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BRENDAN BEHAN'S DRAMATURGY

Brendan Behan is one of many outstanding Irish writers swarming the tiny island since the time of the Revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. A number of those artists have emerged from lower or lower-middle classes, such was the case of Sean O'Casey, who will be mentioned in this paper, and such a self-made artist was Brendan Behan.

He was born in a traditionally Republican working-class family in 1923, his father being a political prisoner of the Free State at the time. From early childhood Brendan followed the Republican tradition of his family sharing their anti-British and anti-Free State emotions. This led him naturally into engaging in IRA activities which subsequently landed him in a British jail and borstal institutions after an unsuccessful attempt at destroying the Empire's naval potential single-handedly. He was arrested in 1939 soon after he had arrived in Liverpool on his own accord with a suitcase full of lignite bombs which he intended to plant in the Royal Navy's shipyards. As soon as he had been released after two years spent in detention in Britain, Behan put himself into even worse trouble by attacking, gun in hand, two plainclothes detectives, after an annual celebration of the 1916 rising. He was lucky to escape from Glasnevin cemetery in Dublin, where the incident took place, without being shot on the spot but he was then caught and tried by a military tribunal and sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment of which he served only four and a half in various jails and camps. He was then released

under the general amnesty of 1946. While in England in 1947 he served a short term in prison once again, for sheltering some IRA terrorists wanted by the police.

The record of Behan's first 24 years of life, of which he spent over six in detention, might suggest that he was a political maniac and a prominent figure, a gunman hero of the IRA. But in fact the acts of violence, planned and performed, for which he suffered two serious prison terms ought to be ascribed to a youngster's search for glory - if necessary through martyrdom - rather than to any consistent ideology aimed at disrupting the political or social establishment. The second term earned from an Irish court must have taught him a good lesson for never again did he engage in any hazardous action on behalf of IRA, apart from a coincidental involvement in sheltering IRA men in England in 1947. He maintained, however, friendly relations with many combatants and never denied a spiritual link with the organization which commemorated him by sending a guard of honour to his funeral in 1964. Behan himself, while looking back at his daring exploits from a distance of several years, did not value his military efficiency highly calling himself "the most captured soldier in Irish history".

The years which Behan spent in prisons and camps were not lost. It was there that he learned Gaelic and made his first serious literary attempts. He wrote a three-act play The Landlady based on a true story popular among his fellow prisoners. The play, though rejected by the Abbey Theatre, was published in a magazine in 1942. He also wrote a number of poems in Gaelic which were published in literary journals and Gaelic press mostly after his release in 1946. It was also in prison that he decided to write an account of his detention in a British borstal, which was to bring him fame when it appeared in its final version as a novel Borstal Boy in 1958. Finally, while still in jail, Behan sketched the first draft of what was to become his first successful stage play - the Gaelic version of The Quare

Fellow, originally called The Twisting of Another Rope, which touched the controversial issue of death penalty.

Upon his release from the Curragh Camp for political prisoners in 1946 Behan returned to the trade he had been trained for, house-painting. But the hope that he would be able to earn his living as a man of letters made him write for a number of magazines and newspapers as a free-lancer until, finally, his talent for story-telling was recognized and he was employed by the Irish Press as a regular feature-writer with his own weekly column. However, from the very beginning of his career as a journalist and writer Behan clearly aimed at drama as the main field of his literary activity. His first two performed plays were short radio pieces called Moving Out and The Garden Party broadcast by Radio Eireann in 1952. They were both based on the experiences of his own family who had changed lodgings from the slum North Side of the river Liffey to the healthier and modern comunal - built neighbourhood on the South Side in 1937.

Although Behan liked to pose as a slum Dubliner he was not exactly one. It is true that he came from a lower class family /his father was also a house-painter/ and was raised in the Northern section of Dublin, the very same slums where O'Casey, another half-fake slummie, had lived the first half of his life. But, on the other hand, as Raymond J. Porter observes, young Brendan "grew up in a household where books were no strangers" and where he became acquainted with the works of the masters of literature: Dickens, Maupassant, and Shaw.^{1/} As Behan himself writes in the autobiographical Borstal Boy, his chief consolation during the hardest time in Walton Jail was the reading of books from the prison library. He mentions Hardy's Under the Greenwood Tree and The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Moonstone by Wilkie Collins, and also displays some knowledge of Chesterton.^{2/} In the same Borstal Boy he briefly mentions a connection of his family with the theatre which may cast some light on the interest in drama he would take in the years to come. While remembering books he had read back at home, he mentions one

by St. John Ervine, "a North of Ireland man who was manager of the Abbey Theatre when my uncle was property man there"^{3/} That he was well read in the classics of fiction even as a boy of sixteen, i.e. when he found himself in prison, can be taken for granted. The next six years in jail only added to his literary education. It is also known that in the pre-war years the Behans were occasionally presented with free theatre tickets by a relative of Behan's mother^{4/} but neither Behan nor his biographers specify what plays and by what authors they actually saw.

Brendan Behan's first play to win him really wide renown was The Quare Fellow which was first performed by the Pike Theatre Club in Dublin on 19th November 1954, and then staged by Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal in Stratford in 1956. The Quare Fellow is written in an essentially realistic vein. Although the piece does not contain a definite main plot, or even a plot structure as such, it does not show any lack of unity due to a consistent thematic construction. The action of this play is a series of episodes that take place at a Dublin prison during the 24 hours preceding an execution. Most of these episodes are directly connected with the preparations for the hanging of the Quare Fellow as he is called in prison slang. Not all the scenes, though, are subordinated to this main theme and some critics tend to view the abundance of disconnected episodes as Behan's failure to achieve a dramatic unity. They accuse the author of overtalkativeness and untamed desire to display his wit at all expense. This is all very true but it also can be argued that all the scenes unrelated to the main theme of the play—the issue of death penalty—make for passing a side-message which is the critical examination and condemnation of the whole penal system of a modern society.

