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Brendan Behan on the Politics of Identity: Nation, Culture, Class, and Human Empathy in Borstal Boy

by PATRICK COLM HOGAN

Colonialism and the Question of Identity

Borstal Boy, Brendan Behan’s partially fictionalized account of his time in English prison and in reformatory, is, from the outset, self-consciously situated in the context of colonialism. Behan is arrested for his work in an Irish Republican Army bombing campaign; he is continually referred to by the generic name “Paddy”; he delivers anti-colonial speeches in court and elsewhere. The book is saturated with the history and contemporary consequences of colonialism. Moreover, Behan’s representation of colonialism is not merely general or historical. Colonialism is not only a matter of broad social trends or of political events. It is very personal as well—affecting Behan’s immediate family and friends. At the same time, Behan expands his concerns beyond his native land, explicitly and repeatedly seeing colonialism in Ireland as directly parallel with colonialism in India and Africa. Indeed, he tends to portray the anti-colonial movements in these regions as related, if distinct, parts of a common struggle.

Yet, despite Behan’s foregrounding of colonialism, Borstal Boy has not been systematically examined in relation to the recurrent concerns of post-colonization writing. This is even more surprising given the fact that, in the last decade, many literary critics have stressed the crucial relation of Irish literature to British colonialism. Indeed, this emphasis has come both from interpreters focusing on Irish writings and from theorists examining post-colonization literature more generally. For example, Declan Kiberd’s important volume Inventing Ireland is in part an attempt to introduce “the Irish case” into “current models of postcoloniality” (5), and he discusses Behan’s drama...
at some length (513-29). The prominent post-colonial theorist Edward Said devotes an entire chapter to Yeats in his influential *Culture and Imperialism*. Said places Yeats in the “tradition ... of the colonial world ruled by European imperialism” (220). Clearly, he intends this placement to be generalizable to other modern Irish writers.

Among works that self-consciously situate themselves in a colonial context, perhaps the most common theme is identity. In the literature of a colonized people—economically deprived, socially demeaned—one of the most pressing questions is likely to be: “Who are we?” Or rather, “Who are we apart from the colonizer?” “Who are we as independent, self-determined people, no longer under the boot of military oppression and racial hatred?” Irish literature is no exception. As G. J. Watson has noted, “the question of Identity—Irish identity, each writer’s identity, the meaning of ‘Irishness’ ... is the theme of Irish writing at the beginning of this century” (14).

We may distinguish three broad tendencies in post-colonization writers’ implicit or explicit response to this question of identity. One is cultural (or equivalently “cultural national”). We are our cultural heritage. Therefore, we must embrace that heritage. We must return to traditional religious belief, rejecting the religion of the colonizer; we must write our literature in indigenous forms and in indigenous languages; we must structure our government (at the time of independence) along indigenous lines, etc. This view was central to the Irish debates surrounding identity. One version of this culturalist position—Catholic in religion, Gaelic in language and custom, even, supposedly, Celtic in political structure (see Mac Neill)—is often referred to as “the philosophy of Irish Ireland.” The phrase famously, or notoriously, served as the title for a book by D. P. Moran, a primary exponent of this view. But the category encompasses a wide range of authors and activists, from Irish language advocates to the promulgators of Gaelic sport, from James Duffy with his project of “A Catholic Literature for Ireland” to Daniel Corkery with his apparent contention that, in Lyons’ summary, “only an Irish Catholic ... could really write Irish literature” (168; cf. Clery 1004-05n.). Of course, the culturalist position is not confined to Catholics. It is also the position of many radical Protestants.

As these examples suggest, one problem with the focus on cultural identity is that it tends to be sectarian. Lyons distinguishes four cultures in colonial Ireland: Catholic/Celtic Irish, Anglo-Irish, English, and Ulster Protestant (17-26). The cultural identity of “Irish Ireland” encompasses only the first group (much as the radical Protestantism of the Orange Order typically embraces only the last). At the same time, it makes Catholic/Celtic culture definitive of Irishness generally. In consequence, as Watson points out, “birth did not guarantee ‘Irishness’”; an “Anglo-Irishman whose family ... lived in Ireland for ... generations” would be excluded by strict culturalists because of “religion” (26-27). This biased, sectarian character was recognized, and deplored, by many writers—the most obvious case, perhaps, being James Joyce’s harsh criticism of Irish Ireland through the figure of the Citizen as portrayed in *Ulysses*. 

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In part because they see the dangers in culturalism, many writers adopt what might be called a “secular national” response to the question of identity. Who are we? A (secular) nation. A democratic unity of diverse peoples with diverse customs and ideas, with diverse histories, but sharing a place, a homeland, and ultimately a nonsectarian political structure (on this general distinction, presented in a slightly different terminology, see Todorov 171). In contrast with culturalist exclusivism, “from the start, the nation was conceived” in such a way that members of any cultural group could be part of “the imagined [national] community,” as Benedict Anderson has argued (145). In principle, if not always in practice, the secular nation is inclusive of the diverse cultures found in any one colonized place—Catholic/Celtic, Anglo-Irish, and so on in the case of Ireland. For a national response to the question of identity asserts that members of all these cultural groups share a more fundamental identity, that of the (secular) nation.

According to its 1853 Constitution, this was the official position of the revived Irish Republican Brotherhood. The first article of this document reads, “The I.R.B. is and shall be composed of Irishmen, irrespective of class or creed ... who are willing to labour for the establishment of a free and independent Republican Government in Ireland” (Mitchell and O Snodaigh 22). It is even the position of some religious groups—for example, “The Independent Orangemen of Ireland.” The 1905 “manifesto” of this group, addressed “TO ALL IRISHMEN WHOSE COUNTRY STANDS FIRST IN THEIR AFFECTIONS” (Mitchell and O Snodaigh 118), culminates in the assertion of an identity that is secular and national in scope, explicitly superseding sectarian, culturalist responses to the question of identity: “In an Ireland in which Protestant and Roman Catholic stand sullen and discontented it is not too much to hope that they will reconsider their positions, and, in their common trials, unite on a true basis of nationality” (120).

