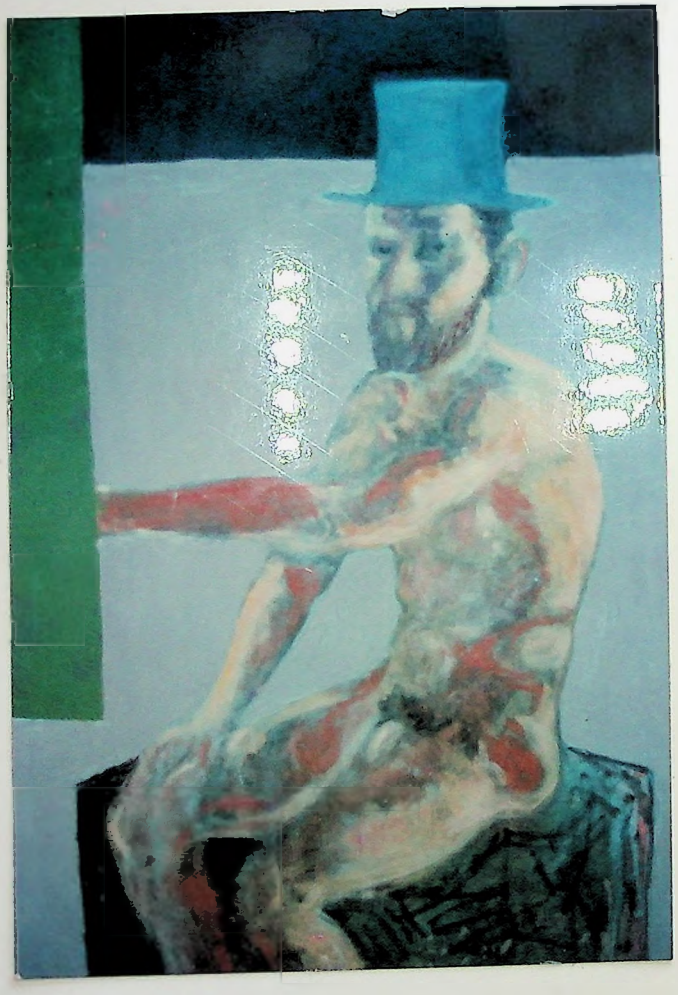


THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

COMEDY AND IRONY IN THE PORTRAITS OF BRIAN BOURKE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN & COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

AND

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

BY

SARAH WALKER

APRIL 1987

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

All works by Brian Bourke.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Awarded joint first prize in the Arts Council competition for portrait painting 1965.
Adjudicator: Sir William Coldstream.
Awarded first prize for Munster and Leinster Bank competition 1966.
Awarded first prize in the Irish Exhibition of Living Art competition for artists under 35 years, 1967.
Chosen to represent Ireland at the Paris Biennale, 1965.
Chosen to represent Ireland at Lugano Exhibition of Graphics 1966.
Marcel Marceau portfolio of drawings published by Goldsmith Press 1975.
"Brian Bourke" a catalogue by Dr. James White, published by Goldsmith Press 1981.
Elected member of Aosdana 1982.