There is a group of prisoners presented in acts One and Two who display different reactions to the forthcoming execution of a convict sentenced to death for killing his brother with a butcher's axe and then quartering his body

like an animal's. Actually, there were to be performed two executions but a man who killed his wife with a silver-topped walking stick has been granted a reprieve changing his death sentence into life imprisonment. Ironically enough, the reprieved prisoner attempts to commit suicide by hanging himself in his cell. Act One and the first half of Act Two present a series of episodes which create the atmosphere of prison existence. Both acts open with a song of a prisoner trying to "keep himself company" in a punishment cell:

"A hungry feeling came o'er me stealing
And the mice were squealing in my prison cell,
And that old triangle
Went jingle jangle,
Along the banks of the Royal Canal."^{5/}

Apart from locating the scenery as Mountjoy prison in Dublin this song returns as a refrain throughout the play being a symbol of prison life and the anonymous suffering behind its walls and bars. Anonymous, because the singer does not appear on stage even once in the whole play.

Apart from preparing ground for the culmination of the play - the expected execution, Behan's intention in Act One and part of Act Two was probably to create the atmosphere of monotony of prison existence which can be broken only by the prisoners' inventiveness and humour. This intention is perhaps not as effectively realized as it could be, owing to the fact that Behan could not resist the urge from his wit which tempted him to include many humorous scenes. They do not create an immediate impression of dullness and it is only from the perspective of having read or seen the whole play that one perceives that the hilarious humour of the prisoners is their weapon against the hopelessness of their position. At one point in Act Two, however, the monotony of prison routine is commented upon by one prisoner who quotes an anecdote Behan may have invented or heard while in British jails:

"PRISONER A. /gloomily/. /.../ In Strangeways, Manchester, and I in it during the war, we used to wish for an air-raid. We had one and we were left locked up in our cells. We stood up on our tables and took the blackouts off the windows and had a grand-stand view of the whole city burning away under us. The screws were running round shouting in the spy-holes at us to get down from the windows, but they soon ran off down the shelters. We had a great view of the whole thing till a bomb landed on the Assize Court next door, and the blast killed twenty of the lags. They were left standing on their tables without a mark on them, stone dead. Sure anyway, we all agreed it broke the monotony."

In about the middle of Act Two Behan focusses his attention on the warders and other prison staff. They are presented as malicious towards the prisoners and corrupt for on one instance Behan makes them report on one another, each time to a higher authority: warder to chief warder, chief warder to governor. If there is to be named a central character in the play it is certainly Warder Regan. He feels sympathy for the prisoners and proves to be the most bitter and indignant about the execution, much more so than the prisoners, as it is he who has been appointed to assist it. While talking to the Chief Warder Regan says:

"WARDER REGAN. /.../ You think the law makes the man's death someway different, not like anyone else's. Your own for instance.

CHIEF. I wasn't found guilty of murder.

WARDER REGAN. No, nor no one is going to jump on you in the morning and throttle the life out of you, but it is not him I'm thinking of.

It's myself. And you're not going to give me that stuff about just shoving over the lever and bob's your uncle. You forget the times the fellow gets

caught and has to be kicked off the edge of the trap hole. You never heard of the warders down below swinging on his legs the better to break his neck, or jumping on his back when the drop was too short."

Further on Regan accuses the whole society for the disgrace of legal homicide:

"WARDER REGAN /almost shouts/. I think the whole show should be put on in Croke Park; after all, it's the public expense and they let it go on. They should have something more for their money than a bit of paper stuck up on the gate."

On the night preceding the execution the hangman and his assistant arrive from England which is, in a way, symbolic /"England - a hangman of thousands: in Ireland, in Cyprus, in Kenya" as a slogan says which Behan uses in The Hostage/. In private the executioner is a friendly bartender and the assistant is an ex-Salvation Army member. The hangman has little time for preparations so he has to interrupt his friendly chat with Regan to consider the technicalities of the execution:

"HANGMAN. Take a fourteen-stone man as a basis and giving him a drop of eight foot ..." etc.

This deadly arithmetics is accompanied by the assistant singing a hymn, which, put together, makes for a highly grotesque scene preparing ground for the culmination of the play.

The execution itself is not bluntly and openly presented to the audience but related by one of the prisoners in an equally grotesque manner of a horse-race commentary:

"MICKSER'S VOICE. We're ready for the start, and in good time, and who do I see lined up for the off but the High Sheriff of this ancient city of ours, famous in song and story as the place where the pig ate the whitewash brushes and - /The WARDERS remove their caps./ We're off, in this order: the

Governor, the Chief, two screws Regan and Crimmin, the quare fellow between them, two more screws and three runners from across the Channel, getting well in front, now the Canon. He's making a big effort for the last two furlongs. He's got the white pudding bag on his head, just a short distance to go. He's in. /A clock begins to chime the hour. Each quarter sounds louder./ His feet to the chalk line. He'll be pinioned, his feet together. The bag will be pulled down over his face. The screws come off the trap and steady him. Himself goes to the lever and...

/The hour strikes. The WARDERS cross themselves and put on their caps. From the PRISONERS comes a ferocious howling./"

The Quare Fellow must be seen as a well voiced protest against capital punishment and indeed in its time it played an important role in the struggle to abolish death sentences. On the structural level it is a play difficult to qualify. For one thing it has no plot, Warden Regan may be qualified as a foreground character but in fact the play proposes no central figure. It is the theme of the execution, the threat of it, and the physically absent quare fellow that unify the action. If not for those factors, the play would disintegrate into more or less humorous fragments, anecdotes about prison life. The visible symbol of the forthcoming execution is the grave dug in the middle of the stage which first appears in Act Two and remains there till the end of the play.

Behan's next play, The Hostage, in its Gaelic version followed a similar pattern. Its English translation, however, first presented by Theatre Workshop in London on 14th October 1958, marks a considerable change in the type of dramatic expression which will be discussed below.

In The Hostage the situation is similar to that in the earlier unstaged Lardlady: a patriotic Republican house in Dublin has become a brothel as its owner lives day-dreaming about the past times of the struggle for Irish independence.

For Monsewer, as he insists to be called in order to avoid the hated 'Sir', the war against Britain is still unfinished. Once a commander in the Volunteers and IRA he now imagines himself commanding a nonexistent force of patriotic rebels. He musters them, passes orders, and torments them with the sound of his celtic bagpipes which he constantly practices dressed accordingly in a celtic kilt.