But this response too has problems, as Marxist writers in particular have stressed. In covering cultural differences with the blanket of national unity, the nationalist response equally occludes class differences.3 As Said notes, nationalism is, in the end, “deeply problematic” because “[t]he national bourgeoisie and their specialized elites ... in effect tended to replace the colonial force with a new class-based and ultimately exploitative one, which replicated the old colonial structures in new terms” (223). The secular nationalist response to the problem of identity obscures class interests in two complementary ways. First, it suggests that the interests of colonized peasants and workers are the same as those of the indigenous aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Second, it suggests that the colonizer, tacitly understood as a unified entity, is uniformly the enemy of the indigenous working class, peasantry, and so on.

3. It also occludes gender hierarchies, as many feminist writers have pointed out. Though this is a very important point, and very consequential for the issue of identity, it does not bear significantly on Behan’s memoir, which focuses on exclusively male institutions.
In fact, the working classes of Ireland or India or Africa share their most profound interests not with their own, indigenous bourgeoisies, but with one another and with the working class of the colonizing country. In other words, writers adopting a Marxist or related perspective answer the question of identity not by reference to culture or to nation but to class.\(^4\) In this view, what is most important, most definitive about me is not my relation to a set of cultural practices and religious beliefs and not my citizenship in a secular polity. Rather, it is my location in a particular complex of economic relations.

To say this is not to say that other issues or group relations are consequential, just that they are subordinate to class. Answering the question of identity by reference to class does not entail a rejection of nationalist or culturalist concerns—just a rejection of their determinative character and primacy. Indeed, most class-oriented Irish writers emphasized the necessity of national independence to the advancement of the working classes. More generally, exponents of class identity in colonized countries have tended to accept a limited nationalism, much as nationalists have tended to accept a limited, nonsectarian, culturalism.

The class-based view was implicitly shared by many Irish labor activists at the turn of the century and was a tacit presupposition of such documents as the “Resolutions” of the 1913 Labour Day meeting in Dublin. The first of these resolutions begins by extending “fraternal greetings to the workers of every country who are striving for the emancipation of their class” and by urging “all organized workers” to join in “a closer federation of labour.” From here, it turns to the more immediate issue of labor conditions in Ireland, calling on “all Irish workingmen” to join in solidarity with their “fellow-Trade Unionist” (Mitchell and O Snodaigh 140), in effect, asserting their primary identity as workers (though without repudiating national concerns). Sean O’Casey is no doubt the most famous literary exponent of this view. As Richard Fallis explains, O’Casey was interested in nationalism but “socialism became an even stronger concern,” ultimately overriding nationalism. “His passionate socialism caused him to leave” the Irish Citizen Army “when he felt it was being infiltrated by persons who cared more about nationalism than socialism, and he played no active role in the Easter Rising, the Anglo-Irish War, or the Civil War” (183-84), all three of which were premised on a national (or cultural) response to the question of identity, not a class response.

Behan begins from, roughly, a Marxist perspective.\(^5\) He recognizes the cruelty of English cultural oppression and the importance of cultural self-assertion. In keeping with this, he wrote poetry and drama in Irish—a prime act of cultural self-assertion. At the same time, he was an active member of a

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\(^4\) For a fuller discussion of this view and its relation to nationalism and colonialism, see Hogan, “Allegories.”

\(^5\) For a useful overview of Behan’s socialist and nationalist background, see Paul, 100-05; see also Ulick O’Connor, 25-30, 232.
nationalist organization, and planted bombs in order to achieve what he saw as the rightful national integrity of Ireland. Thus he could hardly be called indifferent to cultural and national dilemmas. Still, he saw culture and nation as secondary to class. His political commitment was not a commitment to the advancement of a national elite nor to the propagation of an insular and sectarian culture. As Kiberd points out, “Whenever he espoused Gaelic ideals”—or Irish national ideals—“Behan was at pains to fuse them with socialist principles” (517). (Conversely, in Brown’s words, his “view of international class brotherhood … qualifies his earlier nationalism” and culturalism “without completely obliterating” them [197].)

At the very outset of the memoir, when he is arrested, Behan explains his nationalist and culturalist purposes directly in relation to class. Yes, he seeks “the removal of the baneful influence of British Imperialism from Irish [national] affairs” and, yes, he calls out “God save Ireland,” tacitly alluding to his Catholicism and thus his cultural identity. But the final goal of this removal and salvation is to gain “a full and free life, for my countrymen” by establishing “the Irish Workers’ and Small Farmers’ Republic” (12). He notes immediately that this is a “Communistic” goal and is shared only by the “left-wing element in the movement” (12).

This is not an isolated incident. In the course of the memoir, Behan repeatedly presents cultural and national oppression in terms of class—in keeping with classical Marxist analyses. From this early declaration (on the fourth page of the book) to the end, there are many points at which Borstal Boy appears to be a straightforwardly Marxist story. And yet there are other ways in which the memoir is not straightforwardly Marxist at all. Specifically, Behan clearly sees class analysis as absolutely crucial for understanding the real conditions of human lives and the way those conditions shape individual action and expression. But he does not accept class as providing individuals with any deep or internal identity beyond these contingently shared conditions in a structure of injustice. However important class may be, it does not define who we “really” are, any more than nationality or culture defines this.

