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Embodying Resistance: The Poetry of Bobby Sands

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Abstract

This article focuses on Bobby Sands' poetry, which has elicited little critical attention to date, apart from a few notable exceptions. I propose to explore the overlap of the political and aesthetic interest of his work through close readings of two poems in particular. Taking into consideration not just the poetry itself but also the very specific conditions in which it was written and smuggled out of prison, I will analyse the poems through the Rancierian prism of the distribution of the sensible and demonstrate how Sands expresses dissensus.

Keywords: Bobby Sands, poetry, Rancière, politics, aesthetics, dissensus

Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse à la poésie de Bobby Sands, qui a peu intéressé la critique, à quelques exceptions près. Je me propose d'explorer les aspects esthétiques et politiques de son œuvre à travers des micro-lectures de deux poèmes en particulier. Tenant compte à la fois de la poésie elle-même et des conditions dans lesquelles elle a été écrite et acheminée clandestinement à l'extérieur de la prison, j'analyse les poèmes par le prisme des écrits de Jacques Rancière et de son concept du partage du sensible et démontre la manière dont Sands exprime un dissensus.

Mots clés: Bobby Sands, poésie, Rancière, politique, esthétique, dissensus

"I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world¹". So begins Bobby Sands' diary of his hunger strike which began on March 1st 1981. After the failure in political terms of the hunger strike which took place in 1980 and which was ultimately aborted when the first prisoner, Sean McKenna, almost died, Bobby Sands chose to lead the 1981 hunger strike in the knowledge that he and at least some of the other men would most likely die. They did. Bobby Sands died on May 5th 1981, despite his having recently been elected as MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone in a fortuitous by-election which marked the beginning of a shift in republican strategy, and nine other prisoners followed him to death². The prisoners, who had been naked since the mid-1970s, covered only in

1. Bobby Sands. *Writings from Prison*, Dublin, Mercier Press, 1998, p. 219.

2. The nine other men were Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee and Micky Devine.

a blanket, and who had been participating in the no-wash protest since 1978³ had consistently reiterated their five demands: the right to wear their own clothes, the right to abstain from penal labour, the right to free association, the right to educational and recreational facilities and the restoration of lost remission as a result of the protest⁴. The 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes did not, of course, just spring out of nowhere. In 1917 Thomas Ashe, incarcerated in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, went on hunger strike for political prisoner status and, despite being force-fed, died there; Terence MacSwiney, the Mayor of Cork, imprisoned for sedition, died after seventy-three days of fasting in 1920. The IRA prisoners' hunger strikes (in 1972, 1973, 1974, 1976, 1980 and 1981⁵) were therefore part of a long tradition of self-starvation as a means of political protest.

Sands was only able to make entries for the first seventeen days of his strike and his final entry on Saint Patrick's Day, in Irish, focuses unsurprisingly on the notion of freedom: "If they aren't able to destroy the desire for freedom, they won't break you. They won't break me because the desire for freedom, and the freedom of the Irish people, is in my heart"⁶. This tension between physical imprisonment and mental freedom, in other words the transcending of corporeal constraints, runs through all of Bobby Sands' prose and poetry, not least in the recurrent recourse to bird imagery that begins with the skylark and ends with his allusion to "the odd curlew mournfully call[ing]"⁷.

This paper will focus on the vast quantity of poetry produced by Bobby Sands during his two periods in prison and until his death in the 1981 hunger strikes. Although Sands' poetry has elicited (too) little critical attention (Ellmann,

