1896–1980); married Mosley in 1936 in the home of Joseph Goebbels with Adolf Hitler among the guests; interned in Britain during World War II; lived in Ireland before settling in Paris; editor of right-wing journal *The European* and author of several books.

I wish English always were that easy.

(Behan starts singing a full-throated version of the ‘Song of the Partisans’: La-la-la-la-la ... La-la-la-la-la-la ...) We were starting about the book ...

... and the IRA ... In France they say that the title of Borstal Boy is a bit disingenuous because you were in fact an IRA prisoner.

Oh yeah, well, I joined an organization called the Fianna, which was a boys’ organization, in 1932, when I was nine.¹⁵

You joined the IRA at nine? That’s kind of early.

It’s a youth organization! The only youth organization anywhere you could join except you joined the boy scouts, which were a British and an imperialist organization where you salute the flag and all. I don’t see what else you could join if you were a kid. I was in the Fianna until I was fourteen. In 1937 a lot of friends of mine went and fought in the International Brigade in Spain. One of them, a boy called Tommy Woods, was two years older than myself when he went away. He was sixteen. He was killed when he was seventeen in Spain.¹⁶

My own uncle was killed in Spain too in 1936.

The people who were opposed to us, called the Blueshirts, they sent away people to fight for Franco.¹⁷ They didn’t do any fighting. They’re the only military expedition in history that came back with more fucking men than they went away with. They went away with six hundred and they came back with six hundred and six because they picked up some Irish fellows who just wanted to come home. The Spanish used to call them *los turistas irlandeses*, the Irish tourists. They used to call General O’Duffy, who was their leader, ‘the flying postman’. It must be remembered that fascism in Ireland had a very interesting

origin. It was largely supported by the British elements, supported very heavily by the Protestants, I’m sorry to say. Naturally, they got support from the Catholic priests — from some of them; some of them were against. But I’d say the hierarchy, I’d say the bishops were for it. Which is an unholy alliance of people — some of whom are friends of mine. The Guinness organization backed it with money. The big industrialists — it happens that in Ireland they are mainly Protestants — they didn’t mind Catholic fascism, providing it was the same as the French bourgeoisie under Hitler.¹⁸

Now tell me, when did you first think of becoming a writer?

Well, if you look up the genealogies ... It’s a contradictory feature of my character that I’m a great snob. My snobbery takes peculiar forms. For instance, one of the greatest men I ever saw in my life was André Marty. He was the secretary of the French Communist Party. I heard him speak in that Colombes Stadium. I didn’t know what he was saying, but he was a good speaker and seemed to me to be a good man. Is he alive or dead? I don’t know. I heard Jacques Duclos speak. He struck me as a good fellow — a fellow with a lot of humour — a very funny fellow. I heard de Gaulle speak at a place called Avenue d’Orléans, now the Avenue du Général Leclerc. At least I was at the opposition meeting. De Gaulle’s not a bad guy; he’s a good fellow.¹⁹ He’s trying to do the best he can. In some ways, I think the Communists ought to give him a rest — they ought to leave him alone. But eh, the Communists ought to give themselves a rest sometimes too.

Have you ever thought of living in France permanently?

I don’t know what country I could live in except here; I only live here because they can’t ... Well, they treat me OK here. The prime minister insults me, of course.

Because of what you wrote?

Well, to get back to that book ...

You wanted to say something about genealogies ...

My name in Irish means ‘people who tend bees’. The Behans are an ancient literary family from south Leinster, a few miles south of Dublin. But they were never able to produce anything. The best-known member of this clan is, eh, Brendan Behan. It’s the first piece of evidence you fuckin’ got that we were a literary family. (*Sylvère laughs.*) Well, on my mother’s side, my grandmother wrote and recited Gaelic and English verse. She was, of course, a native speaker of Irish. She came from county Meath.²⁰ And my father ... It’s a very strange thing, the heaviest concentration of Roman Catholics in the entire world — that is to say Catholics that work at it, as the Yank says; people who go to mass every Sunday — is to be found in North Dublin. I never met a priest from North Dublin ... Well, I met a priest geographically from North Dublin, but not by what is famous in literature, in *Ulysses* and in the plays of Sean O’Casey. I never met one person from it who was a priest. I never met a person from it who was a policeman. I never met anyone from it who was a schoolteacher. As they say, there’s snobbery in hell, and there’s snobbery in Ireland.

I assume you were born among the upper-classes ...

We were from tenement houses. My father is a very witty, smart man. He is a housepainter. And he used to read a lot. My uncle Peadar Kearney, my mother’s brother, wrote a lot. He wrote songs. Some of them have become the songs you hear Irish people singing all over the world, no matter where you go. At least everywhere in the world I’ve ever been where there were Irish people. Ordinary Irish people. I don’t mean

diplomats. I don’t mean the type of people who go to the Sorbonne. They probably wouldn’t know very much about him.

I didn’t know much about him, I’m sorry to say. But then I go to the Sorbonne. Actually you can’t be too snobbish about it. Anyone graduating from high school can be admitted there.

The ordinary Joes, anywhere they go, even the Protestants from the north-east, from the Shankill Road, the ordinary Belfast worker, if he gets drunk enough, and gets amongst a lot of his countrymen from other parts of Ireland, he sings ‘Glory-o, Glory-o, to the Bold Fenian Men’, which is a song written by my uncle and was in a film called *Down with the Rio Grande*.²¹ I don’t know whether he got any money out of it. I didn’t know as much about Hollywood then as I do now. I would have seen he got more.

So you were born in culture after all. There always were books around. That’s how you got the idea of writing Borstal Boy?

Anyway, I was always surrounded by books, although we lived in the slum. My father used to steal books, mostly from convent libraries, or from the libraries of such Protestants as can read. I don’t like employers. And since a lot of my employers happened to be Protestant, I didn’t like a lot of Protestants. The Protestants produced great writers — Yeats, Sam Beckett and others too numerous to mention, as the saying has it. But most of the Protestant people around Dublin that had any money were business people who didn’t read anything except the Bible and the bank-book. Mostly reactionary in politics and snobbish. Kindly for the most part, except if you were working for them.

You kind of stole your way into literature?

I read Rabelais when I was very small, about Pantagruel coming out of his mother’s

19 André Marty (1886–1956), naval engineer and communist activist; led a mutiny against French intervention in the Bolshevik Revolution; involved in the establishment of the International Brigade to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Jacques Duclos (1896–1975), quondam editor of Communist Party’s underground journal *L’Humanité*; organizer of communist resistance group in World War II. Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970), leader of Free French in London during war years; later conservative statesman and president of the fifth republic, 1958–69. De Gaulle ended the French war in Algeria by signing the peace treaty at Evian with the Front de Libération Nationale in 1962.

20 Kathleen Kearney (1889–1984), known in her later years as a singer and broadcaster; she had seven children; twice married, both her husbands — Jack Furlong (d.1918) and Stephen Behan (c.1888–1967) — fought in the 1916 Rising; she was a messenger for the insurgents. Stephen Behan, housepainter, republican; imprisoned, 1922–24.

21 *Rio Grande* (1950), directed by John Ford, starring John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara, writing credits James Warner Bellah and James Kevin Mc Guinness.

22 Thomas Davis (1814–45), native of Mallow, county Cork; nationalist poet, songwriter and journalist; co-founder of *The Nation* and key member of the Young Ireland group that developed around it; critic of Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic nationalism, attitude to higher education and venality.

