

# Borstal Boy: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Prisoner

COLBERT KEARNEY

AT first sight, Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy* seems to be devoid of any structure other than simple chronology, yet this apparent carelessness is the disarming deception of the storyteller, one of the means by which the narrator makes us believe in the entirely spontaneous truth of his tale. It is quite easy to establish that the work does not contain the whole historical truth, the truth of fact, and, far from being a piece of spontaneous recounting, is the result of many beginnings and revisions. What the novel does contain is the truth of fiction: the penal institutions bear much the same relationship to *Borstal Boy* as the island does to *Robinson Crusoe*. Beneath the illusion of actuality is a structure which expresses the development of a personality. *Borstal Boy* is a work of creative autobiography, that *genre* in which the author scrutinises his formative years in the light of his later vision of himself. True to the style and scope of an oral delivery — which the novel pretends to be — the structure consists of a series of unmaskings: the narrator is perpetually posing and examining the pose. The young lad who is arrested in Liverpool has very definite views of himself and his role; these have undergone many painful changes by the time he returns to Dublin.

Asked to single out the most characteristic note of Irish poetry, Professor Sean Lucy chose what he termed "dramatic self-awareness":

something which for good or ill contains the power and appetite to see ourselves, and those things and people

that catch our imagination, in terms of dynamic, imaginatively-compelling role.<sup>1</sup>

This self-awareness is the essential element in Behan's style. It can be shown that the tradition out of which he wrote was the native Irish tradition which, deprived of libraries and printing presses, survived in oral form.<sup>2</sup> Reading *Borstal Boy* is like being in the audience at a live performance. The *seanchai*, the Gaelic storyteller, commands attention not merely by relating but also by re-enacting; he achieves depth not by commentary or analysis but by the dramatic power of his performance. In his presence one is close to the primal roots of drama.

In 1939, aged sixteen, Behan travelled to England to strike a blow for Ireland by disrupting the British war-effort with bombs. His action was not sanctioned by the I.R.A. leadership and was against the advice of family and friends. He was tailed on arrival by the Liverpool police and the novel opens as the detectives enter Behan's digs and catch him about to throw his bomb-making equipment out the window.

The unofficial nature of the invasion is not mentioned in the book where Behan presents himself as the traditional volunteer under arrest, making the customary statement of loyalty to the cause and defiance of the Crown. He is surprised at the lack of reaction from his captors but comforts himself by imagining the reception at home:

The left-wing element in the movement would be delighted, and the others, the crow-thumpers, could not say anything against me, because I was a good Volunteer, captured carrying the struggle to England's doorstep . . . .<sup>3</sup>

He acts out his role as a "felon of our land," a role immortalised in legend and in the prison memoirs of men like John Mitchel and Tom Clarke. He ends his statement with the scaffold-cry of the Manchester Martyrs, "God save Ireland," and the memory of the ballad which commemorates them enables him to look defiance at his captors:



accent and name, Larry Houlihan, but despite his origins (or, perhaps, because of them) Houlihan goes out of his way to treat the Irish prisoner with special harshness. On the other hand there was Charlie, one of the common criminals, a sailor who was later to be killed in a convoy. Charlie came from a London suburb but showed more fellow-feeling with Behan than did the Irish constable. Behan and Charlie become "chinas" (mates), despite the fact that as I.R.A. Volunteer and Royal Navy seaman they are technically at war with each other.

The young prisoner's confusion is not limited to questions of nationality unless, in the Irish context, religion be considered an aspect of nationality. Despite numerous confrontations and excommunications, the average Volunteer was a staunch Catholic and Behan, though not ostentatious in his religious observances, was essentially a devout Catholic. In the gloom and isolation of his cell, he wonders if he will be able to attend mass. (He assumes that the priest will be Irish.) His spirits rise as he follows the mass — without a book, he adds proudly — and he loses his loneliness in communion with the universal church. It was "like being let to the warmth of a big turf fire this cold Sunday morning" (p. 63). Benediction affords him an opportunity to raise his fine singing voice in clouds of incense and nostalgia and he returns to his cell a much happier boy.