3. In 1972, a hunger strike carried out by republican prisoners in Crumlin Road Gaol in order to obtain special category status ended in victory (for all political prisoners, including loyalists) but as part of a new, long-term strategy for dealing with the conflict in the North of Ireland, the British government announced that as of March 1st 1976, anyone convicted of "scheduled offences" would no longer benefit from political status and would be considered as an "ODC", an ordinary decent criminal. Danny Morrison, among others, has pointed out the contradiction in the British handling of suspected paramilitaries and the removal of special category status: "Having been arrested under special laws, been questioned in special interrogation centres, been tried in special courts with special rules of evidence, the prisoners were told when they arrived at the specially built H-Blocks that there was nothing 'special' about them". (Danny Morrison, (ed.), *Hunger Strike: Reflections on the 1981 Hunger Strike*. Dingle & London, Brandon, 2006, p. 15). The prison protests escalated from the blanket protest to the no-wash protest in response to provocation and mistreatment by prison officers and eventually, in the face of no sign of change in British governmental policy, a hunger strike was deemed the only remaining form of protest available.

4. Danny Morrison, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

5. For a brief overview of these hunger strikes and the reasons for them, see Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 218.

6. Sands, *op. cit.*, 239. Original text in Irish: "Mura bhfuil siad in inmhe an fonn saoirse a scriosadh, ní bheadh said in inmhe tú féin a bhriseadh. Ní bhrisfidh said mé mar tá an fonn saoirse, agus saoirse mhuintir na hÉireann i mo chroí" (p. 238).

7. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 83-85, 234.

Whelan and Lloyd are three notable exceptions)⁸, largely due to his political affiliations and to a form of intellectual snobbery, I will explore the overlap of the political and aesthetic interest of his work through close readings of a few of his poems and “Trilogy”⁹ in particular. Taking into consideration not just the poetry itself but also the very specific conditions in which it was written and smuggled out of prison, I will analyse the poems through the Rancierian prism of the distribution of the sensible and demonstrate how Sands, through his poetry in particular, expresses dissensus.

According to Maud Ellmann, Bobby Sands’ literary enterprise is inextricably linked to divesting himself of his past:

There is a sense in which the hunger striker is already dead as soon as he embarks upon this discipline of memory, for in this moment he surrenders food for words and life for legend. [...] What is more, his autobiographical endeavors re-enact the rigors of the hunger strike itself, insofar as both consist of the evacuation of the self. He writes his life in order to create his own memorial but also to disgorge his mind of history, just as he devoids his body of the fat that represents its frozen past¹⁰.

Apart from the fact that it is unclear exactly how and why Ellmann reaches the conclusion that Sands must “disgorge his mind of history”, this interpretation is also problematic because she insists so much on the individuality of Sands’ hunger strike. Notwithstanding the fact that Sands was indeed using his own physical body as a form of resistance, the very collective nature of the strike should not be forgotten for all that¹¹. Sands is not so much interested in surrendering his “life for legend” as in providing a written trace of the collective experience and finding an aesthetics which enables him to do so¹². When Sands wrote that he was “standing on the threshold of another trembling world” he was of course aware that he was approaching inevitable death, but there is a sense of awareness in all of Sands’ prison writing of its very liminality (expressing an unlimited psychological freedom his body is explicitly denied; smuggled out of the prison through various

8. David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space*, Cambridge, CUP, 2011, p. 166-197; Lachlan Whelan, *Contemporary Irish Republican Prison Writing: Writing and Resistance*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing & Imprisonment*, London, Virago, 1993.

9. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 104-150.

10. Ellmann, *op. cit.*, p. 87-88.

11. This indeed is one of the problems of Steve McQueen’s film *Hunger* (2008), in which the collective nature of the hunger strike is replaced by one man’s Christ-like sacrifice.

12. It is true that Ellmann is referring specifically here to work produced by Sands once he had begun his hunger strike, but she still nevertheless allows herself to get carried away with analogy of the fat on his body representing his frozen past. What one is supposed to understand by “frozen past” is never really clear.

bodily orifices; straddling the generic boundaries of poetry, fiction, political essay and autobiography).

