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**Brendan Behan's France. Encounters in Saint-Germain-des-Prés.**  
*Jean-Philippe Hentz, Université Strasbourg II*

In contrast to his featuring of Ireland and New York in *Brendan Behan's Island* and *Brendan Behan's New York* respectively, Behan did not use France or Paris as subject for his books. However, France, Paris and the district of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, a kind of village within the city, played important roles in Brendan Behan's development, particularly through, and on account of, the influences and personalities he encountered there. Those experiences, enhanced by symbolical aspects of place which reflected and reinforced key characteristics of his identity, convictions and literary endeavours, would enrich his subsequent writing.

There are very few well-informed sources about Behan's stays in Paris and it is mainly in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel*, the second volume of his autobiography, that some account of his Parisian adventures is to be found. The very nature of autobiography suggests that, the author's sincerity notwithstanding, the account should be treated with a degree of caution and should not be accepted as totally factual. The need for such prudence is accentuated by the fact that Behan did not physically write this book. He dictated the material and thus can be seen to have taken on a traditional storytelling stance, with all the liberties that such a role implies.

Brendan Behan's France is first an ideal place, that of the Revolution and of the Republican ideals; Paris is the town where the writer, free from any shackles of the past, can reveal himself to himself, and to others. But the past is actually and unavoidably present, and Paris is haunted by the ghosts of Behan's predecessors, with whom he has

to compromise until he ultimately negotiates his own re-appropriation of that place. It is through a prism of Parisian cosmopolitanism that the renewal and regeneration of his vision of Ireland are accomplished.

### **Paris and the revolutionary writer**

#### *France and French Republican ideals*

The first encounter between Brendan Behan and France can be traced back to his childhood. Significantly, it was a literary meeting. His father, Stephen Behan, read French books - in particular, Zola's novels and Maupassant's short stories - to his children. Stephen Behan was a house painter, but he was also an educated man who had attended a Jesuit school and whose first ambition had been to enter the priesthood. He was eager to hand down his knowledge and enthusiasms to his children. Thus, young Brendan, a bookworm, was introduced at an early age to the works of French writers, and also to the writings of Irishmen who had lived in France. Pre-eminent in that latter group was Wolfe Tone who had recorded accounts of his visits to Paris between 1796 and 1798.

Tone was a founding member of the United Irishmen and an iconic figure for Republicans. In the Pantheon of the Behan family, and hence in the estimation of Brendan, Tone ranked highly. Brendan's interest and admiration can be deduced from his eagerness to contribute, at the age of fourteen, to an Irish Republican journal entitled the *Wolfe Tone Weekly*. Not alone had Paris been a place of refuge for Wolfe Tone, it was also the cradle of his Republican convictions, and the launching pad from which he attempted to organise French aid for Ireland's independence struggle. Thus, through Tone, the French language, culture, history and capital city were intimately linked with

the Republican ideals that Brendan Behan shared with his family. Hence, Stephen Behan's desire to familiarize his children with French at an early age is actually rather more akin to a political act than to the disinterested transmission of a certain erudition. This link between the French language and Irish Republican ideals has its origins in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when revolutionary France was seen as the country which would deliver Ireland from the occupying British authority. France never actually accomplished that task but the hope lived on and France was presented as "a brother country in religion, from which the liberating expedition can come some day,"<sup>6</sup> a myth that would, in time, give rise to a Republican and revolutionary ideal. The linkage between France and the Irish Republican struggle can be found in Brendan Behan's life, during the times of his imprisonment in Arbour Hill and the Curragh as result of involvement in IRA activities. His prison years, from 1942 to 1946, were periods during which he had opportunity to further his education, notably his knowledge of the Irish language, but also that of French. As he wrote to his cousin, Séamus de Búrca, on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1943:

Ask Sean as well, to ask Fred if he has the Maupassant in the French because I'm learning it now (not doing much good at it tho! Peadar O'Flaherty who teaches it, says I'm the laziest bleeder God ever put life into! (Mikhail 1992, 24)

The "Maupassant" in question is apparently the one that his father used to read to him when he was a child, but the passive child who listened without always understanding what was being read to him is now taking up his father's torch and is becoming an adult capable of acting on the text through his own reading – Behan had become a student. These "studies" finally transform the prison into a kind of university, a place of learning where knowledge is exchanged and where real lectures, such as those given by Peadar O'Flaherty, are organised. This representation of prison is quite reminiscent of that

given by one of Behan's mentors, Frank O'Connor, in *An Only Child*, the first volume of his autobiography: "In fact, [prison] was the nearest thing I could have found to life on a college campus [...]." (O'Connor 1970, 205)