- 23 Patrick J. Bourke (1883–1932), actor-manager and playwright; produced one of the first full-length films made in Ireland, *Ireland a Nation* (1913).
- 24 Dionysius Lardner Boucicault (1820–90), Irish-American actor, actor-manager and famous dramatist; his best-known melodramas include *The Colleen Bawn* (1860) and *The Shaughbraun* (1875).
- 25 Behan went to England in 1939 to participate in an IRA bombing campaign; arrested within hours of disembarking at Liverpool, he was sentenced to three years in borstal in February 1940. Deported to Ireland in November 1941, he was arrested again in April 1942 for firing at a Special-Branch detective after an Easter Rising commemoration in Glasnevin Cemetery; sentenced to fourteen years penal servitude, he spent four years in the Curragh before his release in 1946 as part of a general amnesty for IRA prisoners. He served a short sentence in Strangeways prison for his participation in an IRA jail-break in 1947 and was jailed for a month in Ireland in 1948 for a breach of the peace.
- 26 Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (1810–65), novelist; works include *Mary Barton* (1847), *Cranford* (1853) and *North and South* (1855).
- 27 Possibly James Hadley Chase's *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (1939), a crime novel popular in Britain during World War II, despite its alleged fascist sympathies.
- 28 Frank Harris (1856–1931), Irish journalist and biographer who had a brilliant career in London; his *Oscar Wilde* appeared in 1916. Lady Jane Francesca Wilde (1826–96), poet; published under the name Speranza.
- fuckin' ear or whatever he did. I remember my father stole a copy of Rabelais in two volumes. It was a beautiful edition. And he stole it from a Dominican monastery at Castleknock. And he brought it out under his coat. I said, 'How did you get away with it?' 'How?' he says, 'Those fuckin' druids' — which was his familiar way of referring to the clergy of his Church — 'they'd never suspect that a housepainter would take Rabelais. If I pinched a bottle of whiskey, they'd go for it quick enough.' But they didn't think a housepainter, an ordinary Joe, was going to knock off Rabelais. So that was only one book. He had the *Decameron* of Giovanni Boccaccio. My mother used to read his Thomas Davis, who was a great Protestant patriot who came originally from Cork.²² The only thing I can say about him as a poet is that he never used the word *thee* or *thou* or *thine* or *thy*. I mean he had a sufficiently good knowledge of the English language as she is spoke not to give us any thees or thys or thous. But there were always books around where I was. And even the business of royalties was familiar to me because then my mother's sister was married to a man called P. J. Bourke, who ran the Queen's Theatre in Dublin.²³ He used to put on this great playwright ... was perhaps the most famous playwright in the English speaking world — which is to say in the theatre generally — about the year 1900. He was a man called Boucicault. It was a French name because he was a Dublin man, but, like many another good Dublin man, he was of Huguenot descent. We called him 'Busycot'.²⁴ But my uncle used to put on his plays and he used to put on revues, sometimes French revues which were very popular. I'm fucked if I know why because the French don't know how to dance. They don't get a good line number. You don't get good chorus girls from France. You get them from the north of England ... from Birmingham and places like that. You won't get any French girls to lift up their legs in unison. And the real test of a line number is that when one cunt opens, they should all open. When one cunt

shuts, they should all shut. Up down, *dum da dum dar um da*. (*He sings*.)

Derek: *When you were in prison, what did you read?*

Anything I could get. When I was in prison ... Prison and borstal, Derek, are two separate transactions.²⁵ When you were in prison, you got whatever books the librarian cared to leave in to you. When you were in borstal, I read Sean O'Casey; I read Bernard Shaw — I stick pretty close to my own land's men, you know — I read Dickens; a woman called Mrs. Gaskell.²⁶ I read a book from Miss Blandish, which was discovered to be a fraud, snare, a delusion, a very silly book.²⁷ We'd a good library there. I read Frank Harris's *Life of Wilde* — the first time I discovered what Oscar Wilde had done. I'd always thought he was an Irish rebel because his mother — Speranza was the name she wrote under — she was an old rebel.²⁸ Wilde was an Irish gentleman, as he said himself. I can see no reason for an Irish gentleman being put into prison by a lot of fucking base-born troglodytes from the London suburbs except it was for being an Irish rebel. And I suppose he was a rebel, of sorts. But then I don't like Wilde's writing very much, I'm afraid.

Derek: *Reading in prison did sort of stimulate your desire to write?*

No, I always wanted to be a writer. When I was a kid and saw a piece of paper on the street I'd kick it in front of me so it stopped there and read it before I'd walk on. The idea that I became a writer in jail is a fallacious one. Nobody becomes a writer in prison. The only kind of writer you become in prison is a bad writer. There was one book written in jail, *Pilgrim's Progress*. It was not a part of my education as a child. I was raised a Catholic and a Red. There was no place for pilgrims and progress in my childhood, I'm happy to say. I read the fucking thing afterwards. They should have stuck him back in Bedford prison for writing it.

In much of your work, The Hostage, for instance, prisons always seem to be very present.

Well, the world is a prison for anyone who hasn't got any money. You know what Albert Camus said? He said, 'The duty of the writer is not to those who are in power, but to those that are subject to them.'²⁹ In the same way, an awful lot of people go to prison and it doesn't seem to fundamentally matter much what you go to prison for. It's not an important point. People get into jail for all sorts of situations. I mean, I don't try to shed tears for everybody in prison. The troubles of Mr. Eichmann, for instance, weigh very lightly on my shoulders. I go to sleep quite well and sleep without worrying very much about what is happening to him.³⁰ But a great number of people get into jail as kind of an inconvenience. A great number of people live in the shadow of imprisonment for one reason or another.

And you seem to have had plenty of reasons yourself. Good ones too.

Oh jails, workhouses and whorehouses.

Same sort of things?

Oh no, I should hope not the same sort of things. But actually, *Borstal Boy* was a very innocent kind of a book. It's as innocent as it seems to be. A lot of kids in together; they were all healthy kids because they had to be healthy to go to that particular place. They had the normal sort of fear and wonder of kids. They had also the bravado by which we all live. Man lives in a strange environment. He hasn't been here very long. He does the best he can. Does better all the time. Old people are not so decrepit as they used to be when I was a kid and I don't see any children with bare feet. I know tourists tell me, or people who've been to Ireland on a visit tell me, that they met lots of barefoot children. I didn't meet any barefoot children — not in a long time. I never went barefoot myself, incidentally, but plenty of kids

round our way did. I'm also told you meet a lot of beggars in Dublin. But I've seen lots of beggars in Paris; I've seen lots of them in New York. I've seen people sleeping on the métro in Paris. And the only reason you don't see them in London is they're not allowed to sleep on the métro. But there are beggars in London and plenty of them. And there are plenty of them that sleep out in Hyde Park. But ... em ... you were asking me something about ...

About Borstal Boy ...

Eh, the sympathies of any writer are actually with the world at large. The world at large is not such a happy place as it might be. But these kids were healthy. Sexually, of course, they masturbated, which, of course, everybody does at that age. I think the only people who don't masturbate are people who've been married for a good number of years. They sort of don't bother with it. Not because it's distasteful, but just because it doesn't fucking mean anything. But at that age, of course, they do. Mr. Justice Frankfurt and Mr. Justice Brandeis went to a lecture by Kinsey — this is the story I was going to tell you — and Mr. Justice Brandeis, who seems to be a bit of an old ballocks, comes out and he said, 'Frankfurt, this man says that all American boys between the ages of thirteen and twenty-three they masturbate. I never masturbated.' 'Well,' says Frankfurt, 'You missed a damned good thing.'³¹ But there was nothing very physical about sex in borstal. Sometimes fellows got into bed with other fellows. But once they got into bed they didn't exactly fucking know what to do. They didn't know what way to go about whatever they were after. And once or twice a fellow fell asleep and another bloke joined his bed and was caught. Of course, he was caught. Ah, they didn't make a big song and dance over it. How do you expel him? (*Laughs.*) Told him never to do it again, or some fucking thing. I think fellows used to pull each other off and things of that sort. But mostly they were fond of each other,

29 Albert Camus (1913–60), novelist, essayist and playwright; awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957; delivered a much-admired acceptance speech on literature, truth and liberty. Behan here paraphrases: 'By definition [the artist] cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it.'