It is precisely this liminality that places Sands' poetry in particular in the realm of dissensus as Jacques Rancière defines it. For Rancière, the distribution of the sensible is that which "reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed" while "politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time"¹³. Within this understanding, the IRA prisoners living naked in their excrement create politics "by interrupting the distribution of the sensible by supplementing it with those who have no part in the perceptual coordinates of the community, thereby modifying the very aesthetico-political field of possibility"¹⁴. In other words, by organising resistance on a massive scale, despite their relative isolation from each other (refusing to wear the prison uniform, covering their cells with their own excrement) and more especially by smuggling out poetry not always necessarily related to the struggle, the prisoners successfully reconfigured the "aesthetico-political field of possibility". Moreover, to quote David Lloyd, "[t]heir reinvention or raising of the oral community against the deprivations of the prison regime and the violent coercion of speech under interrogation did not stop at the expression of defiance, but bore the conviction that even in the most extreme assumption of the body's vulnerability the contours of another possible life live on"¹⁵. Most of Sands' poems, which by necessity he had committed to memory, were recited to his fellow prisoners during nightly entertainment organised by the prisoners and the traces of this orality can be detected, as we will see, in the written versions which were smuggled out of prison and into print form in *An Phoblacht/Republican News* and the collected works¹⁶.

Sands' best-known poems are probably those which have been put to music and popularised by singer Christy Moore. "The Voyage", "McIlhattan" and "Sad Song for Susan" have therefore become part of the contemporary Irish folk repertoire. Sands himself was, by all accounts, a talented musician¹⁷ and incorporated elements of popular music into his own repertoire. Denis O'Hearn reveals

13. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, [translation : Gabriel Rockhill], London/New York, Continuum, 2004, p. 12-13.

14. Gabriel Rockhill, "Translator's Introduction" in Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

15. Lloyd, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

16. Lachlan Whelan points out, however, that it was mainly Sands' prose work that was published in *An Phoblacht/Republican News* and that most of his poetry was not actually published until after his death. See Lachlan, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

17. See Denis O'Hearn, *Nothing but an Unfinished Song: Bobby Sands, The Irish Hunger Striker who Ignited a Generation*, New York, Nation Books, 2006. It should be noted, however, that O'Hearn's work, though immensely useful, at times borders on the hagiographic.

for instance that the poem “The Rhythm of Time”¹⁸ is heavily inspired by The Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy for the Devil” although Sands, instead of focusing on the pervasiveness of evil as the Stones provocatively do, prefers to emphasise personal integrity as a means of combating various types of oppression¹⁹. Both the song and the poem encapsulate several historical events and it is this aspect of the Stones’ song that enables Sands, as he does elsewhere, to situate the resistance of the IRA prisoners within a much wider context of world history and thereby undercut the British government strategy which aimed at delegitimizing their struggle. “The undaunted thought” with which this poem culminates, “The thought that says ‘I’m right’²⁰”, is all the more powerful as it is framed not within the habitual republican discourse²¹ but within a context of consistent resistance through time to various regimes of oppression, in other words, within an economy of politics (as Rancière understands it) and dissensus. This is also why the regularity of the rhythm and rhyming scheme is so central to the poem, as it reflects not just the importance of mnemonics within this specific prison context but also the regularity with which forms of resistance emerge and change the course of history. Sands is implicitly providing a counter-argument to those, like Kearney and Longley, who insist upon the atavistic and primitive nature of Irish republicanism (“the mythic consciousness” or “totalitarian tinge” as Kearney and Longley respectively would have it)²² and tend to ignore the contextual situation which gives rise to engagement with violence. Longley is particularly scathing of what she sees as the “geometric regression” of commemorating the past, particularly when she disingenuously sneers at “Bobby Sands – an authentic ‘Republican rebel’ – memorising Leon Uris’s *Trinity* to entertain prisoners in Long Kesh²³”. The deferral in “The Rhythm of Time” of what the “it” (which “wept”, “marched”, “burst forth”, “screamed aloud” and so forth) actually refers to until the final line of the poem also provides a response to Kearney’s presentation of the H-Block prisoners as passive pawns exploited by the republican leadership outside the prison²⁴ or indeed Kearney’s claim that republican discourse and in particu-

18. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 177-179.