Of course, nothing in Marxist analysis requires that we think of class as some sort of binding identity. Indeed, the mainstream of Marxist tradition runs against this idea, at least in theory. The classical dictum, “class origin does not determine class stance,” indicates clearly that someone of bourgeois origin may cast his/her lot with the proletariat, whereas someone of proletarian origin may cooperate with the capitalists for individual gain. The point applies equally to nationality—as Behan himself stresses repeatedly. Moreover, the very idea of identity tends to imply something essential, definitive, internal to a person—something that makes him/her what he/she is. But Marxist theory emphasizes that individual attitudes and actions within society are largely a function of institutional and other structures (e.g., one’s position as laborer or management in a factory). The point is generalizable, as recent work in social psychology has demonstrated (see, for example,
Duckitt 102 for a particularly striking instance of this). Behan recognizes this general tendency, and the critique of institutional structure is a crucial part of his response to cultural self-affirmation and national identity, again in keeping with Marxist ideas.

But Behan’s conception of class is, in the end, even less a matter of identity than it is for most Marxist thinkers. One could think of *Borstal Boy* as a work that sets out to establish and to critique various answers to the question of identity. Behan presents the case for cultural identity, and critiques cultural identity—largely by reference to the oppressive nature of institutional structures and the conflict between these structures and nationalism. He presents the case for national identity but critiques that as well, largely on the basis of a Marxist-inspired analysis of class. He establishes the definitive role of class identity but undermines that by what is, in effect, an appeal to personal affinity.

This appeal to affinity is also a common strategy of post-colonization writers—the humanistic assertion of love or friendship blurring lines of culture or nation or race or class. It is often employed, however, as if such love or friendship were a substitute for political action—an employment that does not merely limit but undermines Marxist principles. In *Borstal Boy* this is not the case. Behan makes it clear that such personal affinity can fully develop only in conditions of economic equality—and that economic equality can develop only through national independence. Personal affinity does not erase class or nation. Rather, it serves to humanize them, to limit them, as class itself limits nation, or nation, culture. Indeed it, in a sense, undermines the very question of identity. Culture, nation, class—these are three crucial areas of oppression, three areas in which we must work if we are to be able to develop any sense of identity that is not grossly distorted, any society in which friendship can flourish on the basis of affinity. But to take any of them as defining identity is to reduce ourselves to grotesques. Each of us is a vast array of memories, experiences, ideas, aspirations, skills, relations. From this infinite panoply of self, culturalism, nationalism, even a focus on class, selects one part as definitive and discards the others. But no part of self is definitive. And each of us shares different parts with different people—including people from vastly different cultures or nations or classes.

But even this is not the final response implied by Behan’s story. For personal affinity too is limiting. We do not find ourselves drawn to one person or another, so we avoid him/her, ignore his/her needs or interests, etc. Behan

6. For reasons of space, I cannot present a theoretical account of the precise psychological structure of identity. In brief, I take identity to be a sort of self-concept or self-category, which is largely a function of social attribution. Put differently, identity is not intrinsic but imputed, not a matter of essence but of social (and, of course, individual) belief. However, a socially imputed category ("Irish," "Catholic," or whatever) functions as an identity concept precisely insofar as it is taken to be intrinsic and essential, to define what I most truly and most deeply am. For discussion, see Hogan, "Bessie," "Mimeticism," and *Colonialism*. Again, Marxist analyses and social psychological research indicate that what I am is, in fact, highly malleable. It has little if any relation to, for example, religious beliefs, but is largely a matter of the changeable social conditions and institutional structures in which I live and act (see, for example, Holland et al., 226-27 and citations).
criticizes this too. Clearly, the hierarchies of culture, nation, and class are wrong. But, Behan suggests, even the hierarchies produced by personal liking are wrong. They too are a matter of assigning oneself a falsely narrow identity. Finally, Behan suggests that universal empathy is the ultimate and enabling condition for work against class or national or cultural oppression. Empathy or compassion provides political action with both its most admirable motive, and its necessary limits.

**Cultural Identity and Its Institutions**

**British Imperialism in Ireland** devastated indigenous culture more thoroughly than it did in India or Africa. In some ways, the Irish loss of culture is comparable to that of American slaves—extending even to the nearly complete eradication of the Irish language. There is, however, one central aspect of the culture that the English failed to wipe out despite intense and repeated efforts over three centuries: the Catholic faith. In keeping with this, Catholicism has been at the center of Irish cultural self-assertion even up to the present time. While the Irish language has certainly had significance in this area, it does not seem to have aroused and sustained the passion of Irish people with the same consistent intensity.

In keeping with this, Behan does make numerous references to his knowledge of Irish. He clearly values the language and delights in singing Irish songs. But there is little of emotional consequence in those scenes. In contrast, his concern with the Church reaches to his sense of who he is and what his life should be. When first imprisoned, he longs to attend Mass and to see the priest. He recalls with devotion the Blessed Mother Mary, “the consolation of mankind, the mother of God and of man”—her veneration being a deeply important part of Catholic piety. Moreover, this is not merely a matter of an individual’s relation to God. Behan takes deep consolation from his membership in the international Catholic community: “Every Sunday and holiday, I would be at one with hundreds of millions of Catholics, at the sacrifice of the Mass.” He emphasizes the traditionalism of this, its place in his own culture, when he dreams of his entrance into the chapel “to worship the God of our ancestors, and pray to Our Lady, the delight of the Gael.” As if linking the suffering of the Irish people with the sufferings of Jesus, he notes in the dwindling language of those same ancestors, “‘Deorini De’—‘The Tears of God’—they called the fuchsia in Kerry” (54). He goes on to extend the point to Latin, language of the Church, and thus an ancestral language also: “‘Lachryma Christi’—‘The Tears of Christ’” (55). He hopes, “maybe out of being here I would get back into a state of grace” (55).