30 Adolf Eichmann (1906–62), Gestapo official; played a key role in the extermination of Jews and Gypsies; escaped from an American internment camp in 1946 and fled to Argentina; identified and abducted by Israeli secret service agents in May 1960; his trial in Jerusalem in summer 1961 attracted international attention; executed in May 1962.

31 Alfred C. Kinsey (1894–1956), biologist; led pioneering research project at Indiana University on human sexuality, the findings appearing in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). Louis Brandeis (1856–1941), Associate Justice of US Supreme Court; Felix Frankfurter (1882–1965), appointed to the US Supreme Court in 1938.

32 Behan is playing here on *foi*, faith and *foie*, liver.

rather like young animals. They fought — not so much as they do in ordinary schools, because they were a tough lot of boys. The first thing you learned was to keep your hands down, because if you didn't keep your hands down some fellow would bang you one in the fucking head. The real way of fighting, of course, was you struck a man with your head and then you kneed him in the ballocks at the same time. This was known as the Knee-and-Nut. But they were a good crowd of kids. A lot of them were

Cockneys, and Cockneys are from a big city. It's not much of a city, but it's a city. It's a big expanse of built-up area. They were very kind people, very witty and very funny, very entertaining. They wouldn't be entertaining to me now, but they were entertaining to me then. They were all kids. They were healthy. I won't say they were happy. I don't know who's fucking happy. I'm happy. Sometimes. The French say *question de foi*. Well, we all are good livers; don't know we have much faith.³²



With theatre director Joan Littlewood (1914–2002) on the set of *The Hostage*, Theatre Royal, London, 1958; Littlewood's 1956 production (with Gerry Raffles) of *The Quare Fellow* brought Behan critical acclaim and celebrity. Photograph: Joe Waldorf/The Observer/Getty Images.

So there was nothing much wrong with borstal itself?

Well, broadly speaking, I was as happy in borstal as — I don't say in prison, prison was where I was when I was brought in first — but broadly speaking I was as happy in borstal as I was anywhere else. And, you know, a lot of them — it was very sad — a lot of them were killed during the war. Quite a number of them. I think a bigger proportion than any similar group of people.

What's the experience you remember most vividly from all your years in prison or in borstal?

All my years? I don't remember. People forget; they don't remember. Except I remember professionally. If you were to stick a thousand dollars under my nose, or two hundred and fifty pounds, I'd remember quick enough. That'd jog my fucking memory. But it's an effort. I remember I had great health. I used to box at nine stone and two. I wasn't a very good boxer. Gene Tunney, who was perhaps the greatest boxer that ever lived, was the only man who ever looked at me and accepted the fact.³³ He said, 'Yeah.' He says, 'Yeah.' Other people say, 'Oh I'm sure you were better than you think you were. You're just saying that. You're just being modest.' Well, I was a very bad boxer for two reasons. I couldn't fight except I was in a temper and I don't get in a temper unless I get scared. And when I was in the ring I wasn't scared. I guess I wasn't ferocious enough. Basically, I had a short reach — too short a reach for my weight, do you understand? And I remember everybody; they were a decent crowd. The people in charge of the place were English intellectuals. Any kind of intellectual is better than no intellectual. You can't get along without the fucking intellectuals. Nobody can.

How old were you when you left school?

Twelve. I was at school with the French

Sisters of Charity. Les Soeurs de St. Vincent de Paul. They were mostly Dublin girls and some French girls. Dublin girls in a convent are very unusual because you don't get many Dublin priests and you don't get many Dublin nuns. Well, these were mostly Dublin girls, from north-east Dublin near the docks. I went from there to the Christian Brothers when I was eleven. They were the biggest crowd of fucking bastards that I have ever met in my life. If I had a child I would not send him to anywhere except to where there were married men. I don't give a bollocks as to whether the men were young or they were old, but they gotta be married. No unmarried man is entitled to have children under his control. A woman perhaps, when the woman is getting screwed good enough, she's OK. Nuns seem to me to be an exception. They were very nice people. They were very good-humoured people. Whether they're especially blessed by God or not, I don't know, but apparently the blessing seems to extend only to the female section of the religious communities. The men were just nuts. They used to beat kids up. It was obvious that they weren't getting laid often enough. And I don't like religious people to have charge of children either. Well, I like children to have a bit of religion, maybe, but not too much. If I was given the choice between having a very religious person and an atheist that was well-read and had advanced and progressive ideas, if I was given the alternative of having, say, a very religious person who only read *La Croix* — is that what you call it? — and having an atheist that read *L'Express* or *France-Observateur*, well I'll take the reader of *France-Observateur* or *L'Express*.³⁴ I'd get religion somewhere else if I wanted to. But anyway, I always wrote, and I always wanted to write. Then when I was twelve I got published for the first time. I wrote an article for a republican magazine called *Fianna*. It was the paper of the scout organization I was a member of. I wrote an article then for a left-wing paper called *The Irish Democrat*, when I was about twelve. The editor of it was a man that was killed

33 James Joseph Tunney (1897–1978), American heavyweight boxer; defeated Jack Dempsey to become world heavyweight champion in 1926; retained his title in 1927 in a famous and controversial return bout; retired as champion in 1928 with 65-1-1 record and 47 KOs; successful businessman.

34 *La Croix* is a liberal Catholic journal; the other two weekly magazines were on the far Left at the time.

35 Éamonn McGrotty (1912–37), b. Mount Street, Rosemount, Derry; joined Christian Brothers teaching order; left and took up journalism in Dublin; advertising manager for *An tÉireannach*, Irish-language republican newspaper; member of the IRA; involved in Na Fianna; prominent in Conradh na Gaeilge; joined International Brigade; killed in action at Jarama.

36 Sean O Faolain (1900–91), short-storywriter, novelist, man of letters; took republican side in the Irish Civil War; became disenchanted with republicanism; founded and edited (1940–46) the literary journal *The Bell*.

37 O Faolain visited Behan in Mountjoy Jail after his arrest for firing at a Special Branch detective in April 1942; Behan's 'I Became a Borstal Boy' appeared in *The Bell* in June 1942.

38 *Cúirt an Mheán-Oíche* [The Midnight Court] (1780) is a bawdy tour de force about sexual relations; the poet, Brian Merriman (c.1749–1805), imagines a court of women sitting in judgement on men for failing to satisfy their sexual needs.

39 The poem consists of 1,026 lines; Behan here recites an extract from the introductory section. The translations listed are Ussher (1926), O'Connor (1945) and Marcus (1953); O'Connor's translation had first appeared in *The Bell* (1941). Behan claimed to have translated the poem in its entirety but lost his only copy of it; a section of his translation is in *Borstal Boy*.

40 Republican Congress (1934–35), radical umbrella group; established in March 1934 after the IRA army convention voted against adopting a more radical position on social issues; key figures included George Gilmore (1898–1985), Peadar O'Donnell (1893–1986) and Frank Ryan (1902–44); split into republican and socialist factions at its first convention in September; dissolved 1935.