EXHIBITIONS

First one-man exhibition of paintings, Dawson Gallery, Dublin 1965.
Exhibition of drawings, Dawson Gallery, Dublin 1967.
Exhibition of paintings, Dawson Gallery, Dublin 1967.
Exhibition of paintings and drawings, Dawson Galllery, Dublin 1969.
Exhibition of drawings, Belfast 1967.
Exhibition of paintings and drawings, Art Council Gallery, Belfast 1969.
Exhibition of paintings and sculpture, Dawson Gallery, Dublin 1971.
Included in the Irish Imagination Exhibiton, Dublin 1971.
Exhibition of paintings, Zurich, 1972.
Exhibition of paintings, Galerie Cobra, Bremgarten, Switzerland 1973.
Exhibition of paintings "Frau Stutz's Cherry Tree", Dawson Gallery, Dublin 1975.
Semi-retrospective exhibition of paintings, Gorey Arts Cntre, 1975.
Exhibition of paintings, Kenny Art Gallery, Galway 1976.
Exhibition of paintings, Thoor, Ballylea, Gort, Co. Galway, 1976.
Exhibition of Irish Landscape paintings, Dawson Gallery, Dublin 1976.
Exhibition of paintings, University College Galway, 1977.
Exhibition of paintings, "knock-a-Lough, 8 seasons", Taylor Galleries, Dublin 1978.
Exhibition of theatre drawings, Stone Art Gallery, Galway 1979.
Three-man show, Meiers Gallery of Modern Art, Zurich 1980.
Included in "The Delighted Eye" exhibition, London 1980; "Hibernian Inscape", Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin 1981.
Exhibition of paintings, drawings, prints and sculpture "Self and Don Quixote", Taylor Galleries, Dublin 1981.
Represented Ireland in the 2nd Biennale of European Graphic Art, 1981.

Figurative Image Exhibiton, Dublin 1982.
Travelling Exhibition "Making sense....10 artists" Project Arts Centre, 1983.
Exhibition of paintings, drawings, prints and sculpture "Portrait of J with Basque Hat", Taylor Galleries, Dublin 1983.
Exhibition of paintings, drawings and prints, Carroll Gallery, Longford 1984.
Travelling Exhibition "Out of the Head", an Arts Council exhibition in the "Artist's Response" series 1985-86.

Introduction.

Brian Bourke is a contemporary Irish artist, living and working in the West of Ireland. He was born in Dublin in 1936, studied at the National College of Art, and later at both St Martins and Goldsmiths' Schools of Art in London.

In my thesis, I will deal with his portraiture. I will not necessarily cover every portrait he has ever done, but rather I will concentrate on several series in which I am particularly interested. These are, in order of appearance in the text: the drawings of Marcel Marceau, his self-portraiture, the portraits of "J in a Basque hat", the portraits of Frau Stutz, (of which there are few but I find them some of the most important in his scope of work), and finally his portraits of Sweeney, an historical Irish figure. I intend to show how, in his potraiture, he has been inspired by and has included theatre, landscape and literature. The scope of his work is permeated by a sense of comedy. The themes of comedy and drama and the ways they coerce and conflict will also be discussed. The subjects, Frau Stutz and Sweeney, are connected by madness as well as comedy. I am particularly interested in his perception of sanity and the unique manner in which he portrayed Frau Stutz. The main element running through the work is drama. This involvement with drama, its comic and tragic elements, may have been subconsciously aroused by his time spent in the theatre as a young man.

I have chosen to deal with the work which I find most important and successful as well as that which I enjoy most. I am describing

his painting and drawing, not his etching which I find the least successful of all his work and not his sculpture as it is a separate area in itself. He does not distance his work from himself, he puts much of his own experience and character into it. For this reason, I felt it was most important to talk to the artist. Therefore, in order to present the artist and his work in his current vein of thinking, I have based part of my thesis on an interview with him, which took place in Dublin, on December 28th , 1986. The interview was ninety minutes long and much of it has been transcribed and is included in the text. A copy of the interview on tape is available with the thesis.

CHAPTER I

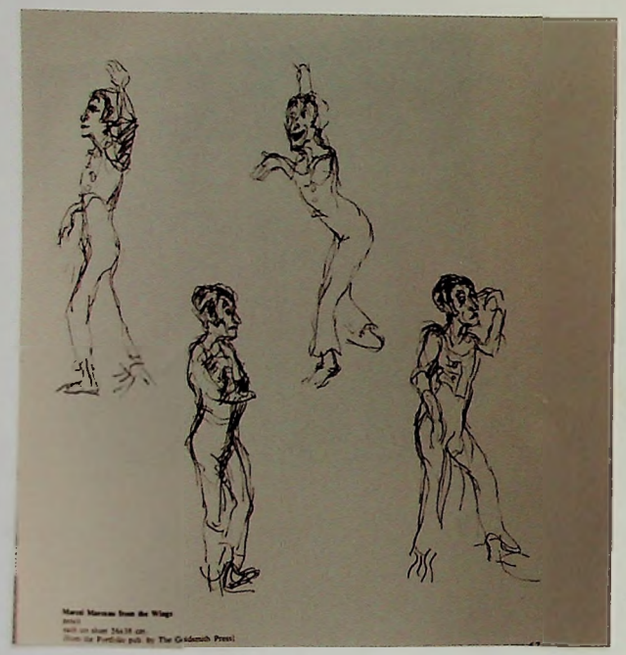
Marcel Marceau and Self-Portraits.