Like O'Connor, who was imprisoned during the Civil War because of his Republican commitment, Brendan Behan is a political prisoner who takes advantage of prison to have access to a knowledge which might otherwise have been out of his reach. Moreover, the fact that he studies Irish and French at the same time is far from being insignificant: both languages are inextricably associated with his Republican and nationalist political ideals; learning them implies as much a genuine interest as an ideological bias. As Behan would amply prove in later years, this political predilection places him in the direct line of descent from the relationship that his father had with the French language.

*First encounter with Paris and birth of the writer*

In 1948, Brendan Behan went for the first time to Paris, where he spent a few months. This stay happened shortly after he had been released from prison where he had served four months for molesting a policeman. Apart from a few short visits back to Ireland, Behan continued to live in Paris until 1950, and he subsequently returned frequently to that city. His choice to settle in Paris may have arisen from several motives: his need to go away from Ireland; the impossibility for him to go to Great Britain, where he was *persona non grata*; his doubts concerning his vocation as a writer and consequently his desire to live in a town which had been the refuge of numerous Irish writers such as Joyce, Wilde or Beckett. That latter reason is suggested by Colbert Kearney in *The Writings of Brendan Behan*:

Paris had the reputation of being an artist's city and many writers had served their apprenticeship there. It might be what he needed: perhaps he could lose himself and his reputation in a new city and release the artist in himself. (Kearney 1977, 32)

It may be claimed that his Parisian period allowed Behan to reveal himself to himself as a writer, and to move from the orality of the raconteur and entertainer that he had been up till then, to more serious writing. This would be the opinion of Ulick O'Connor in *Brendan Behan*:

Though he had begun for the first time to acquire a writer's discipline in Paris, Brendan behaved from time to time just as if he were back in Dublin. The difference was that in between bouts of drinking in Paris he worked hard: before this in Dublin the only time he had found himself able to write consistently was when he was in prison. [...] In Paris they were interested in what you had done, not what you might do. It was a working writer's city, with an indifference to reputation, especially to those gained outside it, that bordered on the insular. Here Brendan formed habits of regular writing hours and became aware of the need for re-writing. He *worked* at writing - as a craft and not as a means of occupying himself when he wasn't house-painting or drinking. When he finally settled back in Dublin in 1950 he was no longer just an entertaining talker who intended to be a writer: he was a writer who liked to talk a lot. (O'Connor 1972, 140-141)

Indeed, it appears that it was in Paris that Behan began to work on the writing of *Borstal Boy*, of which Ulick O'Connor says that "it took Paris to make him begin it." (O'Connor 1972, 142) In addition, he started to write for the theatre while at the same time working as a journalist. It was also in Paris that he wrote two short stories, *A Woman of No Standing* and *The Confirmation Suit*, which were published in 1950 and 1953 respectively. In the winter of 1952, Behan also published in *Points*, an English avant-garde journal in Paris, an article about his being arrested in Liverpool at the age of

sixteen. This article is in fact the earliest version of the opening pages of *Borstal Boy*, the first volume of his autobiography that would be published in 1957.

If Paris as a place apart gave Brendan Behan the opportunity to develop and establish his status and his vocation as a writer, that progress probably owed much also to his encounters with members of post-war Parisian literary circles, groups that he assiduously frequented. On his arrival in Paris, as he recounts in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel*, Behan went straight to the district of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the Mecca of the French and international intelligentsia of the time. For Behan, Saint-Germain-des-Prés actually becomes the synecdoche of Paris and of France as a whole, all concentrated in essence in this district whose boundaries he never seems to cross. The focus on area is reminiscent of a typical motif of working-class writing: the importance of the district and its components in the working-class culture. Behan transposes the approach onto this part of Paris which becomes, in a way, the French equivalent of Behan's Dublin locality. Moreover, Behan categorically refused to be considered as a tourist in Paris, as can be read in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* when a young Irishwoman calls him a tourist:

I choked with indignation, and Desmond, Donal and George gazed at her with disgust. The foul word that had just left her lips stamped her, in all our eyes, as a cad, or a caddess. It's not a word used in polite society along the boulevards, unless you are speaking of somebody else, of course. (Behan 1967, 213)

The very formal vocabulary used in this extract suggests an ironic treatment of the haughtiness of the "polite society," an appellation which describes the cosmopolitan denizens of Saint-Germain-des Prés rather than the local population. At the same time, it intimates a sincere feeling of belonging to this place that was his home as a writer.