19. O’Hearn, *op. cit.*, 253.

20. Sands, “The Rhythm of Time”, p. 179.

21. Ireland is in fact only mentioned once in the poem and even then it is a reference to Kerry lakes which, as Whelan suggests, is an indirect allusion to the War of Independence (Whelan, *op. cit.*, p. 99).

22. Richard Kearney, “Myth and Terror”, *The Crane Bag*, Vol. 2, No.1/2, *The Other Ireland* (1978), p. 125-139, p. 128; Edna Longley, “From Kathleen to Anorexia”, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bloodaxe, p. 179.

23. Longley, *op. cit.*, p. 72. Sands did indeed recount the story of Uris’s *Trinity* to his fellow prisoners (see O’Hearn p. 191-192) but it is entirely disingenuous to suggest, as Longley does, that this was the extent of his literary repertoire.

24. See the constant recourse to passive constructions in Kearney’s portrayal of depictions of prisoners and the absence of acknowledgement of the prisoners’ own depictions of themselves (Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy*, London & New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 112).

lar prisoners' discourse is tantamount to "ideological dogma", "divorced from the summons of reality"²⁵. On the contrary, Sands' specific desire to anchor this poem firmly within an international history of dissonance and the specific material conditions in which it (and all his work after his return to Long Kesh, this time into the H-Blocks, in 1977)²⁶ was produced, all point clearly to the fact that he is not imprisoned within an "ideological dogma" and, if anything, far too anchored in "the summons of reality."

Contesting the tendency to read all of Sands' work as somehow evidence of "disinterest [...] in the immediate objective gains of the protest" and Sands himself as he who "generated the orienting myths and anchoring symbols of the prison situation which imparted an epic narrative to the Blanketmen's situation" as Feldman sees it²⁷, I propose to read Sands' "Trilogy" as evidence of, as Lloyd puts it, "a re-vernacularisation of a literary ballad", [Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"], forged under the conditions of restraint and distress out of which the collective re-emerges against cellular isolation²⁸. I will firstly investigate the tension between the individual and the collective group before analysing the representation of torture, particularly in the final part of the poem, subtitled "3 The Torture Mill – H Block". This will lead me to a final discussion on Sands' perspective on the interplay between art and politics.

The structure of the whole poem, made up of 226 stanzas, is similar to that of Wilde's famous ballad: each stanza of the second and third parts of the poem is six lines long (those of the first part eight lines long) and all adhere to the alternate rhythm of iambic tetrameter/iambic trimeter. The choice of ballad form not only establishes a link with an oral communal tradition perpetuated inside the H Blocks by the prisoners and, specifically, with Wilde's prison experience, it also, through its very rigidity, mirrors the prison space in all its rigidity. It is significant that Sands opens the first part of the poem, "The Crime of Castlereagh", with an assertion of his individuality:

I scratched my name and not for fame
Upon the whitened wall;
"Bobby Sands was here," I wrote with fear
In awful shaky scrawl.
I wrote it low where eyes don't go
Twas but to testify,

25. Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

26. Sands was released from Long Kesh in March 1976 but was arrested again in October of that same year and imprisoned in Crumlin Road Gaol until March 1977.

27. Feldman, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

28. Lloyd, *op. cit.*, 179.

That I was sane and not to blame
Should here I come to die²⁹.

The quintuple recurrence of the pronoun “I” emphasises the individuality of both poet and persona³⁰, and the beginnings of a resistance that is at first individual and then collective can be seen in the disruption of the iambic rhythm in the third line which opens with an anapaest that accompanies the process of naming and suggests that the speaker will not kowtow to the prison regime. What may first seem solely like an individualistic act of asserting one’s identity and one’s existence is actually also an act destined to alert future detainees to the fact that others have passed through there. As Lloyd has pointed out, Sands reverses the trajectory in Wilde’s ballad from the collective to the individual prison experience³¹. This is also because the poem itself moves in terms of spatial representation from Castlereagh holding centre to the Diplock courts and then, finally, to the H Blocks and although the latter is synonymous with a specific cell system which attempts to eradicate contact between prisoners, Sands presents “an alternative collective ethic³²” from the beginning of this third part through the shift from “I” to “we³³”. It is particularly important that the “I” should be so prominent in the first part since this enables Sands to emphasise the weight of the “law unto itself³⁴” practised by the police interrogators in Castlereagh in the hope of crushing the individual into a confession.