But Behan has already suggested that the beauty and cultural depth of this Faith are inextricably bound up with an institutional hierarchy that is not only cruel to individuals but opposed to the very nationalism for which it is such an important (cultural) inspiration. Just before the meditations we have been considering, Behan observes, “My father had been excommunicated in 1922 with thousands of others, and so had De Valera, and the Bishops were always
backing the shooting and imprisoning of I.R.A. men” (54). Shortly thereafter, Behan is informed that he too is excommunicated and has no right to the comfort of the Mass or to the sense of shared community. He protests, but the priest will hear nothing of it. In despair he concludes, “the Church was always against Ireland and for the British Empire” (65), going on to trace the Church’s complicity with English colonialism from the 12th century onward. As if to illustrate this brutal complicity between Church and imperial state, the guards “took me to the cell, and beat me in the face ... in the ribs, in the kidneys” (67).

The effect of the beating is less than that of the excommunication. Later, he manages to attend religious instruction, but when his excommunication is remembered, Behan is evicted. Alone in his cell, he surrenders almost entirely to despair (92): “I felt like crying for the first time in years, for the first time since I was a kid of four or five. I had often prayed after Mass at home that God would not let me lose the Faith. I thought of Sister Monica, the old nun that prepared me for my first Confession and Communion and Confirmation, and Father Campbell, the old priest in Gardiner Street that I went to Confession to, and the Christmas numbers of the little holy books we used to have at home. Never, never no more.”

Behan hardly has any choice in the matter. However much he might wish to assert that his identity is cultural, Catholic, the institution of the Church itself prevents it. Behan must face the loss of several false identities in the book (a point made in different contexts by several critics, prominently Kearney). This loss is the most painful because it is the most deeply felt, the one most bound up with his childhood, with his family, with his earliest dreams and hopes. But, in the end, he gains a sort of freedom. The experience “scalded my heart with regard to my religion, but it also lightened it. My sins had fallen from me, because I had almost forgotten that there were such things” (301).

Yet, despite all this, he continues to recognize the significance of cultural self-assertion. “If I was willing to serve Mass, it was in memory of my ancestors standing around a rock, in a lonely glen, for fear of the landlords and their yeomen, or sneaking through a back-lane in Dublin, and giving the password, to hear Mass in a slum public-house, when a priest’s head was worth five pounds and an Irish Catholic had no existence in law” (301).

In criticizing cultural identity, Behan’s focus is clearly on the institutional complicity of the Church with colonialism. He also, however, touches on the sectarianism of cultural self-assertion. For, after centuries of colonialism, Ireland had a significant Protestant minority. At a certain point, cultural identity necessarily runs up against national identity. Lavery is “a good I.R.A. man” from Belfast (174). He is a decent fellow and gives Behan a gift of cigarettes and chocolate. Just before the gift, he explains, “A Presbyterian minister that comes in here is a Derry man, and although he digs with the other foot, he’s still an Irishman.... Catholic or Presbyterian, the Irish” are nonetheless Irish, nonetheless “the same” (175). The point, obviously, is to
assert national identity over cultural identity—a point with which Behan evidently agrees. And yet he hardly sees national identity as definitive either.

**Nationalism, Race, and Betrayal**

Several passages take up, with genuine emotion, the national oppression and exploitation visited upon Ireland by England. In treating these topics, Behan considers the racism that is part of modern national oppression. At the same time he tacitly criticizes the false racist conclusions so easily drawn by anti-colonial nationalists. Indeed, however well-intended Lavery’s comment about all Irish might be, however valuable it might be in opposing sectarian culturalism, Behan makes it abundantly clear that any national generalization is false, whether about the Irish or about the English (Laverty claims to recognize Irish nationality precisely by contrasting the Irish with the English: “it’s only when you’re listening to the English that you realize” the Irish, “Catholic or Presbyterian,” are all “the same” [175]).

The most obvious place where Behan denounces the history of national cruelty is at his trial, where he tells the judge that “[b]y plantation, famine, and massacre you have strived to drive the people of Ireland from off the soil of Ireland, but in seven centuries you have not succeeded” (128). The statement is nationalist in message and in imagery. It roots the people in the land as a geographical basis for their group identity.

Perhaps the most poignant case is “the two Irishmen ... sentenced to death at Birmingham before Christmas.” Behan “knew the man that had planted the bomb and it was neither of the men that had been sentenced.” The execution is doubly tragic. First, these men are as innocent as those killed by the bomb. Second, the bombing itself was the direct result of British imperialism. There should have been no bomb to begin with; there should have been no motive for it. The nationalist, anti-colonial point is clear—especially when Behan notes that the men’s innocence “would not matter very much to the English” (109).