41 Liam Tumlison, Irish republican and member of International Brigade, formerly member of the Orange Order; radicalized by outdoor relief riots; joined IRA and adopted Irish-language form of his Christian name (William); left IRA to join Republican Congress, 1934; killed in action at Jarama, 14 March 1937.

afterwards in Spain, a man called Eugene McGrattan.³⁵ He was from Derry, incidentally. I always wrote these things. Then when I'd come out of jail in 1942 — when I'd come out of borstal — I wrote an article for a magazine called *The Bell*. It was published by Sean O Faolain.³⁶ I think he's a well-known writer, at least he's well-known in England and America.

I don't know about France. And O Faolain taught me a lot about writing. He told me, first of all, to cut out this shit where I was trying to get a bit of sympathy for myself. I was trying to get a bit of glory for myself as a republican martyr. So he cured me of that very effectively. And I suppose I just started writing.³⁷ I started to write exactly what happened. The defeats, the cowardice ... and you know, they're important too.

Derek: *I believe you write very good poetry in Irish. Have you ever written any in English?*

No. Except the translation of a poem called 'The Midnight Court'. Have you ever heard of it?³⁸

Derek: *No.*

Never heard of 'The Midnight Court'? You should be ashamed of yourself as an Irishman. W. B. Yeats said, 'It's a violent, extravagant and an altogether remarkable and glorious poem.' Would you like to hear a bit of the translation? Well, I'll say the Irish too:

Siolla de mo shúil dar shamhlaíos uaim,
Chonacas chugam le ciumhais an chuain
An mhásach, bholgach, tholgach,
thaibhseach,
Chámhnach, cholgach, ghairgeach,
ghaibhdeach;
A hairde ceart, má mheas mé díreach,
Sé nó seacht de shlata is fuilleach,
Péirse beacht dá brat ag sraoilleadh
Léi sa tslab le drab is draoibeal...

*I saw as I suddenly looked around
approach from the bay with titanic strong
sound a big-bellied bitch — well-arsed,
gigantic, fierce, fearless, furious,
formidable, frantic;
If my terror-struck gaze could estimate
right, six or seven full yards or more
was her height.
A mile of her mantle behind her trailed ...*

That's a bailiff summoning the poet to the court, presided over by the Queen of the Fairies, where the women of Ireland protest against the men of Ireland. The men of Ireland aren't screwing them often enough. It's a good poem. You ought to read it. There are three translations. One is by a bad Catholic like myself, Frank O'Connor. The other is by Percy Arland Ussher who is a Protestant. The third is by David Marcus who is a Jew. They're all very good. They're all available. And they're all worth reading.³⁹

You mentioned before that you belonged to a youth nationalist organization ...

I was in a republican organization. Besides being a nationalist organization it was a republican organization and it was a socialist organization. The IRA since that time has not been socialist. It's not been anti-socialist; it's just not been anything politically.

You were nine then. What happened to you when you were sixteen and got arrested?

Oh, I was thrown out of the IRA because I was accused of left-wing activity. By that time there had been a split in the IRA and the left wing had started an organization called the Republican Congress, most of whose members fought afterwards in the International Brigade in Spain.⁴⁰ It was a Dublin crowd. A lot from the country too. One fellow was from Belfast that was killed. A fellow called ... Jesus ... Tommelson, I think.⁴¹ What else do you want to know?

What happened after you left the prison?

So I went to France. In France I was writing — in English, of course. I wrote a bit. Finally, I got a job working for Mr. de Valera's newspaper, *The Irish Press*. A friend of mine who'd been in prison over the IRA became editor of it, McGuinness.⁴² He gave me a column to do every week, which I did. And I lived on the column while I finished *Borstal Boy*. So Mr. de Valera did this much good for literature, that he enabled me to finish *Borstal Boy*. I didn't have it finished, but I had most of it. And a man called Iain Hamilton from Hutchinsons who was a friend of mine ... I don't like publishers as a rule.⁴³ I would certainly never get into a motor car with anyone belonging to Gallimard; it doesn't seem to be very fortunate for writers in motor cars. But Hamilton was in the Shelbourne Hotel and he saw some of it and he said, 'Can I have

it?' I said, 'You can if you give me a hundred and fifty pounds for it in advance.' He said, 'Sure.' He gave me two hundred fifty pounds to finish it. And that was that. (*Brendan seems relieved.*) *Ça va?*

Well, I'm glad we got this far. But you didn't quite finish telling me ...

What? (*Getting angry.*) I can only finish by writing the damn thing ... again. Is that what you mean?

... what you did before you wrote Borstal Boy ...

(*Exploding.*) I can't talk well about writing!

I meant what you did before you went to jail.

42 Jim McGuinness, London editor of Irish News Agency and editor of *The Irish Press* in the 1950s; subsequently senior editor at Radió Teilefís Éireann.

43 Iain Hamilton (b.1920), publisher and author; books include *The Irish Tangle* (1970).



In the National Library of Ireland, 1952.
Photograph: Daniel Farson/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

44 Camus died in a car accident on 4 January 1960; the car was driven by Michel Gallimard, a relative of his publisher.

45 Françoise Sagan, pseudonym of Françoise Quoirez (1935–2004), vivid supporter of left-wing causes; opposed French war in Algeria; works include *Bonjour tristesse* (1955) and *Aimez-vous Brahms?* (1959). Sartre's play *Les Séquestrés d'Altona* (1959) used Nazi atrocities to attack French torture in Algeria; Camus, who came from Algeria, retreated into an uncharacteristic silence on the topic of the Algerian War.

46 The quotation is usually attributed to Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), president of US (1801–09).

(*Calming down somewhat.*) Before that, I was in the IRA. And then I went back into it. They had to take me because I'd been a messenger boy for years. I knew more about that than just about anybody else.

Was that a full-time job with the IRA?

Well no, but it became a full-time job. And I knew more about the IRA than possibly any man living. I don't know about what happened lately. I don't bother myself finding out.

Now, did you know that Borstal Boy has been translated in French?

No, I didn't know. Who are the publishers, Gallimard?

Yes.

Gallimard are good publishers. It's a pity that Albert Camus was travelling with someone of that family when he was killed.⁴⁴ Big loss. I didn't agree with everything Camus said. Several of his attitudes I didn't like, but he made a great statement when he got the Nobel Prize. And he said, 'The duty of a writer is not to those who are in power, but to those who are subject to them.' France has very good reasons to be proud of her writers. I don't speak as a literary critic; I don't speak even from the point of view of my own taste in literature, but as writers — I mean *hommes et femmes de lettres*, which is a phrase not properly translated by the English word 'man of letters' — your *hommes de lettres* in France, from Jean-Paul Sartre to Françoise Sagan, they have remembered that the only certificate a writer can possibly receive for his own integrity — the only genuine certificate he can receive — is being accused of being a traitor to his country.⁴⁵ The first duty of a writer is to let his country down. If he can't let his own country down, I don't see how he can let any other country down. His own is the one

he can let down most effectively. By that I do not mean that he lets down the people of his country. But in their attitude to Algeria, Jean-Paul Sartre and Françoise Sagan and the other writers there, they are the conscience of France; they are the *true* France. Even from a purely economic view, nobody goes to France to spend money to look at a lot of bastards with uniforms strutting up and down around the place like a comic opera of fucking heroes, wearing *képis* and blowing Gauloise smoke into the faces of the public. We can see those kind of tramps *anywhere*. You can get them anyplace. You can get old cabalistic, old chauvinistic — it's not even chauvinistic, it doesn't relate to the country as a whole — you can even get that sort of rubbish about the honour of the army and the traditions of the army from countries which have only had an army for five minutes. I have no doubt that the Kentucky Colonels take themselves just as seriously as this marshal that was in Algeria and is now retired, Marshal eh ...

Maréchal Juin.