The Gothic imagery which suffuses the poem, particularly in the first part of the trilogy, also works to counter any over-emphasis on Bobby the individual, particularly when the persona hallucinates the arrival of previous detainees in his cell as he awaits (and dreads) interrogation:

They moved around and moved around
Just staring at the bed.
They marched in pairs with tortured stares
For they were marching dead.
Each looked a loss, each bore a cross

29. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

30. This in itself is unusual since most of Sands’ work was published under the pseudonym Marcella, both because of a collective approach to material coming out of the prison and to ensure that Sands would not be targeted by prison officers as a consequence of his publications.

31. Lloyd, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

33. In this respect, although Sands was the author of a phenomenal amount of prose and poetry, the whole process of production of this work was collective. Not only did Sands show or recite a good deal of his poetry to Bik McFarlane, but he also involved both his fellow prisoners in other cells by reciting his work at night and his cellmate(s) by having them hide his work in their rectums and smuggle it out of the prison. (See O’Hearn, *op. cit.*, p. 263-264.)

34. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

Upon his bended back,
And on it plain was that man's name
For he'd known torture's rack³⁵.

The redundancy in the first line is ironically indicative of a movement which is actually a sort of stasis emphasising the suspension of time which has been alluded to several times previously in the poem. Lloyd sees this stanza as a *danse macabre*³⁶ of sorts and I would agree, although I would also suggest that Sands is also parodying Christic imagery precisely in the collective image of multiple Christs bearing multiple crosses, all of which indicates that there is no Christianity here. This is reinforced by a hellish sequence which follows in which ghostly, malevolent figures perform a sacrifice of Brian Maguire while the persona looks on, paralysed³⁷. The exclamative oath which marks the point where the persona realises that the sacrificial victim is Maguire is, in this respect, particularly ironic: "The devil's sons and evil ones/Gathered round like fire,/And, Jesus Christ, their sacrifice!/Was murdered Brian Maguire³⁸." Far from the Christian tropes of sacrifice, this grotesque parody reinforces, through the expletive oath, the deliberate deformation of the foundational core of Christianity (both the Passion and the message of fraternity) and the way in which Castlereagh interrogation centre both physically and psychologically broke the individual in a way that was no longer possible in the H Blocks because of the collective resistance developed there by the prisoners.

Far from putting himself forward as the embodiment of "utopian and eschatological intentions³⁹", Sands actually makes sure, particularly in the part of the poem devoted to life in the H Blocks, to undercut any notions of heroism. Deliberately drawing on the mundane and concrete details of the no wash protest ("some men retch", "The bowels of men appear"), he ends that stanza with the important reminder that "There are no heroes here⁴⁰". Moreover, the penultimate stanza of the poem emphasises a collective reaffirmation of the refusal to be criminalised as a group: "We do not wear the guilty stare/Of those who bear a crime,/Nor do we don the badge of wrong/To tramp the penal line⁴¹".

35. *Ibid.*, p. 122-123.

36. Lloyd, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

37. Brian Maguire, who was being held for questioning in Castlereagh, hanged himself according to the authorities despite the implausibility of this. See Feldman, *op. cit.*, p. 129; see also debate in Westminster specifically about an enquiry into this incident, Hansard 15 June 1978 vol 951 cc1161-4, [<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1978/jun/15/brian-maguire>] (site accessed July 9 2014).

38. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

39. Feldman, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

40. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 145. See also earlier in the poem where he plays two different registers off against each other in order to highlight the way in which language is used in a vernacular form by the prisoners so as to emphasise the execrable conditions in which they are imprisoned: "Each wall is smeared with something weird,/So the governor must admit,/On jail cement is excrement/But what he means is shit" (p. 139).

41. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

A good deal of Sands' work (prose and poetry) is concerned with documenting the various forms of torture and inhuman treatment⁴² the IRA prisoners are subjected to both in Castlereagh and the H Blocks themselves. Although the torture situations themselves are very different (in the first case, the purposes of interrogation are to elicit a confession or information of sorts, while in the second, the prisoner having been condemned and sentenced, the purpose is simply to exert physical and psychological pressure on the prisoners so as to weaken their resolve for the protest), Sands evokes them in a similar way and in so doing exposes as a fiction the idea that torture can be tolerated in any circumstances, since in both cases, the torture is revealed to be gratuitous. The emphasis on the body in these passages is all the more arresting as the perpetrators of torture are presented as disembodied beings: "lurking figures", "A silhouette of heavy set", "From fore and aft there rose a laugh"⁴³ against which the physical torture of the prisoners' bodies is placed. Plosive and harsh occlusive sounds are used in the actual description of the torture as a means of reinforcing orally the violence meted out on the body: "Then kidneys crunch with heavy punch/To torture jiggling squeals./Bones are bruised 'cause boots are used/To loosen up your tongue"⁴⁴ and the internal rhymes here also convey a sense of the relentlessness of the brutality.

The only difference between the descriptions of the torture in Castlereagh and the H Blocks is the acknowledgement of forms of coercion, summed up in the paradoxical phrases "They murder you with charm" and "They flatter you and shatter you"⁴⁵. Alternating physical brutality with verbal coercion serves to seemingly bridge the gap between torturer and tortured while actually ensuring that "the distance between their physical realities is colossal"⁴⁶. In the third part of the trilogy Sands exposes another torture paradigm in which the persona uses the pronoun "you" so as to extend the depiction of torture to a generic situation and to directly engage the reader⁴⁷:

They grab your legs like wooden pegs
And part them till they split.

42. It is worth remembering at this point that the torture techniques described by Sands (and many others) while under interrogation led to a case being taken to the ECHR which ruled in 1976 that the combined use of five specific techniques amounted to torture but then, when these findings were appealed, ruled in 1978 that in fact the treatment "amounted to inhuman and degrading treatment". See *Case of Ireland v. The United Kingdom*, application number 5310/71, Judgement January 18 1978 [<http://www.worldlii.org/eu/cases/ECHR/1978/1.html>] (Site accessed July 8th 2014).

43. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

46. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford/New York, OUP, 1985, p. 36.

47. This is part of a strategy of "ambiguous connection" between the persona/poet and the reader. See the discussion of this strategy in another context in R. Shareah Taleghani, "The Cocoons of Language: Torture, Voice, Event" in Yenna Wu, Yenna Wu & Simona Livescu (eds.), *Human Rights, Suffering, and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature*, Plymouth, Lexington Books, [2011] 2013, p. 126.

They pry and spy and even try
To look in through the split⁴⁸.

The objectification of the prisoners is captured here in their reduction to inanimate “wooden pegs”, an image which actually renders the sexual assault being described all the more powerful since it emphasises the fragility of the human body. This, along with an earlier admission of “the body burn[ing] with pain⁴⁹” and the doctor “glar[ing] at [him] begrudgingly” before stating that the prisoner is “quite fit./So send him on, he’s good and strong,/And roast him on the spit⁵⁰” all resonate with Scarry’s analysis of torture and pain, particularly when she says that “whether the doctor [...] designs the form of torture used, inflicts the brutality himself, assists the process by healing the person so he can again be tortured, or legitimizes the process by the masquerade of aid, the institution of medicine like that of justice is deconstructed, unmade by being made at once an actual agent of the pain and a demonstration of the effects of pain on human consciousness⁵¹”. Sands effectively accentuates this collaboration in violence by the doctor through the animal imagery he puts in the doctor’s mouth⁵².