There was a black dark frost outside, and the cocoa was smashing and warm. It was now four o'clock and the biggest part of the week-end punched in, thanks be to God. (p. 67)

Nor is the sense of communion confined to the chapel: Charlie has solemnly declared that, despite the fact that some of the warders and prisoners have it in for Behan because of his membership of the I.R.A., he remains Behan's china. However, this new sense of buoyancy is not to last.

Behan is pleased when ordered to see the Catholic chaplain but is shocked to be greeted with a list of

charges against the I.R.A. and an ultimatum to choose between it and the Catholic church. Behan loses his temper and replies with a catalogue of the despotic tendencies of the hierarchy. For insulting a Catholic priest he is beaten up by Protestant warders and he realises that he is being punished by one element of the prison establishment for insubordination to another. Prison regulations required that all prisoners attend the services of the religion listed on their papers and thus the priest is powerless to excommunicate Behan effectively. Religious services were popular among prisoners as a means of breaking the monotony of their lives and the most popular of all was the Friday night religious instruction for R.C.'s which was conducted around the basis of many prisoners' dreams, an open fire. Behan brought his chair as closely as he could to the fire and other prisoners very kindly make room for him. Enscathed in such luxury, he is incapable of bearing malice and he tells himself that perhaps the priest was not altogether bad but merely doing his duty as he thought best. Then a warder taps him on the shoulder and he is told that, on the priest's instructions, he is to be returned to his cell. The effect is traumatic. He could survive beatings, abuse, solitary confinement but this rejection is different and he is close to tears for the first time in years. He recalls the kindness he had received as a child from Sister Monica and Father Campbell and bitterly reminds himself that he must forget it and all that it meant for him.

Wasn't I the soft eedgit all the same, to expect anything more off that fat bastard of a druid? Weren't the priests famous for backing up the warders even the time of the Fenians? When Dr. Gallagher was driven mad in Chatham Prison.

But I wouldn't always be inside, and if I could do the like of Father Lane an ill turn in my turn, by Jesus and I'd be the boy to do it.

Let them come to me some time at home with their creeping Jesus old gab, I'd say to them: what about this night in Walton Jail, you bastards? (p. 104)

(This is perhaps the only instance in the entire book of unadulterated bitterness.) In the allusion to Tom Clarke's account of the fate of Dr. Gallagher we notice Behan retreating for protection into the role of "felon of our land," a role which we have already seen to be under considerable strain.

His altercation with the priest brings him a beating followed by solitary confinement on bread and water. Unwilling to earn another beating for defiance, he paces his cell singing to himself.

Some in the convict's dreary cell  
Have found a living tomb,  
And some unseen untended fell  
Within the dungeon's gloom,  
But what care we, although it be  
Trode by a ruffian band,  
God bless the clay where rest today  
The Felons of our Land.

Then the martyr's nose detects the food of which he is deprived and once again the spirit grapples with the flesh. He catches the mental torture, as he often does, by following the soul-stirring purity of the ballad with a more worldly rhapsody:

Wasn't it the great pity that the fellow that was doing the suffering couldn't be where the singing was to get the benefit of it. Mother of Christ, wasn't there a thousand places between Belfast and Bantry Bay where a fellow would be stuffed with grub, not to mind dowsed in porter, if he could only be there and here at the same time? But I supposed that would be like trying to get a drink at your own funeral. Make way there, you with the face, and let in the man that's doing jail for Ireland, and suffering hunger and abuse, let him up to the bar there. Oh, come up at once, the publican would say, what kind of men are you at all? Have you no decency of spirit about you, that wouldn't make way for one of the Felons of our Land? Come on, son, till herself gives you this plate of bacon and cabbage, and blessings of Jasus on you, and on everyone like you. It's my own dinner I'm giving you, for you were not expected and you among that parcel of white-livered, thin-lipped, paper-waving, key-rattling hangmen. And, come on; after your dinner there's a pint to wash it down, aye, and a glass of malt if you fancy it. Give us up a song there. Yous have enough of songs out of yous about the boys that faced the Saxon foe, but,

bejasus, when there's one of them here among you, the real Ally Daly, the real goat's genollickers, yous are as silent as the tomb. Sing up, yous whores gets. (p. 93)