That he was also an inhabitant of a space that he had purposely appropriated, and so became a citizen of Paris, will be discussed later. Behan's right to belong is substantiated by the degree of his integration into the local community: he was friends both with Samuel Beckett and Albert Camus, notorious frequenter of the *Café de Flore* and *Les Deux Magots*; he mixed with the Existentialists and in other literary and artistic avant-garde circles of the time; Boris Vian, a writer and musician, as well as a prominent figure in the night life of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, translated Behan's successful play *The Quare Fellow* into French.

*Jean Genet – an intertextual encounter*

The district of Saint-Germain-des-Prés provides Behan with a pretext for evoking the writer Jean Genet, who was closely linked to Sartre. Although Behan never met Genet personally, it is possible to talk about a kind of intertextual encounter between the two writers. Genet was a former thief who had spent several years both in prison and in a reformatory that could be compared to a Borstal School. His experience of the reformatory was turned into an autobiographical novel entitled *Miracle de la Rose*, published in 1946. Behan's acquaintance with that text is evidenced in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel*:

I had extracts of his autobiography read to me, some of which rose the hair on my head. And, as my mother once remarked, that which would shock Brendan Behan would turn thousands grayes. (Behan 1967, 173)

If this sometimes very blunt and frank narrative may have shocked Behan, I would argue that – contrary to Ulick O'Connor's assertion – he had nonetheless a real admiration for Genet and that *Borstal Boy* was influenced by *Miracle de la rose*. Indeed,

if books such as the autobiography of Wolfe Tone, Mitchel's *Jail Journal* or Tom Clarke's *Glimpses of an Irish Felon's Prison Life* have been considered as sources of inspiration for the writing of *Borstal Boy*, the fact is that *Borstal Boy* actually quickly deviates from narrative codes of that type although it may have initially echoed or followed them. Thus, like in any prison life narrative, the opening pages of *Borstal Boy* deal with Behan's arrest, trial and imprisonment, alluding to everything that happened in his life before these events and portraying a character ready to fight and to sacrifice himself in defence of a cause. This posture, or pose, disappears with Behan's entrance to Borstal and it is replaced by a very positive representation of incarceration, in which political convictions seem to take a back seat while emphasis is placed on good-companionship, friendship and the initiation of the young man. That approach corresponds more closely to the codes of the *Bildungsroman* than to those of the prison life memoir.

If the theme of homosexuality, omnipresent in Genet's book, does not appear in Behan's autobiography or at least not as obviously so, there is nevertheless a certain resemblance between *Miracle de la rose* and *Borstal Boy*. Both texts share the themes of the beauty of youth and, within the fenced-in worlds of these institutions, the themes of the closeness of the friendships and the microsocieties which are formed therein, all with their own rules. Besides, in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel*, Behan draws a kind of parallel between Genet's situation and his own:

[Genet] was a burglar for many years and also a poet. He was arrested many times for breaking and entering and each time refused to recognize the Court. [...] Monsieur Genet told the Court that he robbed as an existentialist, and had a conscientious objection to keeping his hands easy. In a less civilized country, he would have been engaged in the production of mailbags, four stitches to the inch. But Sartre and a

number of other writers demanded that they leave the boy alone. And he is now an honored French writer, a credit to his country and the proprietor of an estate in the country. (Behan 1967, 172-173)

Even though Behan and Genet were not arrested on similar charges, it should be noted that Behan, like Genet, had refused on several occasions to recognise the court before which he appeared, and had also asked for his trials to be held solely in the Irish language. An instance of these demands is recorded in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel*. The occasion is that of Behan's 1942 trial for involvement, with several of his IRA comrades, in a shooting at Glasnevin cemetery:

As we were soldiers of the Irish Republican Army we refused to recognize the Court, and the Court entered pleas of "not guilty", after it had been established that we were of right mind. (Behan 1967, 72)

Behan's expressed motivations are rather political while those of Genet tend towards the philosophical, but both of them express the same intent to defeat a legal system that can be seen as incompetent or without jurisdiction because it considers as an offence or a crime what the defendants present as legitimate actions that are in keeping with their convictions.