These sometimes graphic descriptions of abject torture are often juxtaposed in this final part of “Trilogy” with parodies of the pastoral mode:

To roll and droll on country stroll
Is quite a pleasant flip,
To chase and race through open space
Is such a thrilling skip,
To trot like swine through one’s urine
Is not so nice a trip⁵³.

The internal harmony of the first and third lines, expressed in the ternary rhyme, as well as the pastoral imagery of proximity to nature and the freedom to run in open space, are disturbed by the final two lines which bathetically undercut any notion of pastoral freedom in their comparison of the situation of the prisoner with that of swine. This strategy (which recurs on at least two other occasions towards the end of the poem) constitutes an invitation to go beyond Sands’ obvious wish to represent the experience of political incarceration in the North of

48. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

52. The doctor’s active participation in the torture is also depicted in the opposition of traditional expectations of doctors and the actions of this doctor in the H Blocks, which Sands presents sarcastically: “The medic’s job though somewhat odd/Is to patch a body’s hurt./To nurse a man not curse a man/When body is inert./Though in the Blocks these humane chaps/Just rub your face in dirt” (Sands, *op. cit.*, 148).

53. Sands, *op. cit.*, 146.

Ireland from Castlereagh to the H Blocks to a consideration of the very specific aesthetic choices he makes to do so.

Yenna Wu has devoted an essay to responding to the following question: “can politics or ethics intersect with aesthetics in the study of political prison literature?” She goes on to qualify this question by pointing out that “[a] thorny question in reading political prison literature is whether we should or could contemplate it aesthetically⁵⁴” and quoting Barbara Harlow’s injunction against experiencing any “aesthetic gratification⁵⁵”. However, Wu then goes on to contest Harlow’s position, firstly by insisting on the degree of aesthetic gratification experienced by the authors of this type of writing, and then by turning Harlow’s argument back on itself: “we cannot discount the aesthetic strategies adopted by authors for self-expression or for their identities and subjectivities. Failure to take these materials and factors into account could be ‘unethical’ of the reader in the sense that he or she is not doing complete justice to the authors and the texts⁵⁶”. As the title of her essay indicates, Wu investigates political prison writing through the framework of “rhizomatous forces” explaining that the rhizome metaphor enables her to underline the “creative, adaptive, resilient, persistent, and recurring” dimensions of these works and to make sense of its “offshoots in different forms and directions” and the fact that it “possesses [a] strongly protean quality⁵⁷”. Interestingly, Wu’s understanding of the potential of the rhizome resonates with Rancière’s thoughts on the democracy of writing. When Wu points out that “[l]ike the rhizome, a well-written narrative is organic, has a life of its own, and possesses internal forces that enable it to spout and grow shoots in various directions, transform in shapes, and propagate in unpredictable ways⁵⁸”, it recalls Rancière’s reminder that the democracy of literature emerges when the effects of any literary text are uncalculated: “The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible. But they do so on condition that their meaning or effect is not anticipated⁵⁹”. I would suggest that Bobby Sands’ poetry, in particular “Trilogy”, “sketch[es] new configurations of what can be seen” and necessarily “propagate[s] in unpredictable ways”.

Sands in fact toys with the whole idea of aesthetic expectations throughout the poem. I have already highlighted his deliberate parody of the pas-

54. Yenna Wu, “Reviving Muted Voices: Rhizomatous Forces in Political Prison Literature”, in Yenna Wu & Simona Livescu (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 35.