Juin. Yeah. You can get this sort of comic opera Charlie Chaplin *anywhere*. They're all over history. Sometimes they become dangerous. When they become Hitler, or when a Hitler comes along to employ them. But no person loves France for these comic opera thugs. You can get them anywhere. Even if you do happen to like them, you probably prefer your home variety to the foreign sort. There's no need to go across the water, or even across the front yard to look at 'em. You have 'em in *every* country. They're as easy got as a wet foot! But the real France, the France of whom it was said that 'Everyman has two fatherlands, his own and France', that is the France that has been very well represented by my *confrères* in writing.⁴⁶ And I'm extremely proud of them.

Your French confrères certainly are in need of support because the war is really

dragging the country down. There's widespread torture in Algeria and political censorship at home. But Ireland has had its share of violence as well, and readers in France are aware of that. Borstal Boy wouldn't have been written ...

Well, I'm very glad first of all that it's been printed in French. I thought it was about time. My other work is in French — two of my plays are. I've not yet seen the French edition. In any event, I cannot read French. Such small French as I have I got it by standing around Les Halles market. I got my first lesson in French when I asked a fellow ... I said to him, 'Où est le bistro, le café de Le Nouvel Siècle dans Les Zalles?' "Les Zalles", non!" he said to me, "Les zommes", oui! "Les Zalles", non! "Les Halles".⁴⁷ That's where I got my French grammar from — from a fish porter, a fellow carrying fish around the place. I don't know what you call him in French. I don't know what you call him in English either because I've always avoided hard work as much as I possibly could. But what were we talking about?

About Borstal Boy.

I wrote *Borstal Boy* many years ago.⁴⁸

That was long before The Hostage?

Oh sure. It's a work of affection. There's a man, Mike Todd Jr., who was talking about making a film of it in New York. We're going to get Sal Mineo. Don't know if he's known in France. He's in a movie called *Exodus* now.⁴⁹ It's not a good film, but it's a film with good intentions and it's going to make a lot of money so I suppose it's got something to be said for it.

Can we speak a bit more in details about the matter of the book?

The matter of the book ... Sylvère, that's a thing I find very difficult to do. For a

garrulous man, I very seldom talk about my own work. Not that I'm reticent, but because I get bored by talking about it when I'm not actually doing it. However, you've been so good as to go to all this trouble, I've no doubt I can say something. You ask me questions and I'll answer them.

Borstal Boy is an account of three years of your own life?

Um, two.

And you spent eight years in prison?

Well, a lot of years. Yeah, eight.

So why did you choose to write only about those two?

Oh, well, they were the first two. It's chronological. And I may never write about the other time because ... First of all, my imagination was not exactly ... Politics, for instance, bore me. I have certain likes and I have certain dislikes in politics. Active members of the Communist Party in Ireland ... For the most part, I didn't find them very satisfactory people. For instance, they would not send me to the USSR because I came out of a slum. They're usually lower-middle-class people, at least the leadership ... At the same time I think the communists are very necessary, they're very necessary to the working class. Whether the people I know, or the people anybody knows as the leaders of the Communist Party would be good people to live under, I don't know. I shouldn't think so, myself. But I think the Communists are a necessity to the working-class, as I think the Irish Republican Army is a necessity to Ireland. But the second period of my imprisonment, which was spent in Ireland, was a period when I was involved in, well, sort of active political agitation inside. The IRA was split. It was split three ways. You see, the IRA had a very long and respectable anti-fascist tradition — a thing that is deliberately

47 Behan had mistakenly assumed *Les Halles* was pronounced like *les hommes*, with a liaison between the 's' and the following vowel; the fish porter was correcting him.

48 *Borstal Boy* was first published in 1958 but Behan had worked on it since the early 1940s, see note 37.

49 Mike Todd Jr. (1929–2002), film producer; b. Los Angeles, son of innovative film producer; stepson of actress Elizabeth Taylor; assistant to his father on *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956); produced *Scent of Mystery* (1960), a film employing Smell-o-Vision technology which piped smells featured in the film's scenes, such as pipe smoke, from tiny tubes beneath the theatre's seats; d. Borris, county Carlow, Ireland. Sal Mineo (1939–76), American actor and theatre director; nominated for Academy Awards for his performance opposite James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) and opposite Paul Newman in *Exodus* (1960), Otto Preminger's adaptation of Leon Uris's novel; his career suffered due to rumours about his sexual orientation; developed a new career in theatre; stabbed to death outside his home in Los Angeles.

50 Frank Aiken (1898–1983), an IRA commander during War of Independence and Civil War, later senior Fianna Fáil politician; Minister for Defence (1932–43); Minister for Coordination of Defensive Measures (1943–45); Minister for Finance (1945–48); Minister for External Affairs (1951–54; 1957–69). Frederick Henry Boland (1904–85), diplomat; first Irish ambassador to the United Kingdom (1950–56) and Permanent Representative of Ireland at the UN (1956–63); President of the UN General Assembly (1960–61).

51 Henri Alleg was the editor of the underground left-wing periodical *Alger Républicain*. Arrested in June 1957, he wrote *La Question* (1958) while in prison, exposing the widespread use of torture by the French military; Sartre contributed an introduction to the first edition, which was banned in France.

misrepresented. But they had a very anti-fascist tradition and numbers of them, as a matter of fact one hundred of them, were killed in the defence of Madrid in 1936–37. The founders of the International Brigade and the International Column were members of the Irish Republican Army. They were the first over there. I knew some of them personally, though I was only a child. But during the time I was in jail we were so actively *engagé*, it was sort of ... Perhaps I'll write later about it, but I don't think my time has yet come to write about the second part of my imprisonment. Somehow it doesn't *send* me. Do you understand that expression? It's an American expression. It's a good expression too. Perhaps my period in borstal was a little unreal to the extent that it was in a way, I suppose, a little rest — a rest from Ireland. I find Ireland a very upsetting place because I happen to care a lot about it and am one of the very few people here who knows every part of Ireland. And my position has always been a very ambivalent one, if that's the word I want.

In what way?

For instance, when I had the first night of *The Hostage* in New York, the Irish Minister for External Affairs, Mr. Frank Aiken, and the President of the United Nations who had just been elected that day, Mr. Freddy Boland, and the entire Irish delegation came to my first night.⁵⁰ This greatly upset the New York Irish middle classes. The recent Irish arrivals there of the past forty years — those who had made money but were still born in Ireland — were kind of upset. Well, they didn't know what to do. They thought that, of course, if I was good enough for a cabinet minister, then I must be OK. It might seem as if I was accepted. But in actual fact they said that my play was irreligious and blasphemous, that I attacked the Catholic Church. Despite the fact that the Minister of External Affairs and the President of the United Nations

attended my first night. But the week before I left Ireland to go to America, the prime minister — the premier, or *taoiseach* as we say here — Mr. Sean Lemass — good old French name, from an old Huguenot family incidentally, and he was a good soldier himself, a good Irish republican in his time — he attacked me publicly in Tipperary. And he said there were Irish playwrights that were holding their country up to ridicule in rather the same way that some extreme right-wing people would say that Jean-Paul Sartre or Henri Alleg were letting the side down sort of thing.⁵¹ But in actual fact I happen to know more about the people of Ireland than Mr. Lemass. An old woman had a letter to the newspaper last night about her troubles (she was an old-age pensioner) and she said she was going to write to Brendan Behan about it. She didn't say she was going to write to Sean Lemass about it or to de Valera, although I've no desire to go into competition with either of those gentlemen as a politician. The fact remains that she wrote that. On the other hand, in the six counties — in what I consider the occupied part of Ireland — I've gone across the border from Donegal ... When I was making a tour last year, I was received at the border by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The inspector came down and shook hands with me, said — actually, my car broke down and they actually pushed my car — and some English customs man (the customs is a reserved occupation, I mean the customs in Northern Ireland is manned by London) ... the man came down says, 'Hey, what about his stuff? We gotta examine his stuff.' The Ulster Constabulary man said, 'This is Brendan Behan.' They said, 'Well, we don't care who he is.' 'Nonsense,' he says, 'Sure, he's a great man.' And I went into Derry city and I had a meal. Before I'd been in the hotel, I was at lunch. I sat down to my lunch. And by the time I went out on the street for a walk round the city *The Belfast Telegraph* was out. And it had on the front page that I was in Derry city. And going on