As Monsewer himself is such an idiot that he cannot even tell where and when he lives, his house is governed by his former soldier Pat and the latter's mistress Meg. They run the household their own way renting rooms to prostitutes, homosexuals, and perverts. Throughout the play those tenants and their guests appear and disappear many times adding colour to its atmosphere in the manner typical of Behan's style: singing, dancing, quarelling, joking, playing with the language. This house has been picked by IRA to hide a captured British souldier smuggled into Dublin from Ulster. His captivity and eventual death are treated as a response to the planned execution of a young IRA soldier sentenced to death in Belfast. If the boy in Belfast jail is not granted a reprieve the hostage will have to die in an act of revenge. For the time being he is guarded by an IRA officer and a Volunteer. As the puritanical, abstinent and non-smoking officer says, the house has been chosen as a place most unlikely to become an IRA hideout and therefore relatively safe from the police. The immorality of the tenants confronted with the officer's chastity results in numerous funny incidents which allow Behan to include in the play his idea of how to fully enjoy life.

There is a lyrical element in the play alongside its comic and tragic dimensions. The only unspoiled person in the house is Teresa, a country orphan raised by nuns, who serves as a chamber maid. She is so innocent that she scarcely understands what the true nature of the house really is. Teresa and Leslie, the captured hostage, fall in love with each other and since that moment she becomes his consolation in captivity. As he tells her, he too has been brought up in an orphanage in London. Their innocence is stressed very

strongly in a bit frivolous scene of mutual courting:

"/She pulls out a medal which she has round her neck./

SOLDIER. What's that?

TERESA. It's a medal. It's for you, Leslie.

SOLDIER. I'm doing all right, ain't I? In the army
nine months and I get a medal already.

TERESA. It's not that kind of medal.

SOLDIER. Let's have a look... looks a bit like you.

TERESA. /shocked/. No, Leslie.

SOLDIER. Oh, it's that lady of yours.

TERESA. It's God's mother.

SOLDIER. Yes, that one.

TERESA. She's the mother of everyone else in the
world, too. Will you wear it round your neck?

SOLDIER. I will if you put it on.

/She puts it over his head and he tries to kiss
her./

TERESA. Leslie. Don't. Why do you have to spoil
everything - I'm going.

SOLDIER. Don't go! Let's pretend we are on the films,
where all I have to say is "Let me", and all
you have to say is "Yes".

TERESA. Oh, all right.

SOLDIER. Come on, Kate.

/They sing and dance./

I will give you a golden ball,

To hop with the children in the hall,

TERESA. If you'll marry, marry, marry, marry,
If you'll marry me.

/etc. both/

SOLDIER. But first I think that we should see,
If we fit each other.

TERESA /to the audience/. Shall we?

SOLDIER. Yes, let's see.

/They run to the bed. The lights black out./

With Pat and the IRA men struggling to keep the hostage safe and secret, the numerous inhabitants of the house appear to see the boy and declare their compassion offering their prayers, their charms, and their drinks. These occasions present Behan with an opportunity to display a choice of juicy Dublin types of bawds and queers whose principal occupation is continuous noisy quarrelling. Eventually, after Pat attempts to let Leslie escape by ordering him to bring some beer from a nearby pub, the hostage is locked in a separate room. Only Teresa sneaks in after him and spends the night there.

Finally, the house is raided by the police. Several of the tenants have informed of the hiding place IRA invented and they even take part in the attack. Ironically, the only victim of much shooting is the hostage himself. Leslie is shot dead while attempting to run for his life by the very same police who are trying to rescue him. The play closes with Teresa's dirge over the soldier's dead body. It is also in soldier who rises to sing a song, which is both comic and accusatory, like the whole play.

Generally speaking, The Hostage is a play in which Behan tries to expose the absurdity of terrorism and the anachronism of IRA /in the times it has to be remembered, of a relative lull in the history of Irish troubles/. This is voiced by Pat: "/.../ This is nineteen-sixty, and the days of the heroes are over this forty years past. Long over, finished and done with. The IRA and the War of Independence are as dead as the Charleston." The play juxtaposes abstract idealism to actual absurd cruelty it stimulates. On the more immediate level, the play confronts various attitudes to a concrete situation. In this confrontation it is the immoral tenants who prove to be much more charitable, compassionate - in short-humane than the puritanical IRA officer, the stupid idealist Monswer, or the disciplined fool the Volunteer.

The plot, which - with some difficulty - can be observed in The Hostage, is so dissolved in the episodic

nature of the play that it is only towards the end that the reader or audience, who naturally expect some dramatic outcome, become aware that the action wearily leads to one. The same applies to Richard's Cork Leg. In both plays exactly the same device is used to end the action: in a sudden dramatic peripety the police raid a house and in the climax they accidentally shoot a wrong person. Moreover, the same anticlimax is applied of rising the victims from the dead to let them sing their half-mocking and half-warning accusatory songs.

When Behan died he had not been doing any serious writing for some time but he left among his papers the first act of Richard's Cork Leg and a draft of the second act indicating that Cronin, the play's central character, should die. Mr Alan Simpson, with Behan's widow's consent, took upon himself the pains of completing the play for which task he used anecdotes, witticisms, and bits of dialogues left by Behan. Having no directions of how Cronin should die he sent him to Eternity via the route already explored by Behan in The Hostage. Thus Mr Simpson paid tribute to the late author and remained true to him in that he did not add any invention of his own which could either improve or spoil the original idea of the play and invite criticism that it was not really Behan's work.