The consequences of courtroom defiance were not, however, the same for Behan as for Genet. The support for Genet from Sartre and other intellectuals of the time promoted recognition of his talent and of his status as a writer. As for Behan, he went to prison to stitch mailbags. Indeed, when he says that "[i]n a less civilized country, he would have been engaged in the production of mailbags, four stitches to the inch", he actually refers to his own experience and thus may be seen as introducing a subtle, and possibly bitter, criticism of an under-civilised Ireland that is incapable of recognising the talent of its own writers. The purpose is less to shower praise upon France than to

use that country as a counterpoint to Ireland which, quoting Seán O Casey, he reduces to “a great country to get a letter from.” (Behan 1967, 215)

### **Paris and the ghosts of the past: encounters and confrontations**

#### *Paris or the ideal Ireland*

Over decades and generations, France, and Paris in particular, provided refuge for exiled Irish writers and allowed publication of works which would not have been possible in the environment of censorship at home. However, Paris like London or New York also became a kind of double of Dublin in the negative, a place where writers like Brendan Behan went in search of an ideal Ireland in which they would actually have a place. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd identifies 1892 as the year when Paris took London’s place as a refuge for the Irish writers. It was in London in that year that Oscar Wilde was not allowed to stage his play *Salomé*. Consequently, he had *Salomé* published in Paris with “the assertion that Paris was now the true home of personal freedom.” (Kiberd 1996, 161) According to Kiberd, this event was a turning point: “Certainly, the axis which had once run from Dublin to London now ran [run] from Dublin to Paris instead.” (Kiberd 1996, 161)

Thus Paris became the place where the Irish writer could, at the same time, go in search of himself and build up his own ideal Ireland. This is clearly expressed in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* when Behan evokes Paris through the more or less famous Irishmen who lived there:

[...] I knew I would come back to France, which I had grown to love very dearly and felt was part of my inheritance. After all, you might say that the Latin Quarter was bounded by the Rue du Bac on the northwest by the river and the Irish college on the southeast at the Rue des Irlandais, up behind the Pantheon, where Wolfe Tone plotted to

free a people and destroy an empire on one hundred guineas and a hard neck, and where students waved their black shovel hats and cheered John Mitchel, the old Republican Ulsterman, son of a Unitarian minister, who wiped his eyes from the warmth of a Papist welcome.

“Always Ireland with your people,” said Jeus. “You think everything in regard to yourselves.”

Even the French Revolution, and who is more entitled? It was an Irishman led the people in the attack on the Bastille. He was a Wexfordman and a cobbler by the name of Kavanagh. (Behan 1967, 180-181)

The Latin Quarter is truly transfigured and re-appropriated by an Irish reading of its geography. It becomes the ideal Ireland of Brendan Behan: a Republican, revolutionary Ireland, where religions are not sources of conflicts and where the heroes are still alive. Furthermore, the allusion to the Pantheon is quite revealing: this place, where the key figures of the French history of the last two centuries are buried, also seems to encompass in its aura the names of the Irishmen who marked the Republican struggle. This is in keeping with the ideological dimension of France, seen as a symbol of the Republican ideals and thus as a part of Behan's “inheritance”. Jeus's comment, “Always Ireland with your people [...] You think everything in regard to yourselves”, rather suggests a kind of Irish national egocentricity, but does actually not correspond to the spirit of what Behan says. It seems clear that there is no intention to relate everything to oneself, but rather to go in search of oneself, to find again the source of a national identity which also includes cosmopolitanism.

This idea of an identity which would be both national and cosmopolitan is very evident in Behan's works, as it already was in those of Joyce and O'Casey. Most notably, it is apparent in the chronicles that Behan wrote for the *Irish Press* from 1954 onwards and which are anecdotes about Dublin life and the urban culture. Those

chronicles put Behan into the position of an “urban raconteur”, in the words of John Brannigan who also notes in *Brendan Behan: Cultural nationalism and the revisionist writer* that:

[These anecdotes] functioned as a site of definition, recollection, debate and comparison, in which [Behan] identified Dublin with the metropolitan street cultures of Paris, New York and London, with the post-war drive for urban regeneration which was sweeping changes across Europe, and with the potent legacy of the cultural and political revival which had transformed Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century. (Brannigan 2002, 74-75)