And so, drunk and happy on this massacre of matter by mind, the prisoner's imagination rises and swells to the tune of "Out and Make Way for the Bold Fenian Men." Yet, as the prisoner is only too painfully aware, spiritual victories seldom last very long, despite the presence of the ghost of Terence MacSweeney, who starved for seventy-eight days, looking down on his petty privations. Volunteer Behan knows what is expected of him; he also knows what he would do if a warder were to tempt him to sing "God Save the King" by offering him a round steak:

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, he'd be a lucky man that I didn't take the hand and all off him. And sing a High Mass, never mind a couple of lines of 'God Save the King,' for it, aye or for the half of it. (p. 96)

Two months in Walton Gaol had led him to question some of the extreme aspects of his career as a Republican felon. He had not changed his opinion on British imperialism but was willing to settle for a tactical retreat from an exposed position. He would have his revenge outside; till then he did not wish to draw unnecessary attention to himself. This is presented with hilarious clarity in his encounter with Callan, a Republican from Monaghan.

Despite the fact that he was imprisoned for the theft of an overcoat, Callan was a Volunteer of extreme rigidity. No longer a believer in the brotherhood of all Irishmen, Behan finds Callan a fanatical and humourless fool who stupidly invites the warders' wrath. Nevertheless, Callan is a genuine member of the I.R.A. and this cannot be ignored. The encounter with Callan coincides with a period of great danger for Behan. In Coventry, two I.R.A. Volunteers were under sentence of death for bombing offences; anti-Irish feeling is so high that Behan's chinas, Charlie and Ginger, stick close to him to prevent

a sudden attack. Callan proposes a demonstration of solidarity with the condemned Volunteers; Behan considers this futile, leading to nothing more than an increase in hostility and a beating from the warders. Behan is ashamed of his own fears but the desire for self-preservation is uppermost in his mind. He tries to lose himself in the comfortable triviality of Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford* but his escape is shattered by Callan's voice tearing through the prison. He calls on Behan to demonstrate his faith in the Republic. Behan, frightened out of his wits, curses Callan and the Republic and the overcoat which brought himself and Callan together. He will grant Callan's courage but wishes to be excused from any heroics himself. To Callan's repeated cries, Behan replies with a "discreet shout" and jumps back into bed. Questioned by the warders, he replies meekly that he is reading; then he listens to the groans of suffering as Callan is beaten up by the warders.

The executions are due to take place the following morning. As usual in Behan's writings, sparse prose is a sign of deep emotion.

A church bell rang out a little later. They are beginning to die now, said I to myself. As it chimed the hour, I bent my forehead to my handcuffed right hand and made the Sign of the Cross by moving my head and chest along my outstretched fingers. It was the best that I could do. (p. 143)

Lurking in the last sentence is the uncomfortable knowledge that his behaviour, no matter how defensible, had fallen short of that prescribed for a "felon of our land."

Walton Gaol proved a hard school; Behan was perhaps lucky to escape with his life. His view of himself in terms of national and religious ideals has had to concede a great deal. Yet he realises that no matter how much he may be forced to give in this respect, it would be disastrous to give anything in the purely physical arena. When victimised by another prisoner he knows that he must either assert himself or go under. But what self?



As his masks have been shattered one by one, he falls back on his ultimate identity.