Richard's Cork Leg, first performed in 1972 after its posthumous completion by Mr Alan Simpson, is a play in which, like in the previous two, Behan draws freely from his personal experience. The action takes place at Glasnevin cemetery in Dublin, memorable for the author for the incident in which he attacked two detectives practically without any reason. At the beginning of the play two bawds arrive at the cemetery with rubber mattresses expecting a busy night after a ceremony held by Irish fascist ex-volunteers in Spain, the 'blueshirts' who are going to commemorate their dead. Along with the bawds there arrive two blind beggars who later prove to be perfectly healthy. They are Hero Hogan, a revolutionary foe of the Blueshirts, and Cronin,

a merry layabout, Behan's self-portrait as many critics insist. After the opening scene filled with witticisms, puns, jokes, and songs, other characters begin to appear: Mrs Cronin with a meal for Hogan and her husband, an American negro called Prince, Mrs Malarkey who is Hogan's aunt, and her daughter Deirdre. Although Mrs Cronin is pregnant, she not only attends her husband but also treats with understanding his laziness and tolerates his bad conduct.

Prince's surname is Charlie and he was baptized Bonnie Prince because his mother "thought that Bonnie Prince would go well with it." As it is later revealed he comes from Notting Hill and is "as Scotch as the Duke of Edinburgh" but he has been exiled for the love of a lady, which he sings of in his song "I'm lady Chatterley's lover". Prince is a representative of American undertakers, Forest Lawn, the company presently expanding over the Atlantic to establish its "Oirish" branch. Prince advertizes the company's method of preserving the dead and presents a corpse which by virtue of recordings of the Loved One's voice electronically coordinated with instruments in the body can speak and sing. This "has proved a great comfort to many Waiting Ones". Needless to add that, typically for Behan, the Loved One sings an obscene song.

Mrs Malarkey comes to the cemetery to scatter the ashes of her brother, a Belgian count who was "murdered by the natives of Congo /.../ because he was trying to civilize them. He'd only set fire to two villages when his supersonic jet had to make a forced landing. The natives killed him and the others with spears." She explains that her family "is descended from a wild goose" and that she is an "Irish Waloon". It astonishes the bawds: "An Irish baloon, isn't that beautiful?". They have no idea of the historical meaning of the flight of the Wild Geese either: "A wild goose? I'd be nervous of that".

Deirdre is a well bred young girl who proves to be not insensitive to Cronin's advances in the course of which some more obscenities are sung and said. The first act ends in

a blackout covering Cronin and Deirdre on a rubber mattress laid on a tombstone. The scene is blackened because, as Cronin puts it, "When author wrote this you weren't allowed to do it on a stage".

In Act Two the Spanish Civil War legionaries appear and there is a fight between them and Hero Hogan. He fires his revolver wounding one of the blueshirts and fearing the interference of the police the whole party retreats from the cemetery. Mrs Mallarkey says:

"Nobody is sentenced to die. Even if the man was shot, I expect it wasn't in a vital part of the body.

CRONIN. He was shot in the arse hole.

MRS MALLARKEY. Rectum, Rectum.

CRONIN. Wrecked him... it near killed him."

They all find refuge at Mrs Mallarkey's home. There they begin a wild drinking party reminiscent of those Behan himself used to attend. In the midst of the party the police raid the house in search for Hero Hogan who escapes through the window, gun in hand. A policeman seeing an armed man fires at him but misses and the bullet hits the innocent Cronin killing him on the spot.

The message of this play is, more or less, a repetition of that of The Hostage, and an obvious one: that terror always hits the innocent. The play is an interesting variation on the theme of Behan's own Glasnevin adventure for which he suffered imprisonment. In this aspect it may be viewed as a critical evaluation of his own past as it is Cronin and not Hogan who win the audience's sympathy. There are also multiple side issues in this play, all well fitting its humorous half — mocking style. Cronin represents the author's transformed self of the time when he no longer craved for glory in the ranks of IRA but, taught so by his long detention, sought for the more pleasant aspects of life. The blueshirts and Hero Hogan are shown in an absurd fight at the cemetery over the graves of comrades and political ideas. Behan ridicules both parties in a political and military hostility in which the adversaries differ only

in shade of banners though not in their stupidity. Behan's opinion on imperialism, however, is made clear in the way Mrs Mallerkey presents her brother's exploits in the Congo. Prince's search for roots /strangely enough for a negro - in Scotland/ as well as the presentation of the talking corpse are a humorous ridicule of the complexes and the industrious inventiveness of Americans whom Behan came to love when he was in New York but whom he did not spare his witty sting. Finally, Cronin, Deirdre, and the Bawds once again show on which side of conventional morality Behan's sympathies were placed.

The play's unquestionable merit is its hilarious humour. It is tempting to multiply examples of Behan's jesting style, a composition of puns, dirty jokes, sacrilege, and satire, but even one sample will well illustrate these qualities: "BRAWD II /sings/.

She combed her hair, and she combed her hair,
She combed her hair, and she combed her hair,
She combed her hair, and she combed her hair,
She combed her hair, and she combed her hair.

BRAWD I. Hear, hear over there. That was beautiful, Rose of Lima.

MRS MALLARKEY. It was very well rendered.

CRONIN. You must give me the words of that some time.

/.../

BRAWD I. Of course she took prizes for music and electricution at the College.

THE HERO. Oh, your friend was at College?

BRAWD II. The Mary Magdalen Home for Repentent Prostitutes.

BRAWD I. /.../ We do call it the College. Young girls that's only new to the business, they learn the ropes. Some of them was only doing it for fun like, when they were brought into the College... well, the whores there, they teach them to get a few shillings for

themselves, then they go over to London and make a career by hard work and honest toil.

BAWD II. Yes, I even heard of a girl got a job in Hollywood acting a whore on the picture. A Roman whore, like. /.../

BAWD I. And wasn't she appearing before the High Priests of the Pagan Temple.

BAWD II. The film was all the Bible, you know. Naked whores, and pagan priests and roaring beasts. Really holy, it was.

BAWD I. I don't think it would be right to appear naked before pagan priests. I wouldn't mind our own like or even a Minister or a Rabbi, but I'd draw the line at appearing naked before a pagan, it'd be against me theology.

MRS MALLARKEY. I do not think in Ireland you would get many offers of that sort from a clergyman of any denomination.

BAWD II. Oh, no matter what their abomination, none of them got it for stirring their tea with./.../

/.../

BAWD I. Rose of Lima. Conjugate yourself to a near resemblance of respectability."