"I knew I was going to be a painter and where the idea came from I haven't the faintest idea, nobody gave it to me but I had it. It was nothing to do with environment so there has to be, as far as I'm concerned, some natural element.

In the fifties there was absolutely nothing stirring in Ireland and everyone was emigrating. I went to London where, for a while, I worked in a bar in Mayfair, and in the holy hour I used to go around the various galleries. When you lead a really dreary life as I did in London, you either plunge into the dreariness or you give yourself a way out, and the way out for me happened to be painting and sculpture.

However there were things in London that I found very amusing. Finally when I organised myself a bit better, I was working in an operating theatre. That was actually one of my few professions. I was appointed as an operating theatre attendant by the National Health Service. I didn't do drawings from the theatre, sometimes you do the opposite in your creative work from your everyday environment, like the poet Francis Sedgwick, (not to equate myself with someone who went through wars) but, when he was in the trenches he wrote romantic poems about the hedgerows in Meath."(1)

Later on when he returned to Ireland, Bourke did drawings from the theatre, not from the operating theatre but from drama houses such



as the Abbey and the Olympia.

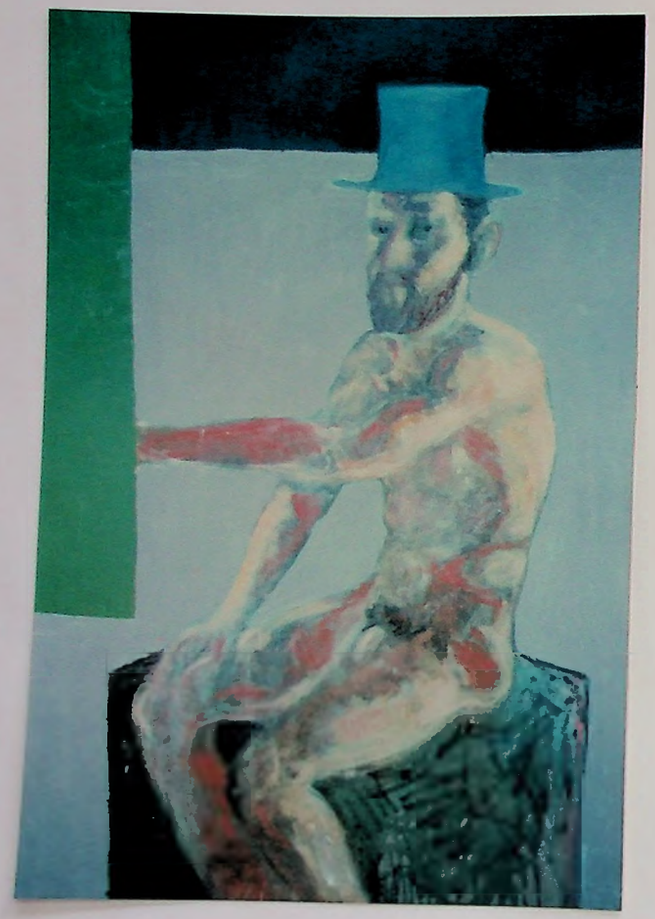
"The theatre is important, I did lots of drawing there in my youth, it was a place I used as a class for myself, but the real reason I was drawing in the theatre was the idea of people moving in space. The space is fantastically important, the set space of the stage, and to have a character moving about within this space making a performance of a sort. They get lost in it, one way or the other, to see this, even if I wasn't interested in the play or ballet, it was the fact that they were actually working in a space which interested me. Some of them could fill it magnificently like Marcel Marceau could, and others failed miserably."(2)