I was no country Paddy from the middle of the Bog of Allen to be frightened to death by a lot of Liverpool seldom-fed bastards, nor was I one of your wrap-the-green-flag-round-me junior Civil Servants that came into the I.R.A. from the Gaelic League, and well ready to die for their country any day of the week, purity in their hearts, truth on their lips, for the glory of God and the honour of Ireland. No, be Jesus, I was from Russell Street, North Circular Road, Dublin, from the Northside, where, be Jesus, the likes of Dale wouldn't make a dinner for them, where the whole of this pack of Limeys would be scruff-hounds, would be et, bet, and threw up again — et without salt. I'll James you, you bastard. (p. 86)

Thus roused, he attacks his taunter with a sewing-needle and, luckily for himself, he does his damage and is arrested by warders before the victim's gang can avenge the assault. He accepts his punishment with ease, knowing that his newly acquired reputation as a tough guy is an insurance policy against utter loss of face and identity. It is a savage method but one dictated by an environment in which the brutality of warders is taken for granted and in which a prisoner is cruelly slashed with a razor on suspicion of stealing cigarette-butts. Seeing the slashed prisoner, Behan ponders his own shortcomings as "a fearless rebel" (p. 109).

There is a positive side to his development which now begins to emerge. He has a Crusoe-like capacity for enjoyment: prison food is often described with a relish normally reserved for more imaginative cuisine, reading a book is made to seem a feast, a mishap to a member of the staff provokes an orgy of pleasure. Yet his greatest gift is his humour and his greatest delight is in friendship. Having broken through the clouds of nationalism, he senses the strong fellow-feeling between himself and the English boys, especially those from urban backgrounds. This is underlined at the end of the first section when we meet a sad character named Hartigan, Liverpool-Irish, son of a Catholic from the west of Ireland. Hartigan

assumes that he and Behan will be chinas, but Behan has rejected such assumptions and remains with the more congenial Charlie and Ginger. He himself had entered Walton Gaol like Hartigan, lonely and seeking solace in his Irishness, but two months had taught him a lot.

The most striking element in the second section of the novel is the undisguised boyish joy with which Behan and his friends greet the change from the violence of Walton to the more liberal regime at Feltham Boys' Prison. The journey is described in language which reminds one of boarding-school vacations; there is plenty of food at Feltham and, luxury of extravagant luxuries, Behan is given his first pair of pyjamas. He finds little difficulty in joining with the other boys who were, despite superficial differences, essentially of the same background as himself. He warms to the wit of the Londoner's rhyming slang; they enjoy his colourful *dublinese*. Linguistic dexterity and musical ability stand him in good stead and he is happy that most of his fellow-young-prisoners are not particularly interested in the nature of his offence — some of them cannot get the initials I.R.A. in the correct order.

A certain amount of conflict remains. Another I.R.A. prisoner urges Behan to adopt a superior attitude to the common criminals. This prisoner is generous with gifts and advice: Behan accepts the gifts and rejects the advice for he finds the person unattractive, sound as a Volunteer but deficient in the spirit and sense of humour which enables people to live with each other. Although there is no explicit comment, Behan is puzzled to discover he has more in common with a Cockney thief than with this Volunteer. He refused to join in Callan's demonstration on the grounds that he was afraid of being beaten up; yet he is willing to risk being beaten to support his china, Charlie. With the Londoners he can swap childhood memories of hawking-cries, football matches, horse-racing lore; with them he shares a grudge against

the ruling classes. (Some prisoners suggest that Behan might make better use of his knowledge of explosives in the houses of the aristocracy.) He has found his place among his fellows and when one tries to stir up feeling against him because of his membership of the I.R.A., Behan easily dismisses him by calling him an informer, the lowest form of prison life.

This new sense of integration flowers into one of the great set-pieces of comic literature, Holy Week at Feltham. The narrator would have us believe that being excommunicated enabled him to relish the incidents with atheistic objectivity, but this does not convince us. He is still sufficiently religious to have qualms about loose behaviour in church and, when he finds himself lapsing into the liturgy, he must remind himself to be disrespectful. In fact, what raises this episode above farce and into the realm of high comedy is the strong undercurrent of genuine religious feeling which informs it.