/Richard's Cork Leg, Act Two/

In Richard's Cork Leg Behan is at his best in the dialogues and here his inventiveness hits the top. Apart from these features the play is similar to The Hostage from the point of view of its dramatic form, particularly the pattern of its outcome, which has been already discussed.

2.

The two early radio pieces /Moving Out and Garden Party/ already display Behan's comic potential in utilizing everyday situations, Dublin types, and the dialect. The

comic quality of Behan's dialogues brings forth associations with the similar feature of O'Casey's style, particularly with the latter's early Dublin plays but also with his later ones such as Cock-a-doodle Dandy or The Bishop's Bonfire. Like so many unforgettable characters in O'Casey's Dublin plays Brendan Behan's Dubliners display in their behaviour and dialogue a strange mixture of opposites: inventiveness combined with laziness and cunning, quarrelsomeness and vehemence counterpointed by cowardice, intelligence and brilliant sense of humour curiously matched with ignorance and narrow mindedness. Behan's types, like O'Casey's, express themselves in the slum dialect of Dublin with its colourful idiom.

Even a brief look at the types in Behan's plays reveals that they are kin to those of O'Casey's in Juno and the Paycock or The Plough and the Stars. The chief linking factor is the language the two playwrights make their characters speak. Although Behan's English translation of The Hostage was produced in haste for British actors and audiences, who may have found extensive use of dialect tiring and distracting, it still possesses quite a lot of typically Irish verbal humour. On many occasions the utterances of its characters glitter with humour which often derives from misuse of words and puns - either intentional or accidental.^{x/} This stands in perfect agreement to what has already been said about the affinity of Behan's and O'Casey's dialogues. However, Behan did not equip his characters with two linguistic features which enriched the verbal humour of O'Casey's types. Behan's Dubliners do not or very seldom do distort the grammar and sentence structures of English - the result of either applying Gaelic constructions "filled up" with English vocabulary,

^{x/} e.g.: "BAWD I. Lord save us! But now /exultantly/ I am so happy in the faith of my Lord, Saviour...

ALL. Alleluia!

BAWD II. That's right, Our Shavuour, he will shave us and hair cut us." /Richard's Cork Leg, Act Two/

"CRONIN. Where's Deirdre?

THE HERO. She's around behind.

CRONIN. I know she has, but where is she?" /ibid./

or using English constructions already antiquated in Britain. Behan avoided imposing Irish pronouncing patters on the actors and readers which O'Casey was doing in his plays by deliberately distorting his spelling.^{xx/} It seems possible that Behan did not want to employ the device which, since O'Casey had popularized it, had been overused and had become a cliché, particularly in all kinds of radio and TV comedians' jokes on the stupidity of the Irish proverbial in England.

In O'Casey's plays, particularly in the early ones, the dialect is often given an important comic role. There is even a marked superiority of the language itself as a comic-creative element over the situational humour. Especially so, as the dramatic tension of the events often stands in a juxtaposition to the comic potential of the dialect as spoken by the characters. In Behan's The Quare Fellow the dialect is not exposed in the scenes responsible for the creation of tragic atmosphere. It is exploited in those parts of the play - deliberately comic - which function as builders of dramatic potential between the comic and the tragic. In The Hostage and Richard's Cork Leg Behan uses a number of digressive stories, anecdotes, and ballads which do not contribute significantly to either the action or the build-up of the dramatic potential. It is in those scenes

xx/ Compare, for instance, the following sample of O'Casey's style:

"PETER /furiously/. A pair o' redjesthered bowsey's pondherin' from mornin' till night on how they'll get a chance to break a gap through th' quiet nature of a man that's always endavourin' to chase out of him any sthray thought of venom against his fella-men! /.../ As long as I'm a livin' man I'm responsible for me thoughts, words an' deeds to th' Man above, I'll fell myself institutted to fight again' th' sliddherin' ways of a pair o' picaroons, whisperin', concurrin', concoctin', an' conspirin' together to render me unconscious of th' life I'm thrying' to live!" /S.O'Casey: The Plough and the Stars, Act Four/

that the comic function of the dialect itself is matched with the comic of the actual contents of the dialogues or actions. Therefore it is justified to say that in his plays Behan the ballad-singer and story-teller exploits the deposits of the comic in the Dublin lore rather than in the Dublin speech as such, which is the case with O'Casey.

This difference in approach of the two playwrights to the slum dialect shows that Behan was not merely copying O'Casey's style. He created his own which might have been inspired by the old playwright's technique but which acquired its final shape chiefly as a result of intent observation of the slum Dubliners themselves and not their famous literary transformations. Behan's is the style in which the comic potential of dialect is still present but is no longer a leading comic device as it gives way to the author's own Shveik-like talents to tell jokes, quote anecdotes, invent puns, and sing ballads.

The plays by O'Casey and Behan display some affinity also in that both authors make extensive use of song and poetry in their drama. This device adds to the Irish spirit of their plays as the Irish are widely known for the delight they take in ballads. Both writers use either existing songs or they invent new texts specially for their plays to be sung to popular tunes. Behan, while he still lived and frequented Dublin pubs, was famous for his eagerness to follow a pint of malt with a popular ballad or a self-invented new song of which he had an infinite number in stock. No wonder then that some of them found their way into his plays. There are 9 songs included in The Quare Fellow, 17 in The Hostage, and as many as 19 in Richard's Cork Leg - enough to cut out of it a musical session. The number of songs and ballads increased considerably in Behan's two later plays as compared with the first one. This can be ascribed to the cooperation with Miss Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop which will be investigated below.

Before discussing Behan's characters as compared to O'Casey's it has to be said, in order to avoid an impression that the two authors are almost identical, that they differ significantly in one essential thing. Apart from The Quare Fellow, Behan did not write a play that would near O'Casey's Dublin dramas in their tragic capacity. This may be viewed as a drawback but it can be well justified by Behan's different disposition and a different dramatic technique he was using. Whatever the cause might be, it has to be remembered that while O'Casey, in spite of an occasional comic trait, is essentially tragic, Behan remains essentially comic, which cannot be ignored even when his serious philosophical messages are discussed.

3.