the street, people kidded me a bit. They said, ‘Do you see the walls?’ They’re in the centre of Derry where the richer people live, or the business part, where the Protestant population are the majority, though the majority of the people of Derry are Catholic. And a man, obviously a respectable upper-class or middle-class Protestant *bourgeois gentilhomme*, said to me, ‘Do you see our walls?’ — they had a siege there in 1690, a Williamite war — ‘They withstood the greatest siege in history.’ Says I, ‘What about Stalingrad?’ So he didn’t quite know what to make of that. That was not the answer he was expecting. And therein lies the key. In that little incident in Derry lies the key to my whole attitude to my country and my country’s whole attitude to me. I was greeted on the streets with affection, with respect, and at the same time this man mentioned the siege of Derry — which was where the Williamite or Dutch forces held the city against the Jacobite or French-backed forces, which was, I suppose, our forces. A reverse position had happened during the same war at Limerick, where the Irish and the French under Sarsfield and Saint-Ruth held the city against the Dutch and the English, in other words, against the Protestants — though it was a bit more complicated than that, if you read history; it was largely over an amount of money, like most wars. But this man thought that when he mentioned the siege of Derry, I would immediately say, ‘Well, what about the siege of Limerick?’ Instead of which, I said ‘What about the siege of Stalingrad?’ (*Laughs.*) Naturally, but for writing I couldn’t possibly live. I like to live well, you see. Those cigars are Hauptmann’s. They come from Dunhill’s in Fifth Avenue. And even before I ever saw Dunhill’s I was still fond of a good cigar and you don’t exactly find them growing on trees up in the Phoenix Park. But I couldn’t possibly live on what I would make by selling books to the people of Ireland. They banned *Borstal Boy*, as you know; it’s banned here.

I wanted to ask you about that. In France they considered it a book about Ireland, that’s why they called it Un Peuple Partisan. I assume it also has to do with the PP alliteration, like BB for Borstal Boy. Why would a book about Ireland be banned there?

Why is it banned? Because we have censorship here, which is a product of English Victorianism. Usually the people who become priests in Ireland are pretty bad people, even amongst the Catholics — amongst the patriotic Catholic population. And my uncle, remember, wrote the national anthem of this country; he wrote ‘A Soldier’s Song’. All my people fought in the 1916 Rising — such of them as were available to do so and some of them were. Among the nationalist population, priests are not very much loved. They may be necessary when you’re a’ dying or getting married or getting born, but you’re usually able to get born or buried without anybody’s assistance. They believe in the Catholic faith and all, but they don’t like priests for the following reasons. Usually the priest is a son of a family who collaborated. They’re *collabos* from way way back. They were permitted to be as Catholic as they liked so long as they weren’t anti-imperialist. And there was an Irish leader, the leader of the 1916 Rising, Padraic Pearse, who said about the Irish censors — well, there wasn’t a censor at the time, but about the kind of people who ban books here — Pearse described that type of person as the ‘rotted man’. And this man had such a filthy mind that when he saw a girl putting a bandage on her father’s ankle, he’d said, ‘Oh no, you must not do that, that’s immoral.’ And Pearse said when that man died he was so filthy that they wouldn’t let him into hell.⁵²

You seem ambivalent about the Church as well.

The Church has a somewhat two-faced

- 52 Patrick H. Pearse or Pádraig/Pádraic Mac Piarais (1879–1916), educationalist, political activist and writer; editor (1903–09) of Irish language journal *An Claidheamb Soluis*; founded two schools; leader of 1916 Rising; executed; his many publications include short stories, plays and essays in Irish and English.
- 53 Ian MacLennan (1909–86), British ambassador to Ireland (1959–63).
- 54 Daniel Cohalan (1858–1952), bishop of Cork (1916–1952).
- 55 Aedan W. McGrath (1906–2000), Columban priest and Legion of Mary organizer in China; imprisoned for subversion in 1951, he was expelled from the country on his release in 1954. See Leo Roberts and Aedan McGrath, comp., *Mary in Their Midst: The Legion of Mary in Action in China, 1948–1951* (Dublin, 1958).



At Forty Foot male-only bathing pool,
south county Dublin, 1954.
Photograph: Daniel Farson/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

attitude in the matter. If I met a priest in the street he'd say, 'Oh how are you Brendan? Any chance of reading *Borstal Boy*?' Incidentally, a friend of mine, a Protestant clergyman from Donegal, told me he spent a night in the Protestant bishop's house in Derry, the town I was in, and he said he wanted to read something. The Protestant bishop showed him a line of devotional magazines and of devotional books and my friend said, 'I don't want to read them.' And he asked, 'Have you got anything ...' 'Nonsense,' the bishop said. 'There's a shelf below that where I keep the real things I read.' And the first book he saw there was *Borstal Boy*. Incidentally, Sir Ian Maclennan, the British ambassador to Ireland, told me — this is to make matters very clear to anybody who wants to know what my political affiliations are — that there's one place in Dublin that you're always sure to get a copy of *Borstal Boy*, and that's the British Embassy.⁵³ They have my works in practically all the British embassies all over the world.

You were brought up a Catholic?

Yeah, a very easy one ...

And you also are a nationalist. For what reason exactly do you think your book has been banned then? Is it because you show the Church in agreement with the English?

Ah yes, I show the Church as being *collabo*. And it's a very sore point with 'em because they have always been collaborationists. I mean, the bishop of Cork, Doctor Cohalan, in 1920–21, openly backed the Black and Tans who were the English Gestapo here.⁵⁴ And he was under sentence of death by Tom Barry, the leader of the Irish Republican Army in that area. And Cohalan lived on to be about ninety-eight and he was a great embarrassment to the government of Ireland and to the Church, of course. The Church, you see, they tell lies. There was a missionary that was

expelled from China. I'll give you his name. His name was Fr. Aedan McGrath and he was expelled by the Chinese government; he was expelled with some other priests.⁵⁵ When he came home the newspaper started off by saying that his father was killed in 1920. And then it went on a little further and it said his father was murdered by the British forces in 1920. And it went on, at last, and said his father was an IRA leader who was killed in action. But, in actual fact, his father was shot in Dublin because he was a collaborationist. And he was shot by the Irish Republican Army. Of course, in Ireland as in everywhere else, there are divisions. There's a lower-middle-class, a suburban kind of snobbery about Belfast in Ireland. But Belfast is a much more Irish city. If I went into, say, the Grand Central Hotel in Belfast, I would be accepted as I was years ago very simply as another fellow, as a bit of landscape. They'd say, 'Well 'ow are ye Brendan?' Just because I'm another man that they know and happen to come from Dublin. And they would kid me a bit about the Free State and about the Pope. In any Dublin hotel, by Jesus, they'd send for me. They'd pay me money to go into the Russell or the Shelbourne or the Hibernian, because they've seen my name in *France-Observateur*, in *Le Monde* — not *Le Figaro Littéraire*, that would tax their brains a bit too much. But they've seen my name in *The New York Herald Tribune*, in *The New York Times* and *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mail* and so forth and so on. But as myself, as a native son of the city, I don't believe I'd be welcomed in those places. The difference is the centre of this city, *le centre-ville*, is a kind of tourist resort. Of course, we have the same kind of tourism as England. We get the leavings of English tourism. Well, Lenin made a statement once when he said the Russian army was for peace. Someone said, when did they vote for peace? How did they vote for peace? He said they voted with their feet. Well, in the same way, the Dublin Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, but mainly Catholic population vote for me at the box office. Now, two theatres

this year — one was the Abbey for *The Quare Fellow* and the other was the Olympia for *The Hostage* ... But my attitude to the powers that be in this country is the attitude of a writer anywhere to the ruling class. If I get a piece of praise abroad they're eager to use it, but I don't get anything from them.