55. Barbara Harlow, quoted in Wu, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

56. Wu, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

58. *Ibid.*

59. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, [Translation: Gregory Elliott] London & New York, Verso, 2009, p. 103.

toral ballad, but he also calls attention to a reconfiguration of what constitutes good taste, on two occasions explicitly alluding to his flouting of these conventions: “For cultured taste takes second place/When you’re in hell, my friend⁶⁰”; “Perhaps you say this poet’s way/Is crude and very low⁶¹?” What Sands is working towards then is a reappraisal of what constitutes poetry within prison and an acknowledgement that the same aesthetic grids of evaluation can no longer apply. This is all the more important as the very conditions in which Sands wrote his poetry meant that the possibilities of revising his work were non-existent, which accounts perhaps for the very rawness of his whole literary enterprise. Hiding both the tools for writing (pen refills) and the writing itself inside his body, Sands not only subverted the prison regime, but also embodied “the conviction that even in the most extreme assumption of the body’s vulnerability the contours of another possible life live on⁶²”. The potential offered by the body for performing art is alluded to early in the poem when Sands alludes to the practice of preventing suicide among detainees, “So wrists could not be carved⁶³”. The choice of verb significantly emphasises the potential for moulding the body into an art form and should be considered alongside the persona’s allusions to the role of the artist more generally:

The Men of Art have lost their heart,
They dream within their dreams.
Their magic sold for price of gold
Amidst a people’s screams.
They sketch the moon and capture bloom
With genius, so they say.
But ne’er they sketch the quaking wretch
Who lies in Castlereagh.

The poet’s word is sweet as bird,
Romantic tale and prose.
Of stars above and gentle love
And fragrant breeze that blows.
But write they not a single jot
Of beauty tortured sore.
Don’t wonder why such men can lie,
For poets are no more⁶⁴.

60. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

62. Lloyd, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

63. Sands, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

These two stanzas encapsulate a scathing criticism of what Sands perceives as a reprehensible lack of interest in the prison protest by writers in the North. Once again, there is a clear sense that the pastoral mode which Sands evidently uses as a sort of umbrella for poetry and art more generally, is not only inadequate to the task of representing the prison protest but also works to eradicate it from sight. The juxtaposition of “the quaking wretch/Who lies in Castlereagh” and “a people’s screams” with representations of the moon or stars suggests that it is in Sands’ poetry that true aesthetic innovation lies. The irony here is of course that the “Men of Art” (whose sense of self-importance and societal attitudes towards them is emphasised in the capitalisation) or the “poets [who] are no more” have been replaced by Sands the poet who represents the prisoners’ experience while expanding the contours of contemporary literary forms. The insertion of the popular idiomatic expression, “so they say” is deliberately ambivalent as it suggests that the ubiquitous “they” (anyone and everyone) is synonymous with the poets themselves, who create their own aesthetic standards against which the poetry written by Sands will inevitably be measured.

I have been suggesting here that Bobby Sands’ poetry both uses the conventions of what, for want of a better expression, one might call traditional poetry and rebels against those same codes which form another, more literary prison which eschews any engagement with the situation of political prisoners in the H Blocks and the conflict in the North. By deliberately drawing attention to the discrepancy in “cultural taste” and the tension between “high” and “low” culture, Sands ensures that his main objective, that of finding an aesthetics which enables him to represent the experience of torture and resistance to that torture, using both the body and the pen, can be attained. His work, and academic work which responds to it “revives some of the voices, sobs, and screams that have long been muted by repressive regimes and official discourse, or by the general public’s neglect and amnesia⁶⁵”. Its liminality, in terms of content, form, production and diffusion, the fact that it “stand[s] on the threshold” of several categories, is its specificity and creates dissensus by overlapping politics and aesthetics so that the two become, in the final analysis, indistinguishable. The rawness of Bobby Sands’ and the other IRA prisoners’ prison protest is translated into a poetic form which relies on certain codes even as it transcends them, paving the way for new forms of expression adequate to representing new forms of imprisonment aimed at dehumanising the individual. Bobby Sands humanises the prisoners and reclaims them as those who have a part in (potentially reconfiguring) society, as opposed to those who have not, both inside and outside the prison space.

65. Wu, *op. cit.*, p. 30.