Like O'Casey, Behan introduces individualized and realistically drawn characters. He himself admits that it is the real Dublin types whom he takes as models for his plays. In a letter to a friend written from Arbour Hill Jail, Dublin, dated December 4th, 1943, Behan writes of his early play The Landlady:

"/.../ I do claim to have taken nine real Dublin slummies and stuck them on paper. I even go so far as to claim that they are as genuine as any of O'Casey's battalion /.../"⁶

In The Quare Fellow each character, no matter how sketchy and episodic, is markedly individualized in relation to the forthcoming execution which is a pretext to present different reactions to the legal homicide. Some prisoners sympathize with the Quare fellow "young Boy from the Islands/, others mask their sympathy with irony /Dunlavin/, some are indifferent /Neighbour/ and cynical /Mickser/, while yet others support the system /Prisoner D/. Similarly the warders are not all alike: Warder Regan and Warder Crimmin disapprove of the death penalty, the Hangman and his Assistant treat the execution with indifference of hired craftsmen, while Warder I finds perverse pleasure in

strictly observing all prison rigours. To the Chief Warder the execution is annoying only because it spoils the routine, while the Governor discovers to his dismay that he is unpopular with his friends and family because of the hanging he considers a good, though unpleasant, service to the society. The aim of such individualization is - of course - to help to involve the audience emotionally and intellectually, to make them feel and think of the shameful side of our civilisation. In The Hostage the individualization serves to point out different attitudes to the cruelty of terror as a means of struggle. It helps to bring home the clash between the immoral and the honest in the same characters, or rather the concept that one does not exclude the other. Bawds and homosexuals, pimps and drunkards prove to possess the elementary human decency which the high-minded idealists lack being insensitive to the suffering of the hostage. Similarly in Richard's Cork Leg the layabout Cronin and the streetwalkers display more common sense than the fighter Hogan and his antagonists.

In The Quare Fellow and The Hostage Behan's technique is to present two or three individuals and a seemingly uniform group of secondary characters. It is only further in the plays that this group as if dissolves to present individualized types. In The Quare Fellow the prisoners as presented in the opening scenes of the play seem to be a uniform class and only later a multitude of different approaches to prison routine and the execution are unfolded. A stereotype of a convict is destroyed to show individuals behind it exactly as it happens to a stereotype of social outcasts in The Hostage. All in all, Behan does the same thing as O'Casey: they both try to show Dublin slummies as full human beings, to break stereotypical images, which they achieve through portraying the real people. This does not mean that the types they use for their purposes are mere photographic portrayals. This would not allow them to achieve a degree of artistic unity, though in case of Behan the necessity to use all the characters that have

been used may be questioned. This applies particularly to The Hostage in which certain characters are redundant from the point of view of the play's inner logic. Such abundance of characters in this play can be better understood when it is borne in mind that The Hostage in its English translation was written under the influence of Joan Littlewood.

4.

While working on the English version of The Hostage, Behan had a definite audience and a definite theatre in mind: he was writing for Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in London. The company was a prominent experimental group formed in response to the revolutionary changes in the theatre and play writing introduced after World War II, particularly by Bertold Brecht. Joan Littlewood not only had imposed certain demands on Behan in the course of the process of translation but also took liberty to alter the text and structure of the play during rehearsals. Such methods have since become routine practice in producing plays, especially by young authors and those long dead, but at that time they were something new and not all playwrights would let their plays be altered in this way. O'Casey, for instance, wrote in a letter to Alan Simpson in 1961:

"/.../ I have never liked the ways of Miss Littlewood, and, I daresay, the one and only mind that has not regarded her as a genius at Direction. /.../ It is well known, too, that Miss L. tempered the method, or tampered with them, of the plays by Behan and Delaney. She may have improved them, but the point with me is that, even so, they ceased to be the work of the playwrights, and became the work of J. Littlewood."⁷

It is necessary, then, to stress that Behan agreed to most of Littlewood's ideas and definitely found them

inspiring. His ready collaboration makes it now hard to detect which of the many new features and concepts in The Hostage as compared to The Quare Fellow and earlier radio pieces are genuinely Behan's own and which were introduced by Joan Littlewood and her actors, the more so as the text of The Hostage as it appears in print is based on the text used in the Littlewood production of the play. Certainly, the knowledge of the Gaelic text would help to solve this question. It is, however, impossible to judge of the whole play from the few fragments of An Giall accessible in the English translation.⁸

In general, the Littlewood approach to the theatre was largely indebted to the concepts of Bertold Brecht. Hence The Hostage, as it was staged by Theatre Workshop, was enriched with many fresh songs and jigs which did not appear in the Irish productions of An Giall.⁹ It has thus come close to what Joan Littlewood thought to be the desirable shape of a semi-musical dramatic performance in the vein of Brechtian popular theatre. Brendan Behan himself was only too delighted to be encouraged to alter his play in this fashion for, as it has already been said, he was an excellent author and performer of songs and ballads admired throughout Dublin's bars. The insertion of several new songs into The Hostage, compared to its Gaelic original, was thus a matter of perfect agreement between Littlewood and Behan, the director's theories matching the typically Irish disposition of the author.

It was also Littlewood's idea to have the number of characters in The Hostage increased. In the Gaelic text of An Giall most of the tenants in Monswer's house do not appear in person. It was chiefly from Pat and Meg's dialogues that Miss Littlewood cut out certain fragments to put them into the mouths of the tenants whom she added to the play as new characters.¹⁰ Behan, too, added some material, chiefly songs. Thus a relatively small-cast play designed to meet the requirements of small Gaelic companies grew so as to involve a much larger Theatre Workshop staff. A lasting

effect of such rearrangement which has changed the nature of the original version is that - as it is - the play bears resemblance to a large-cast musical performance. What seems even more important, the unity of the play's main theme - that of a threat of the hostage's undeserved death dissolves in the mad revelry of actual performance. The added characters: two hypocritic bigots, two prostitutes, a pair of homosexuals, and a dozing drunk Russian sailor are undoubtedly redundant from the point of view of this unity. The pianist who accompanies most of the songs and was invented solely by Miss Littlewood's company does not play any role whatsoever in the play's action.