Bourke watched Marceau filling the space of the Abbey stage successfully. During his observation his attention was drawn from the character within a defined space to the elements of drama contained in Marceau. Although his reason for going to the theatre was to study movement in space, it would be difficult to ignore such an animated and talented performance as that of Marceau. The drama in Bourke's work is comparable to that which characterises Marceau's performance on stage. The comedy and tragedy portrayed by this French mime artist are elements of drama which are subtly a part of Bourke. Marceau creates his own drama, making it more effective in both its humour and sadness through silence. He plays the part of a humble character, not unlike a Shakespearian court jester or "fool". He is a small nymph-like figure who agilely fills the stage and engages the whole theatre solely through his movements and quick mimicking facial expressions. Marceau himself is so able and powerful an artist as to be hardly a suitable

character for mimicry. Bourke's drawings of him are drawings of the character he portrays on stage, as distinct from the mime artist himself. He could identify with that character on a dramatic level and perhaps also a personal level, so much so that he removed the character from the space of the stage, his initial interest, and portrayed him as a moving figure in an undetermined space. He became involved with Marceau's movement and his manner of drawing was influenced by it. He tried to catch up with him in his drawings, even if it turned out that the image was initially somewhat hidden by the lines, as Dorothy Walker wrote: "The series of drawings have that sense of urgency that comes from trying to capture a mercurial subject on the spot and on the move. It is therefore not a question of serene line drawings, but of a flurry of lines in which the image appears, literally, between the lines. The method reminds one of high-speed photography of a moving object in which several images are super-imposed."(3)

The space of the theatre is three dimensional, conveying to the audience a three dimensional image, as against the two dimensional skin of cinema, the screen. Bourke became involved in this space and it is interesting that he portrayed Marceau, very much a three dimensional figure, in light pencil drawings. He did not make paintings of him which perhaps would have added to the body of the subject, nor sculpture to reproduce him in his own dimension. He transferred Marceau from the defined space to the opposite condition in two dimensional sketches on paper.

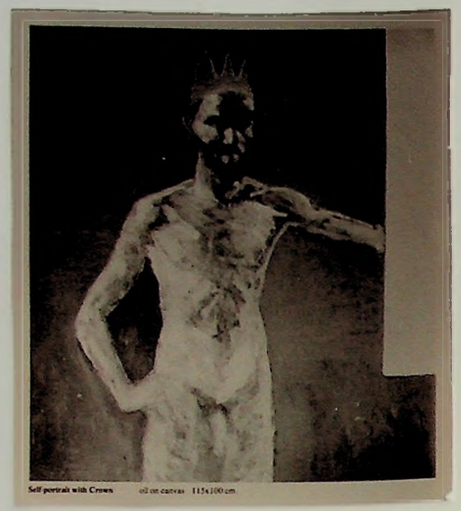
Bourke's drawings of Marceau are of a character who is already outwardly displaying emotions of comedy, tragedy, and despair. He



is drawing Marceau as he sees him playing his part. In his self-portraits, however, Bourke is introducing the same elements of drama through his drawing, thus leading to self-mockery. He has been painting himself since the early sixties. Before he ever did drawings of Marceau he had conveyed this kind of theatrical humour in portraits of his own head and full figure, where he used props such as a top hat, crown, or umbrella, to spark off a satirical image of himself. He is aware of elements of his own situation being portrayed in the drama that Marceau acted out on stage. This was one of the reasons that he was inspired to draw Marceau. James White wrote: "[It is] the mixture of cynicism and incisive character drawing which indicates that Bourke is never far from recognising how close he is himself to those he portrays."(4)

His self-portraits with hat, crown, or umbrella are perhaps the most obvious examples of his self-mockery. As D. Walker wrote: "He has a particular gift for self-portrait, in which he portrays himself, always nude, in wry, ironic, or even ridiculous situations as in the self-portrait with paper hat, or with a yellow umbrella."(5)