When did you start writing Borstal Boy?

Borstal Boy I started about 1948, but, you see, I started it in Paris. Would you like to know the address of the place I started it in?

Sure, I'd love to know everything that has to do with Borstal Boy ...

I started it in the Hotel Louisiane — which is the corner of the rue de Bucy — in an apartment occupied by a man called Desmond Francis Ryan who for some reason was called by the patron of the hotel '*Monsieur Rien*'.⁵⁶ But Desmond Francis Ryan lives in Paris. He lives in the rue Molière. And he's a great — well, he's still a very literary, entertaining man — he is the Paris correspondent of *The Irish Times*. I then left Paris and had no home, no place to go. I was skint in Paris — had no money — and I heard everybody saying you should have been here in Hemingway's time, 1920 and so forth and so on. But the ex-GIs were there and those American guys; they were OK. They were very good to me. One of them who I knew very slightly was Norman Mailer, the man who wrote *The Naked and the Dead*. He bought me ham and eggs in the Pergola. Do you know the Pergola? It's in the boulevard Saint-Germain. Well, he bought me ham and eggs at a time when I had not eaten some ham and eggs for a long long time. I scrounged from Americans who were on the GI Bill of Rights, from a great number of French people. One of them was a lady called — she didn't set up to be a literary sort of a patron or anything of that sort — her name was Dame Housty. She lived in the rue de Grenelle. How I came to meet her was I had been out all night in

⁵⁶ Desmond Francis Ryan (1893–1964), republican activist, journalist and author; educated by Christian Brothers and at Pearse's Scoil Éanna; later secretary to Pearse and, after his death, his biographer; fought in 1916 Rising; Paris correspondent for *The Irish Times* in the 1950s; author of many books, including a history of the 1916 Rising and biographical studies of John Devoy, James Connolly, Michael Collins, and de Valera.

57 Sean T. O’Kelly (1882–1966), republican activist, later popular politician and statesman; member of Irish Republican Brotherhood and Conradh na Gaeilge; founding member of Sinn Féin (1905); participant in the 1916 Rising; interned; elected MP in 1918; chairman of first Dáil; unsuccessfully sought admittance to Versailles peace conference as official representative of the Irish Republic; took republican side in the Civil War; jailed by Free State; followed de Valera when he left Sinn Féin to found Fianna Fáil; Minister for Local Government and Public Health (1932–39) and Minister for Finance (1939–45); elected President of Ireland 1945; re-elected 1952; retired 1959.

Paris. Paris is a city where you can be out all night. At least you could at that time. I never had trouble with the police in France until I became rich and famous ... Well, not rich but famous. I had been walking around all the night because I had nowhere to go and I called into a couple of cafés to see would I meet anyone who would give me a drink and I couldn’t find anybody. So anyway, it was a summer’s morning and I went down and ... You go along windowsills in Paris, you’re always sure to find something. People are in the habit of leaving odd pieces of food up in the place, so I found some old stuff. I went across the Place de la Concorde where they were making a film at the Cleopatra’s needle, the Obélisque. I went and stood with a crowd there. Finally, I wound up walking across the Champs de Mars at about six in the morning. No, I went to Les Halles and I scrounged a swig from a bottle from a *clochard*, from a couple of *clochards*, and I got a couple of pennies and a couple of francs there. I didn’t quite get a bowl of onion soup though. Onion soup was always comparatively dear. A lot of foreigners think onion soup is nothing. But then a good onion soup and you’re fed for the day. A person living on a diet of one onion soup and a litre of *rouge*, say *treize degrés*, well he’s set for the day. He’s fit for action. Into bed and out of barracks!

To go back to Borstal Boy ...

Allow me to finish this ... I was going across the Champs de Mars and I met a boy of about eighteen and his name was Jean Chevalier. And he brought me to the house of his aunt and his cousin Nicole and we had breakfast. His aunt’s name was Madame Housty. She lived at the rue de Grenelle. And I was in Paris last year or the year before. I had a great success; I was a big shot. I don’t remember very much because I was drunk most of the time, I’m sorry to say ... I must have missed a lot of things ... Still, I had some good fun too. We were on the top of the Martini terrace on the Champs-Élysées.

We were supposed to drink martinis but the Martini people are not Jansenists. I mean there was a fair amount of merry gin went into the transaction. But I went searching for Jean Chevalier and Madame Housty and just couldn’t find them. And I want to make sure you get this name right. H-O-U-S-T-Y. And if your newspaper could find them for me I’d be very pleased if they would contact me through the newspaper. I’d like to see them again.

I’ll do my very best.

I discovered all sorts of contacts like that in Paris. There’s a great respect for writers there. I was in a bar called the Breton Bar in the rue Dauphiné. I think the Bretons were the only peasants I ever liked anywhere. I got on very well with them. A woman came in said, ‘Who’s he? What does he do?’ And I said, ‘*Je suis un peintre en bâtiment.*’ And the old concierge, whom I thought hated my guts — he’d never spoken to me before — said, ‘*C’est un écrivain anglais aussi.*’ There was a respect for letters. You don’t get that here. In Dublin they’d shout after you in the street. This is a semi-colonial country. North and South there’s very little difference, I’m sorry to say. The fact that four hundred linen weavers have to leave Belfast and go work in Europe doesn’t please me. I don’t get any kick out of that. Ireland’s great export, amongst a lot of other people, is a lot of university graduates. Every university graduate that sees me come home and is running around unemployed or is stuck in some civil service job says, ‘I hate that bastard. He only gets there because he’s a loud-mouth, an obscene Dublin guttersnipe from the slums.’ What they forget, of course, is that I’m a man of the cities. My grandmother had smaller hands than I have. She was a seamstress.

There’s an old nationalist tradition in your family.

Nationalist tradition? Sure. My family? Good Jesus, my father was a prisoner



Addressing a theatre audience, probably in Berlin or Paris, 1959.
Photograph: Robert Lackenbach/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.

- 58 Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), German poet, playwright and director; developed theatre as a forum for political debate; founded (with Helene Weigel) the Berliner Ensemble in 1949; they staged many of Brecht's most famous plays; hounded by the House Un-American Activities Committee; recipient of the Stalin Peace Prize, 1954. Jaroslav Hasek (1883–1923), Czech novelist whose satiric masterpiece was *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1935).
- 59 Eugene Ionesco (1912–94), Romanian-born avant-garde dramatist and critic of communism; settled in Paris in 1938; key figure in the Theatre of the Absurd; major works include *La Cantatrice chauve* (1950), *La Leçon* (1951), *Les Chaises* (1952), *Le Nouveau Locataire* (1955) and *Rhinocéros* (1960).
- 60 The CNR was a committee, composed mostly of communists, that coordinated the resistance to German occupation during World War II.

when I was born. The first place my father ever saw me as a baby I was outside of Kilmainham prison. He was inside the prison with Sean T. O'Kelly, the ex-president ... ⁵⁷

And yet from Borstal Boy to The Hostage, you seem to have changed your mind somewhat about the national movement.