No doubt that such rearrangements make the performance itself very vivid and theatrically attractive but the effectiveness of the play's dramaturgy suffers from it. However, to give Miss Littlewood justice, The Hostage recreates mostly the lines of An Giall which, with as much base humour in it, lacked the vividness of Littlewood's semi-musical interpretation for want of sufficient movement on stage. Having a better knowledge of the demands of the theatre, Miss Littlewood managed to temper Behan's talkativeness or rather succeeded in finding a way of letting Behan remain himself and saving his play from relative immobility.

The main message of The Hostage has not been forgotten, though it is only in the last scenes of the play that it is brought home. It is perhaps as powerfully pronounced as it would be in a play built up according to the traditional principle of steady growth of a tragic tension. In The Hostage the tragedy is suspended so effectively that the audience may not feel this suspense amid fits of laughter only until they are shocked with the rapid tragic outcome.

As the numerous differences between The Quare Fellow and The Hostage clearly show, the cooperation with Joan Littlewood and her company changed Behan's workshop considerably. It was, however, most unjust on the part of a late Irish poet, Donagh MacDonagh, to accuse Behan that

his plays were "written for him", an incident Mr. Alan Simpson recalls.¹¹ Although in a changed dramatic form, Behan remains himself in The Hostage as much as in Richard's Cork Leg posthumously completed by Mr Alan Simpson on the basis of the playwright's notes and tapes. Behan may have taken advice from Joan Littlewood and he may have left his last play unfinished but his spirit is recognizable in both plays beyond any doubt in the use of dialect, types, songs, and the humour: crude and yet subtle in its wit. In The Hostage and the later Richard's Cork Leg, though notably changing his dramatic technique, Behan remained not only true to himself but also to the Irish tradition in play writing. At the same time he willingly and naturally subdued his predisposition to the new trends in European drama which Littlewood's Theatre Workshop was promoting in England.

5.

As it has been mentioned there is a certain affinity with modern European drama visible in Behan's plays, apart from his drawing from the local Irish tradition. So far a parallel has been drawn between Behan and Brechtian practical approach to the theatre of which Miss Littlewood was a partisan. It may be a coincidental likeness but there also seem to exist links between Behan's philosophy and that of Beckett. It is particularly tempting to find similarities between them in the context of their common origin and Behan's acquaintance with Beckett, however brief and insignificant it may appear. Behan himself only casually mentions meeting Samuel Beckett in Paris in his Confessions of an Irish Rebel:

"I was in the company of Samuel Beckett one evening and his cousin, a Jewish girl from Dublin. Samuel Beckett had been in the Resistance, and he introduced his cousin to a great many of his friends, both French and otherwise, who had also been in the

Resistance. We started off in a bar at Montparnasse and wound up almost a day later somewhere around Pont Royal, and despite the many introductions, I had this little Jewish girl to myself all the way, and for the following reason: Every time Sam introduced her to one of his compatriots, I would click my heels and she would hear the clicking and assume the innocent fellow was an ex-member of the SS and refuse to speak to him. Though in truth the poor bastard had probably spent four years in Ravensbruck or Belsen."¹²

This sort of acquaintance may seem trivial but it is otherwise known that Behan and his wife Beatrix attended Dublin productions of Beckett's plays which were staged in the same Pike Theatre and by the same Mr Alan Simpson as Behan's. The Behans also saw the first London production of Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape on which occasion the two authors met again.

Martin Esslin remarks in the Preface to the Pelican edition of his The Theatre of the Absurd:

"The artists of an epoch have certain traits in common, but they are not necessarily conscious of them. Nor does the fact that they have these traits in common preclude them from being widely different in other aspects."¹³

Although Brendan Behan is, by any scale, "widely different in other aspects" from Samuel Beckett, both The Hostage and Richard's Cork Leg show that the two playwrights "have certain traits in common", to use Esslin's expression again. These are manifested in Behan's philosophy behind the two plays even though no analogy can be drawn between the techniques devised by Behan and Beckett.

Beckett's plays reflect their author's almost biblical conviction that human actions are of little consequence when confronted with the steady flow of time which leaves human desires unfulfilled, discourages hope, and levels all

people, good and bad alike. It is the stupid, unaware characters in Beckett's plays who attach any significance to their daily activities or expectations/as Winnie in Happy Days, Happy in Waiting for Godot, parents in Endgame/.

Essentially, Behan's plays also reflect their author's philosophical assumption that human actions are generally absurd, senseless, grotesque. Even if they lead to any outcome which may appear to be their logical consequence, it is purely by chance, a manifestation of fate rather than dialectics of human intentions and doings. Such is the case with The Hostage in which the captive British soldier is accidentally shot dead by the very police who are raiding the IRA hide-out in order to save him.¹⁴ In Richard's Cork Leg the mad zeal of Hero Hogan, an alleged defender of the common people from fascist oppression, results in another unintended death. Cronin, the alleged common man, gets his bullet as a willy-nilly witness of an encounter between Hogan and the police. In both plays objectively noble intentions lead people to choose violent means of action which results in unpredicted disasters. Fate shows that it is blind and deaf to human logic. Hence the comparison between Behan and Beckett.

One more affinity between those two may be traced in the deliberate juxtapositions of pairs of their characters. As Esslin suggests, Beckett's Endgame with its two main characters may be viewed, on a more abstract level, as a monodrama representing two sides of a personality: Hamm - the selfish, cool intellectual, and Clov - the compassionate and passionately emotional. Similarly, Behan's Richard's Cork Leg attempts to present alternative approaches to life. The combination of features, though, is different here than in Endgame: Hogan seeks the meaning of life in activity, while Cronin finds it in passive submission to his fate, in pleasantly using his lifetime. Hogan is highly emotional but directs his emotions against "class enemy" and neglects the real life, while Cronin's higher emotions remain lulled as he contents himself with the elementary pleasures of life: food,

drink, and sex. Intellectually, however, Cronin far exceeds Hogan and on many occasions displays his wit and erudition. That Cronin is the one to die as a result of Hogan's extravagancies may be regarded as an almost symbolical defeat of the unpretentious, simple pleasures of existence by the urge from misguided intellect and ill-directed emotion to challenge fate, to direct life instead of living it.