By placing himself in these ridiculous situations he is displaying both his self-consciousness and his cynicism, and it is this combination which is a particularly Irish phenomenon. Irish people are often identified by their unwillingness to reveal much of their true nature and by their personal inhibitions which they try to disguise by being cynical. The ease with which he displays his nakedness in such a calm and unperturbed manner is unnerving to the viewer. He has stripped himself of the protection of clothing



Self-portrait with Crown oil on canvas 115x100 cm

Self-portrait with Umbrella
oil on canvas
125x115 cm.

except for the top hat, and the presence of the hat in itself exaggerates the nakedness of his body. He cynically reproaches the misconception that the "artist" is a figure made of some other substance than the "layman". He reveals the naked body of the "artist" to show he is of normal human dimensions, but at the same time makes this ironic by crowning himself. The relationship between the viewer and the work is very much stressed. The involvement of an audience is necessary to complete the paintings. Bruce Arnold wrote: "Brian Bourke is always unquestionably at the centre of his own exhibitions. His personality breathes out of the canvases and drawings. They are held together by a collective family feeling, and in many ways, Brian Bourke is able to intrude between painting and viewer, though without prejudice. He beckons one into an involvement with the canvas."(6)

In "Self-portrait with Top Hat", the flat areas which divide the background of the figure could suggest either an interior or exterior setting. This ambiguous setting is common to "Self-portrait with Crown", the figure is standing and is seen from a different angle with his canvas to his left. One is more inclined to presume that Bourke is standing in an interior in "Self-portrait with Umbrella", thus making a further mockery using an exterior object for protection in an indoor space. He could be making a reference to the well-known superstition forbidding the umbrella to be put up in the house.

These three self-portraits are unusual to his style of painting because of their flat surfaces and clearly defined sense of form. He usually covers the surface of his paintings with vibrant

brush-strokes and cross-hatching, and he uses ovals and rectangles to frame his subjects within a frame. In his later portraits he used this technique to confine the human spirit within a space. Where he was portraying oppression in women, for example, he used this format to put the women automatically in a confined space.

In both "Self-portrait with Hat" and "Crown" he is using a horizontal to extend the space beyond the limits of the canvas in the viewer's eye. The canvas depicted in the scene makes a vertical line, thereby creating a very formal, almost abstract plane which manages to combine the canvas in the nearest foreground, (ie closer to the viewer than the figure) with the background (ie that which is behind the figure). In "Self-portrait with Top Hat" the figure is seated on a box-like form which is loosely made up of brush marks and is represented in a very painterly manner. The bright blue top hat interrupts the abstract plane of the background and becomes a part of it, making a connection between the figure and background, as does the green painted canvas. The three self-portraits in this series are sharp in wit, although the way they are painted is more blurred than later work, like the portraits of "J" in the Basque hat.

Bourke has also painted himself out in the landscape. In "Summer" 1965, he is seated in the midst of a dark landscape, not particularly summery with a dark, cloudy sky, and a dramatic build up of trees behind him. He looks out at us, again baleful as though threatening the viewer, and in front of him is a floating blank canvas in blue. His figure is a non-descript black shape being pushed from both sides by the brush-strokes which make up

the field surrounding him. The head is more carefully painted than the body. In a more expressionist manner, he has used similar horizontal and vertical effects as in the "Self-portrait with Hat" series. In "Summer" the figure is dwarfed by the landscape. This happens to an even greater extent in "Self-portrait with Blank Canvas", a later painting, far more effective in its irony, as well as in its portrayal of the landscape than "Summer". He has set himself up again with the floating blank canvas, here the blankness of the canvas is enforced by its being white, and by the flamboyance of the surrounding landscape.

It is much more subtly humorous than the "Self-portrait with Hat" series, the presence of the landscape gives the painting a mysterious quality. Instead of his dominating the scene and thus the viewer, he is dominated by the landscape and we are made aware of its power and forcefulness. For Bourke "the blank canvas stands for the whole business of starting again. Going from landscape to portraits is the cycle of my life."(7)

Chapter I. Footnotes.