We may find in this type of writing what was already in embryo in Behan’s relation to Paris, that is a hybridization of the national and international, traditional and urban cultures. Like the re-appropriated geography of the Latin Quarter, this hybridization allows the writer to look at the world around him, and particularly at Ireland, in a critical way, while at the same time remaining strongly attached to his national culture. However, if France is a place from which one might take a critical look at Ireland, the reverse is also true. This appears for example in Behan’s use, or sometimes counter-use, of the Irish language, as John Brannigan remarks:

Behan used his poetic writings in Gaelic as a space in which to experiment with the relationship between style and contemporary themes, between the apparent solidity of traditional forms and the ‘shocking’ or disorientating effects of new experiences and materials. (Brannigan 2002, 65)

What John Brannigan describes is clearly apparent in the poem entitled “Oscar Wilde”, whose title and subtitle are in French and whose text is in Irish. It is also evident [Gaelic, or] in the French title of the poem “L’Existentialisme”, that is subtitled in English “An Echo of Saint-Germain-des-Prés,” and the main text of which is in Irish.

This poem mocks the Sartrian philosophy, which was quite fashionable at the time of Behan's first stay in Paris and which Behan considered as laughable, as can be inferred from the last lines of the poem :

[...] there's not a bit  
Of sense or pain, still less  
Truth, in what I say  
Or in the opposite way. (O'Connor 1972, 125)

The use of three different languages to write this poem could be explained in the following way: Existentialism, because it is above all a typically French issue, does not translate into another language, which ironically suggests that one has to be French to understand that way of thinking. But Existentialism also established the international fame of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, a phenomenon which is suggested by "An Echo" in the English subtitle. However, in English, the understanding of what is Existentialism has already become superficial; it is now a mere echo, the reverberation of a thought, an empty shell. Through rendering the body of the poem's text in Irish, Behan highlights what he deems to be the absurdity of this philosophy, and he mocks a sterile quest for meaning and an intellectual pose which is not based on anything tangible. This poem is actually quite reminiscent of the Gaelic satires of the 17th century, a tradition which Behan takes up, not to apply it to a local Irish element this time, but to a Parisian and cosmopolitan culture than can be deciphered and possibly criticised through this traditional writing approach that, in turn, reinforces the discrepancy already suggested by irony.

*Encounters with ghosts*

If France and Ireland have a dig at each other in Behan's works, it may be attributed to the hardships of the exiled writer, and to the disillusionment that Behan underwent in France, as he had done at home. Apart from purely financial worries (which led him to undertake activities that were only barely legal) Behan was also confronted by the sometimes oppressive presence of the ghosts of his Irish predecessors. Foremost among the ghosts were Oscar Wilde, and especially James Joyce. In Brannigan's opinion the works of Joyce, and also in Ireland itself, those of the writers of the Revival, were raised almost to the status of literary norm, thus exerting such an influence that succeeding writers finally considered themselves as parasites. For instance, Behan recounts in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* how he was asked, in the Parisian bars, to talk about Joyce and Ireland. This request was repeated so frequently that he eventually wrote a poem entitled "Gratitude to Joyce,"<sup>7</sup> because talking about Joyce and Ireland was a good way for him to be offered drinks by his audience :

Here in the Rue St André des Arts,  
Plastered in an Arab Tavern,  
I explain you to an eager Frenchman,  
Ex-G.I.s and a drunken Russian.  
Of all you wrote I explain each part,  
Drinking Pernod in France because of your art.  
(O'Connor 1972, 136)

It can be inferred from those six first lines of the poem that Behan, while anxious to escape from the oppressing influence of his illustrious predecessors and simultaneously hoping that Paris would be the place where he could be free from that weight, is finally confronted with James Joyce's omnipresence. This could explain the attraction for him of cosmopolitanism and the search for other models, like Genet. Both pursuits would

help to resist this omnipresent shadow and avoid what John Brannigan calls the “culture of indebtedness”<sup>8</sup>:

In [‘Gratitude to Joyce’], Behan reveals his anxiety about his parasitical relationship to Joyce, living (or in this case drinking) off the stories that he can tell to foreign audiences eager to hear about the great Irish author. Behan is describing the sterile function which he performs, reduced to glorifying [glorifying] the works of the dead in return for the anaesthetic rewards of drunkenness. (Brannigan 2002, 33)

However, it is the international renown of writers such as Joyce and Yeats which contributed towards making Ireland one of the vibrant centres of contemporary Western literature. The corollary of that status is that later writers, such as Behan, stood to benefit from this renown, and to profit by the achievements of their predecessors. This intergenerational reciprocity is acknowledged by Behan in the last lines of the same poem:

If I were you  
And you were me,  
Coming from Les Halles  
Roaring, with a load of cognac,  
Belly full, on the tippie,  
A verse or two in my honour you'd scribble.  
(O'Connor 1972, 136)

The end of the poem attempts to redress the balance through the ostensibly casual way in which Behan puts himself on an equal footing with Joyce. This postulated equality and reciprocity highlights the opportunistic nature of Behan's processes, since he finally cashes in on Joyce's image more than he actually suffers from it. It would appear that, if one accepts that the “parasitical relationship” evoked by Brannigan effectively exists, it is provoked less by the agonizing influence of the past than by the law of supply and demand. Indeed, in a very pragmatic way, Behan supplies Irishness when there is a demand for Irishness, provided that he is paid for it.

This idea of a commercial transaction, and of literature reduced to a token for barter or commerce, is metaphorically expressed in the “pornography” Behan claimed to have written for French magazines and in his alleged activity as a pimp in Paris over a few months. There is actually no trace of substantiating evidence for the truthfulness of these assertions. Yet, one may nevertheless consider that Behan told the truth, but in his own way, a feature that, according to Ulick O’Connor, is typical of his writing:

It is inherent in Brendan’s style of recounting autobiographical episodes that he slips easily into the story-teller’s device of exaggeration for the sake of the effect on the listener. (O’Connor 1972, 55)

Taking this peculiarity of Behan’s style into account, and bearing in mind his quality of “urban raconteur,” one has grounds for assuming that “pornography” in this case refers to the parabolical writing of the confrontation of the writer with the reality of a work which, like pornography, implies the production of purely commercial written works, devoid of any artistic pretension, such as journalism for instance. Indeed, in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel*, the act of writing pornography is directly linked to journalism:

George explained over breakfast that one of his extramural activities was writing pornography, and if ever I was in the need, it would be no trouble to put the writing of one or two articles in my way. (Behan 1967, 180)

or:

After I had agreed to write pornography in English for French magazines and poems in Irish and stories in English for the American magazine, *Points*, we settled down to more serious business. (Behan, 1967, 211)

These two extracts clearly link pornography to a certain kind of journalism. Notably in the first one, the word “articles” rather refers to journalism than to pornographic

writing, with which one might sooner associate the word “stories.” Hence, although Behan may actually have written pornography for French magazines, this formulation could also refer to a form of literary prostitution. The comparison is particularly reminiscent of *The Catcher in the Rye*, a book that Behan especially liked. At the beginning of that novel, Holden Caulfield talks about his brother, D.B., a writer who lives in Hollywood where he writes scenarios for the cinema:

[D.B.] used to be just a regular writer, when he was home. [...] Now he's out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute. (Salinger 1991, 1-2)

The motif of prostitution appears in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* when Behan recounts the period during which he supposedly worked as a pimp in Paris, mostly “providing” American punters. In fact, in a quite revealing way, it is also in this episode of the book that he recalls the evenings he spent talking about his native soil:

“That the giving hand may never falter,” I would say, as the Americans peeled off a few dollar notes for my trouble, and I would entertain the astonished company with songs about my native land. Rich in liquor, my voice carried round the room. (Behan 1967, 216)

The transaction between the pimp and the punter, and that between the storyteller and his audience, are effected simultaneously, as if they were one and the same deal. While it cannot be asserted with certainty that Behan actually was a pimp for Parisian prostitutes, it can surely be claimed that he undoubtedly felt like the pimp of Joyce and Ireland, which he would sell to the highest bidder. But this “commerce” allowed him at the same time to part with an unwanted inheritance, to take away its sacred aura and to replace it with a chosen inheritance.

Brendan Behan's France, the symbol of the Republican struggle and the refuge of Wolfe Tone, the hero of his youth, thus also became the symbol of (and the location for) his emancipation as a writer. The liberating force of his Parisian experience actually allowed him to carry out a necessary metamorphosis from raconteur to writer, and to free himself from sometimes stifling literary influences in order to go and find his own style of writing. If Paris was the place where Behan was confronted with the difficult everyday reality of a writer-to-be, it also provided him with a second home, the district of Saint-Germain-des-Prés which became, in his own words, a part of his inheritance, a constituent element of his identity. In the mirror held out to him by Paris, it is finally himself that Behan encountered, or rather the writer that he had carried within himself at his arrival and who found in Paris the propitious conditions for his expression.

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