The techniques that Beckett and Behan devised to present their notions of absurdity in life are quite different. Definitely, this is not a field to look for parallels. However, although basically different in what they actually wrote, Behan and Beckett are similar in their philosophies viewing life as a haphazard succession of unpredictable events /Behan/ or a pointless advance through time /Beckett/. Behan's plays also reflect their author's philosophical outlook on the futility of human efforts to rationalize and direct the events of life which is close to that of Beckett and a multitude of his international followers.

x x x

I have tried to point out in this article that not only is Brendan Behan deeply rooted in the Irish dramatic tradition which has been stressed by many critics but also that he is equally well set in the European heritage, or rather in the development in European drama in 1940's and 50's, immediately before his own career of a playwright started.

On the one hand, he is believed to be indebted to O'Casey for the choice of his characters, the use of dialect, and the Dublin setting. On the other, it can be argued that he had known little else but prisons and lower-class Dublin before he took to writing and simply could not have made any other choice. There are differences in the field of dramatic technique between O'Casey and Behan which do not allow to generalize about Behan's indebtedness. Therefore,

it is safer and more just to speak of a far-reaching affinity between the two playwrights, of which Behan himself was conscious, than of a master-pupil relation between them.

One might suppose that the verse-song-and-dance revelries of The Hostage and Richard's Cork Leg must result from a joint influence of O'Casean and Brechtian techniques /the latter through Miss Littlewood/. But there is an all-important restriction to overriding these influences. One must bear in mind that Brendan Behan grew in, and later helped to preserve the playful atmosphere of Dublin. What in Brecht was a result of long search for adequate theatrical expression, in Behan was an almost inborn quality. As in life, so in his plays, too, he could not do without a song, joke, pun, verse, and jig every now and then.

Finally, the resemblance of his outlook on life to that of Samuel Beckett was not a matter of study or influence but a result of Behan's hard experiences. These experiences led him in two directions: to the affirmation of the few essential pleasures with which life can bless a man /which is alien to Beckett/, but also to the refusal of political violence resulting from a philosophical outlook on the futility of human efforts to mould reality into abstract patterns and to understand the forces directing human fate /which is akin to Beckett's philosophy/.

Such is the case of Brendan Behan: his origin and experience matched with a sharp observant eye and simultaneously critical and affirmative intellect produced a playwright who may be justly called a bridge between the Irish national tradition in the theatre and the European post-war developments in drama, even though it is impossible to trace Behan's indebtedness to any European authors and theoreticians.

NOTES

- 1 Porter, Raymond J., Brendan Behan, Columbia Essays on Modern Writers, Columbia University Press /New York, London, 1973/, p.6.
- 2 Behan, Brendan, Borstal Boy, Corgi Books /London, 1969/, pp. 78,105,117.
- 3 *ibid.*, p.80.
- 4 O'Connor, Ulick, Brendan Behan, Panther, Granada Publishing /London, etc., 1979/, p.24.
- 5 All quotations from Behan's plays come from The Complete Plays, the Master Playwrights, Eyre Methuen /London,1978/.
- 6 The letter comes from Mrs Behan's collection of her late husband's manuscripts. I have come in the possession of this and several other copies through kind mediation of a mutual friend, Mr Drostan Grant.
- 7 Behan, Brendan, The Complete Plays, Alan Simpson's Introduction, p.21.
- 8 *ibid.*, p.24.
- 9 *ibid.*, p.19.
- 10 *ibid.*, p.20.
- 11 *ibid.*, p.21.
- 12 Behan, Brendan, Confessions of an Irish Rebel, Eyre Methuen /London, 1962/.
- 13 Esslin, Martin, The Theatre of the Absurd, Penguin Books /England,1977/, p.10.
- 14 In An Giall, the original Gaelic version of The Hostage, the final scene is different: the soldier is bound, gagged, and packed into a cupboard /in order to hide him from the police/ where he eventually suffocates.

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Streszczenie

Dramaturgia Brendan'a Behan'a

Na wstępie autor prezentuje trudną drogę jaką Brendan Behan dochodził do literatury: jego pochodzenie, zaangażowanie w działalność IRA i lata spędzone w brytyjskich i irlandzkich więzieniach. Następnie stara się znaleźć odpowiedź na pytanie na ile styl Behan'a pozostaje pod wpływem O'Casey'a. W tym celu analizuje drogę edukacji literackiej pisarza, ukazuje stosunek Behan'a do O'Casey'a na podstawie jego wypowiedzi w listach do prasy i przyjaciół, aby wreszcie przejść do porównania typów i języka w sztukach obu dramaturgów i wskazać na pewne nowe, twórcze przekształcenia wspólnego dla obu materiału wyjściowego dokonane przez Behan'a.

W dalszym ciągu autor podejmuje próbę oceny współpracy Behan'a z Joan Littlewood - reżyserką, która podczas pracy nad inscenizacją jego drugiej sztuki miała znaczny wpływ na skryształizowanie się jego stylu.

Zdecydowane odczucie absurdalności skądinąd w zasadzie realistycznych sztuk Behan'a podsunęło autorowi pomysł przeprowadzenia porównania między dramaturgią Behan'a i teatrem absurdu, a szczególnie Beckett'em, którego Behan znał osobiście. Mimo ogromnych różnic formalnych autor dopatruje się fundamentalnych zbieżności w filozoficznym podtekście sztuk obu pisarzy, co daje mu asumpt do stwierdzenia istotnego pokrewieństwa duchowego między Behan'em

a Beckett'em, który, mimo swego irlandzkiego pochodzenia, reprezentuje awangardowy nurt dramatu europejskiego, a nie tradycję teatralną swego narodu.

W podsumowaniu autor stwierdza, że Behan pozostając w sferze zdecydowanie indywidualnego klimatu charakteryzującego dramaty irlandzkie, stał się zarazem ogniwem łączącym tę tradycję ze sztuką europejską poprzez twórcze wykorzystanie brechtowskiej koncepcji teatru ludowego i wyraźną wspólnotę w warstwie filozoficznej z bardziej nowoczesnym teatrem absurdu.