1. Brian Bourke, Interview with Sarah Walker, 28th December 1986.
2. Ibid. Note: no intervening reference.
3. Dorothy Walker, "Brian Bourke and Clifford Rainey" Hibernia 23rd April 1975.
4. James White, A Catalogue of Brian Bourke. p.
5. Dorothy Walker, "Report from Dublin" Studio International 23rd April 1975.
6. Bruce Arnold, "Brian Bourke at Dawson Gallery" The Sunday Independent 2nd June 1983.
7. Brian Bourke "Why the Artist has a right to fail" The Sunday Independent 13th March 1983.

CHAPTER II

Portraits of Women.

The sense of comedy translates from his self-portraits into his portraits. In the process it becomes less cynical and more humorous when dealing with others besides himself, but no less important to the make up of the work.

"There is an element of drama in all my work. As to whether there's comedy in it is another matter, I suppose if you do use the comic element in art, you'll probably see it in everything that you do. It would be inevitable in my work because there's the comic element in myself, as well as the scepticism and self-consciousness. The seriousness of making art is such that you need to be able to throw in the joke every so often. However the comedy is no less truthful than the thing itself. For instance, I did a series of paintings of a beautiful woman with a huge and somewhat ridiculous hat, in fact the hat was part of the woman because she often wears it, and she wears it with success where others might look ridiculous."(1)

The series of portraits of "J in a Basque Hat" was shown in the Taylor Galleries, Dublin, in 1983. It included twenty or thirty portraits, the medium varying from oil on canvas, oil on paper, mixed media on paper, and etching; all the paintings were of approximately the same size.Bourke portrays the girl in his usual format, within oval and rectangular frames, against a painterly background of brush-strokes. She is seated in the conventional

portrait manner with her hands resting on her lap. The different patterns of her dresses set the paintings off against each other. The changes in her position and facial expression accentuate the individuality of each painting. She is portrayed in Bourke's usual fluidity of line, with an emotional mix of tenderness and respect. The humorous quality in the paintings emerges with the use of the Basque hat, "a huge and somewhat ridiculous hat but one which she wears with success." The hat forms a very flat black shape in contrast to the painterly manner of the rest of the painting's surface. It takes on a number of art-historical references, in some of the portraits acting ironically as a send up of the fashionable portrait of a woaman wearing a hat. Going back through the ages, the hat was a significant extension to portraits from Egyptian times and through the middle ages. It played its part in male portraits of the Renaissance, and in Renoir's style of portraiture where women were adorned by hats resplendent in feathers. In modern terms the distinct black shape of the hat resembles William Scott's pots and pans, which take on a sculptural presence against a background of painted colour. Bourke explains how he sees the hat providing a sort of "lid" for the portrait:

"I frequently put hats on people I'm painting. Anything from a small dab of colour to a stetson. Much the way a halo was once used to set off the head. Its really to do with the work itself. When you're painting a portrait, the energy seems to go out through the head. This is a way of putting the lid on it."(2)

Bourke usually works on a number of paintings simultaneously for

the resulting benefit of all the work. In the portraits of J, he combined a series of twenty or thirty paintings to make up one portrait.

"I may have up to ten portraits going at the same time. They're all around me, happening simultaneously. Which means I've a much lower failure rate. If something isn't working in one picture it may work in one of the others. You've more chance that way of catching slight changes of movement in a head, or all the other things that occur during a day.

Each one is a complete portrait but for me the whole series is the portrait."(3)

The series of portraits, each one remaining independent, impresses on the viewer a sense of motion. As D. Walker wrote: "the repetition built up a drumming rhythm that was unavoidable and very telling."(4) Bourke employs this repetition effectively, involving sound, rhythm and vision. This exhibition of paintings was really an installation piece, affecting a variety of human senses essentially through vision. It not only captured our attention through different senses but also through a combination of human emotions; humour, respect, curiosity etc.