But these are far from the only relevant cases. Behan’s assertion and criticism of national oppression starts at the very beginning of the book, and this opening treatment is particularly crucial, for it contextualizes the discussions that follow. On the second page Behan lists several British atrocities: “Bloody Sunday, when the Black and Tans attacked a football crowd in our street; the massacre at Cork; Balbriggan; Amritsar; the R.A.F. raids on Indian villages” (10). Even such a brief reference suggests the force of a nationalist argument—for no one can escape an oppressor’s bullets through cultural self-assertion alone. And yet, even here, there is already an indication that the nationalist response, while important, cannot in the end define identity. Most obviously, Behan’s list of atrocities itself implies an identity common to Irish and the Indians. Later, Behan extends this to Africans as well. All colonized people share the experience of colonial brutality; it can hardly be used to argue for some insular, national identity.
The problem suggested by Behan in these passages becomes clearer once we recognize the relation between nationalism and racialism. As Etienne Balibar and others have pointed out, a sense of national identity is almost invariably bound up with an imagination of racial identity (see chapter 3 of Balibar and Wallerstein).7 In the case of colonialism, this conjunction is strongly re-enforced by the fact that the colonizers racialize not only their own country but every region they subjugate, defining Indians, Africans, and Irish by putative racial properties. As L. Perry Curtis has discussed, for many years a blatant and demeaning racialism guided even mainstream English thought about the Irish. The Irish were considered to be less advanced in evolution—much like Africans—and were represented as bestial. Behan provides a good example. In prison he is given “a volume of Punch for the twenties. Many of the drawings had to do with Ireland, and Irishmen, drawn with faces like gorillas, shooting Black and Tans who were all like the pictures of Harry Wharton you’d see in the school stories, usually in the back” (38). In connection with this, Behan has no hesitation in drawing attention to the continuity between English colonialism and the Nazi racialism so vehemently—and hypocritically—denounced by the British. Thus he identifies one doctor as “a member of the master race” with “Herrenvolk looks” who “would burn a black man alive ... in the interests of stern duty” (44). At his trial, Behan turns this racialism against the British themselves, asserting that the Irish are “a proud and intelligent people, who had a language, a literature, when the barbarian woad-painted Briton was first learning to walk upright” (128).

As the reference to “stern duty” suggests, Behan is particularly scathing with regard to the English pretense of duty and fair play in their racist policies and practices, as when he speaks of the Englishman’s “labours amongst the lesser breeds, administering the King’s justice equal and fairly to wild Irish and turbulent Pathan, teaching fair play to the wily Arab and a sense of sportsmanship to the smooth Confucian” (80). But here too there is a suggestion that the anti-colonialism implicit in Behan’s irony is not a matter of national identity, however important national independence might be. For Behan identifies Indian, Chinese, Afghan, Arab, and Irish, each with all the others. Clearly, they do not share nationhood. Rather, they share a position in a colonial structure—the position of those who are exploited and brutalized. The only divisions of “identity” here are the racist divisions imposed by the English, who characterize the Irish as wild, the Pathan as turbulent, the Arab as wily, the Chinese as smooth.

But even this is misleading. For Behan suggests that the first error of racialist thinking—an error shared by many anti-colonial nationalists—is in defining individuals by their national/racial category to begin with, as when Behan is repeatedly referred to, not as “Brendan,” an individual, but as

7. Cultural identity too is most often linked with racialism. Indeed, this is true in the case of “Irish Ireland.” I pass over this “sub-national” form of racialism, however, as it does not figure significantly in Behan’s narrative.
“Paddy,” a generic Irishman. We have already seen one more extended instance of this racialist thinking. When Behan says that the innocence of the condemned men “would not matter very much to the English” (109), he is saying that the English would see these two men, not as individuals, with friends and families and memories and hopes for the future, but as instances of their national/racial category. They would view the condemned men simply and solely as Irishmen, as Paddys, virtually indistinguishable from any other Irishmen. Thus their execution could serve as punishment for crimes committed, not so much by other men as by other members of the same national/racial group. The simple fact of racial thinking is precisely what enables this callous injustice.

Perhaps more importantly, this sort of thinking vitiates anti-colonial nationalist identity as well, what Paul refers to as “the simple sectarianism of the nationalist images of the ‘enemy’” (115). Indeed, Behan’s own statement that “the English” would not care about the death of innocent Irishmen is a case of just this sort, for it imputes a false national/racial uniformity to the people of England. But Behan soon repudiates this way of thinking and makes it clear that Irish people may be brutally cruel to the Irish and English people may be deeply sympathetic. In prison Behan meets a guard who is friendly until he recognizes that Behan is Irish and remembers that Behan was arrested for his work with the IRA. He shouts at Behan, “we didn’t do in half enough of you during the Trouble.” One might assume that the man is English, especially since he is claiming that more nationalists should have been killed during the Anglo-Irish War. But he “had a heavy Munster accent” (16). By the end of the book we know that he is by no means exceptional. As a group, the Irish are perhaps the most brutal anti-Irish racists Behan comes upon in prison. Their only goal is to align themselves with the English, to put themselves on the side of the strong against the weak and to eradicate any suspicion—on the part of the English, on their own part—that they share any identity, national or otherwise, with the simian beasts from across the water.

A particularly effective instance of this occurs shortly thereafter when Behan is brought to meet an unknown man. As we subsequently learn, the purpose of this meeting is to see if Behan will “cooperate” with the Royal government and turn informer. Behan, of course, does not yet know this when he enters the room and sees a man with the “thin lips of an Englishman” (27)—a racial stereotype that extends at least as far as India (where the English are sometimes viewed as lacking lips entirely, like snakes). But just as Behan thinks this, the sergeant—earlier identified as having a “heavy Lancashire” accent—introduces them. The sergeant calls Behan by his first name—identifying him as an individual, not as an instance of his race. Behan stresses the point in case the reader might have passed it over.

8. The point is recognized in general terms by most critics; see, for example, Boyle (115-16); Kearney’s discussion (104-07) is particularly valuable and close to the present analysis, though located in a different interpretive context.
This re-enforces our positive view of the sergeant. We have already seen that he is humane—"one of the decent ones." The man who wishes to turn Behan informer is not identified by a Lancashire accent, or even a BBC accent like the officer who gave Behan "several punches in the face" (9). Rather, his name is "O'Sullivan," and he tells Behan, "I'm an Irishman, the same as you" (27). When Behan points out that the two fellows being executed could not have planted the bomb, the sergeant and another officer have to hold O'Sullivan back—the English protecting him against his "fellow" Irishman. And like the "Saxonhead" of the opening sequence, O'Sullivan reaches out to strike Behan—in this case, merely because he dared to defend two men condemned to death for a crime they did not commit.