My ideas on Ireland have never altered. My idea about Ireland is that it's a separate country from England. And it's only in the interests of a section of the English capitalist class and a section of the Northern Irish capitalist class — in the interest of a section of the people I'd describe as extreme Tories, extreme conservatives — to keep Ireland divided. My political *opinions* about Ireland may have changed, but my hopes and ideas of what is best for Ireland haven't altered.

Has your attitude towards the IRA changed much?

I regard the IRA as a regrettable necessity, but it is a necessity. I must explain that I consider some members of the IRA to be figures of fun, but if someone asked me to condemn the IRA for an attack on a British barracks anywhere in the thirty-two counties of Ireland, I'm not going to do it.

Some people in France found your depiction of the member of the IRA in The Hostage to be a bit artificial. He behaved more like a West End type, a fashionable fellow, a character in a comedy.

Well, it's artificial only to people who do not understand the theatre. Only to people who do not know music-hall, vaudeville. Only to people who are such peasants, such Parisian peasants in this context, that they have never seen the Berliner Ensemble by Bertolt Brecht. I don't imitate Brecht but ... Have you ever read *The Good Soldier Schweik* by Jaroslav Hasek?⁵⁸ Did you ever read Dickens, for Jesus's sake? What do you want me to do? Have them all sitting around a table? Have a

rhinoceros running round the place like your adopted chum, Eugene Ionesco, who is a client of the United States?⁵⁹ I am a friend of the United States and I love the United States. *Je ne suis pas un client, je suis un ami.* The only thing that your question convinces me of, Sylvère, is that you've got bogmen everywhere. Do you know what a bogman is? A *paysan*. You've got them in *France-Observateur*. You've got them in *The Irish Press*. But the people who say that sort of thing about me they ought to go to the theatre more often. And I'll tell you what they ought to do. They ought to go to Paris more often. Not have their minds stuck on their own stupid garbage-faced old mother up in the Vosges, stuffing truffles up a duck's ass. That might make for a very good peasant's wife, not for a good drama critic. Though I shouldn't say anything about the Vosges. A very good friend of mine comes from there. A man called Marcel. He was a member of the CNR — the Comité National de la Résistance.⁶⁰ We used to go the Club des Assassins. Do you know it? It used to be at the back of the boulevard Saint-Michel and it was full of the sort of company that I love. Rich Reds. People suspect writers but I got ammunition.

This wasn't a criticism, but you certainly deal with the IRA much more lightly.

What do you want me to do? Write a play about the Western World again?

But you believe the theatre can exert a political influence.

Well, sure I do. A writer influences. But you don't influence like the communists do. In the communist theatre in London, and indeed when they had one in Dublin, there was a drama about cement workers. They'd have a big stack of sacks of cement bags on one side of the stage and they'd all carry them to the other side and that was Act I. And they'd carry them back again and that was Act II. And they'd put them in the middle and someone would drop dead and

rupture himself and that was Act III, and the finish.

And it was called Reinforced Concrete?

Well, maybe that's what they called it ... Jesus, but I call it having the balls bored off me.

Many people in France know about Ireland mostly from Sean O'Casey's plays and yours.

I'm in honoured company. O'Casey's a great man.

But you aren't following exactly in the same way.

Oh well, I'd like to follow in the same way and to be a great playwright but I don't follow in the same path, naturally. He's got his way of doing things and I've got mine. But I think every Irish writer is very much influenced by him. If I said I wasn't influenced by him I'd be very ungrateful as well as very untruthful. But they are different streams ...

You said that you're not really writing for the Irish ...

Sure, I'm writing for the Irish. Of course, I'm writing for the Irish. When did I say that? Once somebody said to me, 'How would this suit a Dublin audience?' And I said, 'The Irish are not my audience, they are my material.' When I say a thing, I don't talk in parables. I'm not a fucking clergyman, not a juggler, not a magician. I simply say what I mean ... I meant it economically. *The Quare Fellow* ran for ten weeks at the Abbey, which is a very long time for Ireland. *The Hostage* packed out for two weeks at the Olympia and as many Dublin people as could go went. But it wouldn't be enough, Sylvère, to keep me alive. Well, it would be enough to keep me alive if I was writing the *Journal d'un curé de campagne* but as I'm not writing that

sort of thing I've got to be out and about; I gotta meet my friends and walk in the sun and that's what I'm about to do.⁶¹

A last question about your language. You've written sometimes in Gaelic?

Sure.

And some shrewd French critics, just by reading your book translation, figured that you're writing in a special Anglo-Irish language.

First of all, I know more than your goddamn French critics, and I know more than any living person about the language — not just of Ireland — but about the spoken language. I'm not going into any philological arguments about nationalist languages — whether Breton or Provençal or the *langue d'oc* or Welsh. I know more about the language of the people that inhabit England, Ireland, Scotland or Wales than any other man living. I'm the only person living here that can say hello in every language spoken, apart from dividing it into dialects. (*He says: 'Hello how are you?' in many languages.*) All those languages are spoken in these islands, but that's simply a kind of tour de force, a bit of a show off. I'm simply calling to your attention the fact that besides English, they also speak Irish Gaelic, they speak Scotch Gaelic, they speak Welsh, fewer people speak Manx and they speak French. French is spoken in the Channel Islands. Maybe you think they belong to France, I don't know. But in any event, the English language is, of course, the language of these islands and a very great and wonderful language it is. Now the first person to put a Cockney — to write Cockney dialogue for the West End stage within living memory — was me. I have been attacked on all sorts of grounds. Nobody has ever said that my Cockney is not authentic, that it is not just as Cockneys speak it, and that goes for Cockneys themselves. I can write the way that the north of England people speak. The Irish for

61 *The Diary of a Country Priest*, a famous Catholic novel by Georges Bernanos (1888–1948), first published in 1936.

62 Evelyn Waugh (1903–66), satirical novelist; author of *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). Behan had a particular dislike of Waugh.

63 John Osborne (1929–94), actor-manager and playwright; enjoyed considerable celebrity in late 1950s and early 1960s on account of his phenomenally successful *Look Back in Anger* (1956); other works include *The Entertainers* (1957) and *Inadmissible Evidence* (1965).



the most part speak English the same all over Ireland. There's not very much difference.

Gaelic also is a literary language.

Let's stick to one thing at one time. Your critics allege that I had kind of fashioned a language of my own in English?

Yes.

What I write is English. I write English as she is spoke. Perhaps one person speaks English one way and another person speaks it another. But Evelyn Waugh, when he went to write *Cockney*, was an abysmal failure.⁶² *Cockney* is a speech like any other. For instance, the use of the word 'fuck' is very important. Because it's an important part of the speech of the majority of people in these islands. Now if you were to ask Mr. Samuel Beckett about that, who is a friend of mine incidentally, he would say that what I was saying is not true. That's because he hasn't been in the habit of hearing it. Even when he lived here he didn't — he would meet students. Poverty is not the test. He could say he met fellows that were ever as poor as Brendan Behan was. The fact is that the urban population of these islands, culturally, are very closely knit together. Most of the impulse comes from, I'd say, Ireland and Scotland. Wales not so much. Manners come from the East End of London. With the result that I could be speaking English, if I had anyone here understood it, and I would speak English. I would be using English words and you wouldn't know what I was talking about. Neither would Derek, perhaps. Say I was saying something like (*Says it very softly.*): 'I'll give that Richard the Third a daisy up in her shop if she don't mack her rabbit.' See? Well, perhaps John Osborne might.⁶³ A peasant can attack me on many grounds, but not on that. ■