As we have seen, prisoners looked forward to religious services as a break and it is not surprising that non-Catholics envied the Catholics their long Easter Week ceremonies. Behan, a catholic Catholic, sees no just reason why his unfortunate heretical friends should be deprived, on a technicality, of the opportunity for spiritual exercise and so he becomes a missionary, guiding a mixed bunch of pagans, protestants, atheists and agnostics into the Church on a week's free trial with no obligation to join. They are received as prison regulations demand, that is, strictly regulated according to the amount of tobacco each was allowed: remand prisoners (own clothes, twenty a day, unlimited parcels) sat in front, those in solitary confinement (nothing) sat at the back, the others ranged in between. The neo-Catholics show an immediate and expert understanding of Jesus' suffering; after all, he was, like themselves, a criminal arrested on information received, charged and convicted in very unfair circumstances. With utter conviction they abuse the informer, Judas,

and warmly approve of Peter's desire to inflict grievous bodily harm on him. "Carve the bastard up." The essence of the comedy is not any disrespectful rowdyism but the lively religious link between Jesus and the prisoners: they show an awareness of the story more informed, intense and imaginative than that normally found in "outside" churches. They are the lost ones for whom Jesus expressed special concern.

On Good Friday, the Italian priest, equally carried away by the Passion, asks the prisoners to accompany him round the Stations of the Cross. The warders were dumb-founded at the breach of the regulations but helpless against the command of the priest. As the prisoners mingle in a new communal ecstasy, those that have minister unto those that have not. The pastoral reputation of the Catholic Church was never so high and the amazing priest who is partly responsible for this glimpse of paradise is very properly rewarded in the little final paragraph which encapsulates the uplift of heart which our hero has enjoyed at Feltham:

On Easter Sunday the little priest skipped around the altar like a spring lamb and gave a triumphant sermon in gleaming white and gold vestments and the sun shining through the window on him. (p. 201)

The novel takes its title from the third and final section which deals with the time spent in Hollesley Bay Borstal Institution. On the way there the boys smoke and sing and fly streamers. Behan sings both popular and patriotic songs to the appreciation of his fellow-prisoners. He feels no need to conceal his membership of the I.R.A. and when he gives a fervently obscene account of the damage inflicted by the I.R.A. on a Black and Tan column outside the town of Macroom his English pals admire the wit and applaud the insubordination.

Inevitably almost, one reminds oneself that these boys have been declared unfit for human society. Behan does not consider himself a criminal and his friends are singularly free from the remorse of conscience which their

confinement is intended to excite. Behan remarks that a prisoner's crime was only alluded to, like the colour of his hair or his place of origin, as a means of description. A more amusing expression of this most Christian charity emerges in the tale of the boy, imprisoned for forgery, who won the cross-country race in an unusual manner:

. . . the long forger's legs of him and his beaky counterfeit nose brought him in before anyone else, also due to the conservation of his energies behind the incinerators, where he slyly hid and rested himself while the other honest poor bastards — well, by comparison, poor simple robbers and rapers and murderers — went round the second time. (p. 279)

All objection is overruled because the majority feeling is that he has deserved his fifty cigarettes prize for his cunning if not for his athletical prowess. Without condoning murder, rape or forgery, one cannot but feel for these boys. They react to their environment. In Walton Gaol one had to be vicious to survive; in the more enlightened atmosphere of Borstal the behaviour is proportionately more civilised. For most of these boys, the governor of Borstal was their first contact with an authority they could respect. Hollesley Bay was something of a boarding-school: there are abuses and punishments but, despite the fact that it is an open Borstal, only one boy tries to escape.

The escaper functions in the novel in a manner similar to Hartigan in the opening section: in analysing him and his condition, Behan tells us a good deal about himself. The escaper is an upper-class "toff" who suffers more than most because he is isolated in a mainly working-class milieu.