Examples of this sort accumulate across the memoir. A guard named "Mooney" mocks Behan's Irish accent like an actor in a Victorian skit. O'Sullivan tries to conceal his own Irish accent (64), to occlude his origins, perhaps to "raise himself" above the nation he repudiates. Behan sums up the general point early in the book: "Catholic warders were the worst. Irish Catholics, worst of all. They showed their loyalty to the King and Empire by shouting at me and abusing me a bit more than the others" (48). He repeats it toward the end. "When I was in Walton a lot of the screws were of Irish descent ... and to prove that they were as British as anyone else they were worse to me than anyone else." The point is generalizable. "A Jewish fellow told me it was the same with them" (265).

And it isn't only the guards, detectives, and police. In prison he meets an inmate named "Dale"; "he told me ... that he was Liverpool-Irish and that his mother was from Westport, County Mayo." But this was no friendly overture, no sharing of common national (or cultural) identity. Dale is no better than O'Sullivan—except that his station is far lower, and thus he is less dangerous. Dale immediately informs Behan that "he didn't like Irish people, and that he was an Englishman himself" (74). When Behan makes the mildest attempts to defend the Irish against Dale's prejudice, Dale is infuriated and, like O'Sullivan, stops just short of "giving [Behan] a belt," shouting, "Just shag off, you Killarney bastard, or I'll 'it you" (74). When the guard intervenes, Dale takes action that O'Sullivan would have been proud of—he blames the row on the "Irish bastard" (75), an assignment of culpability the guard is all too ready to accept.

And, again, the English often enough behave in a precisely contrary manner. Consider one warden, with "a happy rough North of England accent" and "an English name." He "used to smile and whisper 'Up the Republic.'... Once or twice he gave me an extra slice of bread." Behan wonders—maybe he does fit the identity scheme: maybe his mother is Irish, or his wife. But, most likely, "he was just a decent man.... You find an odd one everywhere" (48). It is clear that decency is what is important here, not national origin. To presume an identity based on nationality would be to deny the real situation in which Irish Catholic warders were often the most brutal, and English warders were sometimes the most humane.
Here one might ask if there is any pattern to English sympathy, if there is any property shared by the fair and decent English people in *Borstal Boy*. While not absolute, there is something that ties at least many of these people together: class. On the very first page, the difference between the “heavy Lancashire” accent of the kindly sergeant and the BBC accent of the vicious “Saxonhead” may suggest a class difference; it certainly suggests a hierarchy of prestige between regional and standard dialects, and the former is human while the latter is monstrous. In any case, elsewhere the links are straightforward. One guard asks if Behan is “an Irishman” and tells him that the library has a book about Ireland which Behan might like to read—a simple act, but kind, humane. This guard “had a Cockney accent” (68). Later, Behan is concerned that a punishment will deprive him of water. A “big old Cockney” tells him, “You can ‘ave all the bleedin’ water that’s in the tap,” and has someone go “and fetch ‘im up that diet can ful” (86). At first he misidentifies Behan, calling him “Taffy.” When someone corrects him, he responds with a straightforwardly anti-nationalist assertion: “Well, Paddy or Taffy or Jock is all bleedin’ one to me” (86). Later the same man teases Behan, gives him a Christmas custard, and calls him “son” (106). Just after he explains that the Irish Catholic warders are the worst, Behan makes the class point explicit: “The Cockney warders were ... the least vicious of all” (48).

Moreover, Behan’s closest friends in prison and in the reformatory—“Charlie and Joe and Jock and Chewlips”—are English or Protestant or both, different from him in these ways but still “working-class kids” (270). That shared class status is at least one fundamental reason for their sense of mutual identification, despite divergence in cultural background and national origin. One of the most striking instances of this is in Behan’s affinity with Tom Meadows: it “was like meeting somebody from home, not only from your own country, but from your own house and family ... he was more intimate than a friend” (269). This was because they shared a trade—productive labor, what makes us human in Marx’s view.

Indeed, it is not only national identity that is vitiated by class. The institutional structure of the Catholic Church is oppressive in Behan’s analysis, largely because of political economy as well. For the Church’s complicity with colonialism was only an instance of a broader pattern: “the Church was always for the rich against the poor” (54). Moreover, Behan makes clear the economic roots of most of the crimes committed by his fellow prisoners. As one puts it, “I been screwing [stealing] since I was ten year old. I ’ad to. I wouldn’t ’ave eaten if I didn’t”—then the pathetically hopeful coda: “‘Course, it’s different now, a bit more work startin” (132).

Clearly, for Behan as for Marx, the economy is at the very foundation of human social life, encompassing both politics (from criminal law to governmental structure) and culture (including religion). In short, class supersedes other categories of self and solidarity. Of course, it does not eradicate them. National independence remains necessary. Cultural self-assertion remains
important. But economic class is more socially profound, more politically
determinative, more humanly consequential. Indeed, the goal of transforming
culture and society is ultimately justified and rendered deeply, humanly
important by the further and greater goal of transforming class structure.

And yet this does not mean Behan accepts class as identity-defining
either. He does not. However important it may be, Behan does not mark out
class as some sort of essence that defines one group as the same and another
as different.

In rejecting such class essentialism, Behan is in part responding to a strain
of intolerance in communist thought. He illustrates this through Tom, who
denounces Charlie and Joe and Jock and Chewlips as false proletarians, just
as parasitic on society as the “boss class” (269). There is an element of truth
in what Tom says, but it is far from the whole truth. It is true that a criminal
group cannot be relied on to further social change through collective action in
the way (unionized) workers can. But that is due to their material conditions;
it is the result of their own economic disenfranchisement (“I ’ad to. I wouldn’t ’ave eaten if I didn’t’); it is not an identity. Tom treats their location in
cruel conditions and their response to those conditions—narrow self-interest,
driven by a desire for self-preservation—as if it were an intrinsic essence, an
identity. It is unsurprising that, when making these assertions, “Tom was
nearly frothing at the mouth like a Redemptorist preacher” (270).

Moreover, Behan’s criticism of class-based identitarianism is not confined
to “sub-proletarians.” It extends even to the “boss class.” For their personality
and thought and feeling are no more reducible to class than are the personal­
ity and thought and feeling of anyone else. At one point, Behan tells how, at
home, he would “see the boys from Belvedere Jesuit School”—Catholic, and
Irish, but well-off. He and his friends “threw stones at them,” and “if we
cought them in small groups on their own, we beat them up.” Their hate was
entirely class-based: “We only knew they were rich kids” (233). Behan cer­
tainly allows us to understand the feeling. But he does not approve of it.
There is always more—infinitely more—to know about someone than his/her
class. The idea is presented most poignantly through the case of Ken.

Ken’s wealthy upbringing has made the reformatory uniquely painful for
him—so much so that he makes a brave, if foolhardy, attempt at escape,
which fails miserably. His story is made relevant and effective by the bleak
pathos of his life. He is, evidently, guilty of pushing his crippled brother over
a cliff. But his remorse for this act appears, displaced, in the fanciful story of
a brother who is a military officer and who will save him from prison (222), a
story he almost seems to believe himself. For, of course, there is no brother
there to save him when he flees from the borstal, nor any other family, nor
any friend—all that ended when he pushed the wheelchair over the edge.
Behan’s mates call Ken a “bloody Kensington puff” (216). But Behan recog­
nizes that “[h]e was dead lonely; more lonely than I and with more reason” (215)—in part because he was excluded from the fraternity of lower classes;
in part, because he had been alone even before entering the reformatory. “I
couldn’t help being sorry for him, for he was more of a foreigner than I” (216). When Ken leaves for his ill-fated attempt at escape, Behan can “hear the whole of his misery and despair” in his parting words (218). 9

Behan cannot condone any definition of identity that will ignore someone’s “misery and despair,” reduce it to the whining of a “bloody Kensington puff,” dismiss it as irrelevant or, worse still, accept it as deserved. In the end, Behan will not condone any singular, definitive identity, any group definition that occludes the various, irreducible life, the vast, singular joys and sorrows, of individual men and women—not even the identity of class.

Personal Affinity and the Limits of Identity

What then trumps class? If nation overrides culture (in cases of conflict), and class overrides nation (in cases of conflict), what serves to constrain the use of class, to judge its limits, to shape its forms to practical betterment, so that it does not become a smothering identity? The most obvious option here is personal affinity—friendship, the particular liking of individuals drawn to one another for reasons that are not a simple matter of culture or nation or class, but of broader experiences, or dreams, some matter of taste or sensibility, or a habit of thought. Behan rejects Tom’s rigid class-based divisions in part because he knows Charlie and Joe and Jock and Chewlips and is fond of them as individuals; and he rejects their dismissal of Ken because he feels affinity with Ken as well.

At one point, Behan explicitly contrasts personal affinity with national identity, clearly opting for the former: “I’d sooner be with Charlie and Ginger and Browny in Borstal than with my own comrades and countrymen any place else” (114-15). He admits that “[i]t seemed a bit disloyal to me, that I should prefer to be with boys from English cities than with my own countrymen and comrades from Ireland’s hills and glens” (115). But Behan has already laid out the consequences of such loyalty, such complete devotion to national duty. That, after all, was the devotion of the doctor, who “would burn a black man alive or put a pregnant woman out the side of the road in the interests of stern duty” (44). This stern duty, derived from a sense of national identity, is false and perverted—the negation of a broader, human, and thus genuine duty.

A few pages later, he emphasizes again the discrepancy between affinity and national identity. He meets a fellow from Monaghan, but “he might have been from the moon as from Monaghan for all I had in common with him.” And in this case it isn’t even a matter of collaborationism on this fellow’s part. The one thing they do share is “being for Ireland, against England” (117). Being Irish puts them together in one political condition. It does not make them share an identity of any sort.

9. Paul focuses on this relationship also but concludes that it “confirms” Behan’s “fundamental realization of the true nature of his own class position” (116). This seems to me clearly backwards. It is like saying that his sympathy with Charlie and the other English Borstal boys confirms his realization of his Irishness.
This is not to say that Behan accepts affinity as a final criterion for defining one’s self and one’s politics. Indeed, he makes it clear that personal affinity is a flimsy basis for anything. Sometimes affinity is silly and baseless, as when Behan finds himself drawn to a boy named Jones because his identification number was next to Behan’s own (295). Elsewhere, the brutal preferences of national and cultural identity seem too likely a consequence of affinity as well. At one point Behan notes: “A desperate thing for the Germans or the Russians or the Fuzzy-Wuzzies to do as much to one of theirs, and a crime against humanity, but a far different thing it looked to them to do the same to someone else” (82). The statement is true both in terms of national or cultural identity, and in terms of the personal affinities that arise within, say, an army or other group. In the end, it is just as objectionable to base one’s political sense of self and of others on preference and liking as it is to base that sense on national identity or ancestral culture.

But the most effective criticism of a politics or ethics of affinity comes from one of the young borstal boys. Harty wanted to be friends with Behan. But Behan had no interest in the friendship, did not feel drawn to Harty in the least. In a moving speech, Harty explains to Behan what this indifference meant to him. He keeps repeating, “I thought we’d be chinas” (i.e., close friends). He is almost despairing when he says it once again and recounts an incident from early in their stay: “But I still thought we’d be chinas down ’ere, but you hardly walked round with me once since we came. The first Sunday the screw fell us in for exercise, ’e asked me who I wanted to go round with, and I says, ‘Paddy,’ and when I looked round you was going round with that Croydon geezer, and didn’t even see me … and I was odd man out” (159).