He was dead lonely; more lonely than I and with more reason. The other fellows might give me a rub about Ireland or about the bombing campaign, and that was seldom enough, and I was never short of an answer, historically informed and obscene, for them. But I was nearer to them than they would ever let Ken be. I had the same rearing as most of them, Dublin, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, London. All our mothers had all done the pawn — pledging on Monday, releasing on Saturday. We all knew the chip shop and the picture

house and the fourpenny rush of a Saturday afternoon, and the summer swimming in the canal and being chased along the railway by the cops. (p. 241)

Remembering his own isolation, Behan sympathises with the lonely aristocrat, even when it displeases his own chinas.

The question of class becomes prominent in this section. (On his arrest in Liverpool, Behan had made left-wing noises but in retrospect we see that they were part of his original pose; they were not the result of intellectual analysis, which is understandable when one remembers that he was only sixteen.) In Borstal he has a series of political discussions with a socialist from Blackpool who is imprisoned because he strangled his girl-friend, an action which is criticised by the normally uncritical prisoners and which Behan is forced to admit was "a bit stern all right" (p. 306). This socialist engages Behan in some of the very rare intellectual argument of the book. He sympathises with the people of Ireland but condemns the I.R.A. for failing to see that their fight was not with England but with the class-structure. He urges Behan, a member of the working class, to consider himself above the other prisoners who would steal rather than work and who are, eventually, "a dirty degenerate lot of scum" (p. 303).

Behan seems unable to counter these arguments in intellectual terms — which is surprising when one considers his consistent pride in his intelligence and loquacity — but his emotions refuse to allow him to reject his chinas. In his heart he knows that there might be deficiencies in the social theory of a person who strangled his own girl-friend and, as usual, the eventual condemnation is based on the socialist's lack of humour, implying as it does the lack of understanding and charity. Despite his belief in the brotherhood of workers, he is a loner; Behan is not his china.

Nor is anyone else your china, said I, in my own mind.  
And small blame to them, with your scrawny face and

your red Anti-Christ's stubble on it, and the miserable undertaker's labourer's chat out of you . . . I had no mother to break her heart, and I had no china to take my part, but I had one friend and a girl was she, that I croaked with her own silk stocking. (p. 355)

Nevertheless, the socialist has helped Behan clarify his opinions: when accused by a Scot of liking the English despite their behaviour in Ireland, he replies that it is the imperialist system which is offensive in Ireland and that some of its most obnoxious lackeys are Irish and Scots.

The news of his release comes as a surprise both to Behan and to the reader. The boy at boarding-school will count the last few weeks, days, hours and minutes, but Behan does not. Also, the first duty of a prisoner of war is to escape; Behan claims that the odds against success were enormous but one feels that this is not the whole truth. Gradually one comes to the strange conclusion that the prisoner has enjoyed his prison. The governor claims that Borstal has made a man of Behan, a claim that is not disputed. It has certainly taught him a great deal about himself and about life in general: it has sharpened his perception, taught him to use his comic gifts as a means of survival, granted him leisure to read widely and given him his first literary award. Some years later he wrote of a book:

I read this book a lot of years before it was in Penguins, at a time when I was leading a more contemplative life and had plenty of time to think about what I read.<sup>4</sup>

The irony does not conceal the truth and one notices the pride in an *alma mater* which provided such education even in pre-Penguin days.

Behan's farewells are quick, the sparse prose being the sign of deep and tender emotion. It is more like a prize-pupil leaving school than a prisoner being deported. In Dublin Bay he counts the hills and the spires of the city, remarking that they were as if he never left them. This is a complex observation, part of the complexity being the surprise that such things could have

stayed the same when he had changed so much. He is uncertain what other changes await him: the immigration official welcomes him quietly in Irish, the detective on the gangway says nothing.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>*Irish Poets in English* (The Thomas Davis Lectures on Anglo-Irish Poetry), edited by Sean Lucy (Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 1973), p. 27.
- <sup>2</sup>I hope to show this in a later essay.
- <sup>3</sup>*Borstal Boy* (London: Corgi, 1961), p. 13. Subsequent page references are to this edition.
- <sup>4</sup>*Hold Your Hand and Have Another* (London: Hutchinson, 1963), p. 189.