Empathy and Universality

The point of this passage cannot simply be that Behan should have befriended Harty. One can be kind and considerate, but one cannot be blamed for being drawn to one person and not another. Rather, the point seems to be that Harty is in no way less deserving of Behan’s fondness than Charlie and Chewlips. He is no less appropriate for sharing ideas and feelings, play and work. It happens that Behan likes some of his fellows and not others. But the preference is not a matter of intrinsic value; it is not, or it is to only a very slight degree, meritocratic. In short, personal affinity is too thin and arbitrary to serve as a basis for defining a group identity of any political consequence.

Each form of identity Behan considers serves to mark off one group and set it against another. Sometimes this is necessary. Sometimes one nation is stifling another, which must then struggle for independence. Sometimes one economic class is crushing another, which must then struggle to alter the economic structure. But these crucial alliances cannot, for Behan, become definitive essences. In the end, no matter what one’s struggle, one must—as a matter of ethics—strive for empathy with all men and women, whatever their culture or nation or class status or origin, and whatever one’s own feeling of
personal affinity with them might be. Ultimately, it is this empathy that allows the Cockney warders to recognize Behan’s humanity and treat him with decency; it is what underlies Behan’s own anger and sorrow over the execution of two innocent men; it is what drives the good actions of characters throughout the book.

In his study of empathy, Mark Davis has discussed to what an extent our evaluations of others are guided by our own empathic dispositions and by our efforts, at any given moment, to empathize with others, especially members of stigmatized groups. Specifically, Davis presents empirical evidence that people with high dispositional empathy are “significantly less likely” (102) to adopt a demeaning or antagonistic view of stigmatized people (e.g., Arabs or gays). Moreover, this is not merely a matter of one’s constitution but is at least in part open to choice. When people are asked to imagine themselves in the place of others, they are much more likely to produce “internal” and positive descriptions and evaluations of those people (99). In other words, even the simple effort of adopting someone else’s point of view can allow one to recognize the human subjectivity of that person, rather than reducing him/her to some putatively essential list of properties.

Behan’s memoir points to the same conclusions. Rather than reifying other people into instances of some master category—religion or race or class or whatever—Behan implicitly urges us to exercise our imagination in empathy, to pursue empathic identification, not categorical identity. To see someone solely as a member of a group is to reduce him/her to one feeling, one motive, one value. But, subjectively understood, each one of us is fluid, impermanent, multiple. Behan stresses this: “from my point of view I was as comic as I was pathetic and as comic as I was sinister; for such is the condition of man in this world” (243). Thinking of others as subjects—contradictory, uncertain, moody fluxes of sense and memory and idea—is an act we can train ourselves to perform. Behan illustrates the point neatly in a conversation with Jock. Jock mentions the guard with whom he is working: “My screw is all right. He was years in India and hates black men, that’s all.” Behan immediately responds by empathically adopting the point of view of those Indians: “Maybe the black men weren’t out of their minds about him either” (266).

The back cover of my edition highlights one statement “from Brendan Behan’s own irreverent tongue”: “I respect kindness to human beings first of all, and kindness to animals. I don’t respect the law; I have a total irreverence for anything connected with society except that which makes the roads safer, the beer stronger, the food cheaper, and old men and old women warmer in the winter and happier in the summer.” This effectively capsulizes Behan’s view of ethics, politics, and identity after (or during or before) colonialism. Frank O’Connor in effect corroborates the point when he explains how “Dublin is full of stories of [Behan’s] kindness to old people, sick people, and down and outs” (90). As just noted, the cover indicates that Behan’s statement is “irreverent.” But it seems that the exact opposite is the case. The
attitude could be characterized as Kantian or humanist or anarchist, but it could also be viewed as Catholic—without the institutional structure of the Church. In that way, the statement almost returns us to cultural self-assertion—but cultural self-assertion stripped of its oppressive internal hierarchies and its sectarianism, cultural self-assertion reduced to a sort of pure, human origin. For what Behan asserts in this passage is, in effect, the non-legalistic, ethical universalism of Jesus, which was, as Behan well knew, an empathic universalism—a catholicity—entirely at odds with its later institutional and cultural uses.¹⁰

But that is not all there is to it. For Behan’s ethical universalism remains deeply political as well, embedded in the concrete and necessary conditions of an independent government operating for the social welfare of all its citizenry (making the roads safer, the food cheaper, the houses of old people warmer in winter). Indeed, while a sense of human empathy may be necessary to the humane pursuit of these political goals to begin with, the full development of such empathy can only occur in non-oppressive conditions. In prison when the guards beat a new inmate until he loses consciousness, it makes all the other prisoners happy—not because they enjoy the suffering but because they know the presiding officer will be in a better mood afterwards. Their most human quality—a sense of empathic identification with suffering people—is eroded by a structure of cruelty. In short, Behan’s ultimate emphasis on empathic universalism (as Lalita Pandit has characterized the similar attitude of Rabindranath Tagore [207]) does not at all undermine his commitment to cultural freedom, national self-determination, and economic equality. While it provides a check on their goals and methods, it simultaneously repeats and elevates their importance. For without such freedom and self-determination and, especially, without such equality, we cannot develop to our full ethical potential. And when we cannot develop this potential, the most human part of us withers, and we become more and more like those guards whose spirits rise when they have battered a new inmate until his own subjectivity is blotted out by pain, then vertigo, then unconsciousness.

Works Cited


¹⁰ For a more elaborate discussion of positive Christian elements in Borstal Boy, see Schrank.
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