Bourke has often said how much he enjoys live traditional Irish music and that to experience it regularly is one of the main reasons he chooses to live in Ireland. Most of his landscape painting seems influenced by the rhythm of music, his turbulent manner of painting creates a real sense of sound and movement.

However it is interesting to see how he can convey this rhythm through portraits of women and the sheer impact of a room hung with his work. Of his earlier portraits of womens' heads D. Walker wrote: "Within the confining space, the background to the heads is generally a hatched area of short diagonal strokes in the same wintry colours, like dull recurring noise patterns, to test the endurance even further."(5)

In this case he used rhythm to impress on us the drama of a dire situation, to build up and intensify the overall effect. In the portraits of J, it was a positive and uplifting rhythm, whereas the rhythm in these earlier paintings was negative and oppresive, inescapable for the women he was portraying and thus the viewer.

Bourke likes to paint himself, and after himself: those close to him. He had lived with J for ten years when he did the series of portraits with the Basque hat. When he has a close or intimate knowledge of his subject's personality, he can use it and manoeuvre it to his advantage, thereby having sufficient scope to introduce the correct mood or drama to suit the work.

"I don't do commissions, I really want to know the person before I'd do their portrait, and then if I did know them, I might play around with their personality before or during the work. Just as the change of light helps; it helps to change the person."(6)

James White wrote: "I suspect that like almost every great painter who ever lived, Brian Bourke is engaged in projecting his feelings about sensual man. He is interested in the fact that what each one

of us finds inescapably absorbing in life, is on the level of love, and involvement with those we love. In other words he seems to choose for his subjects those human figures to which he is closest. First of all himself, and afterwards those whose lives impinge most of all on his consciousness."(7)

The "Portrait of A.J.W.", 1981, is a very soulful portrait of a young woman, crayon and gouache on paper. The same sweeping style of drawing is evident as in the portraits of J. A.J.W. has very sharp distinct features. Her head and shoulders are framed in an oval within a rectangle and below the rectangle extends a ghost-like image of her torso, a continuation of line from the shoulders. The rest of the oval is filled with a landscape-like background in various shades of green. She is wearing a hat but one which looks very much part of her head and unobtrusive in the make up of the painting, unlike the Basque hat.

"It's a good contrast if you've got a very serious sitter and they're overwhelmingly interested in themselves, to actually plonk a hat on them, it does things for them and hence for me when I'm working with them. Although I would only dress up a sitter if it helped them. One of the sitters I had sometime ago was an African woman, she was a very beautiful woman. Living in Ireland, she found the atmosphere very cold and the people racist. When she was modelling for me, there was something wrong- she was wearing very bad clothes, her clothes were what she thought to be warm, but in fact they were artificial materials. So, I was getting on very badly and then I asked her to bring some of her own African clothes and when she did, she was transformed, and even felt

warmer as a result."(8)

The obstacle in the paintings of the African woman, at first, was the unnatural clothing that she was wearing. The reality of her, the truth, was revealed through her own clothes, thus making the portraits come to life. How does Bourke deal with the truth in his paintings?

"After working for a number of years constantly, you're no longer making decisions consciously, you don't have to; because you're making them subconsciously. You put into a painting what you consider to be the truthful thing, and if you find that it doesn't work, you take it out and put in a big lie instead, and if it works then you leave it there. Yeats once said to AE: "What do you think of truth in art?" and AE said: "I thought art was only to do with truth", Yeats said: "I don't know, I was trying to write a poem and it was going extremely badly and so I put a big lie in the middle of it, and now its going very well"."(9)

Bourke would always appear to be a truthful artist, in his self-portraits and portraits. The portraits of A.J.W. and of the African women, of whom he made sculptured heads as well as drawings and paintings, appear to be most truthful in their sensitivity to shape and the realism of their faces. These portraits are much less harsh but at the same time crisper than his earlier portraits of women. The portrait of A.B., 1972, is quite a contrast, a mean looking tiny figure, seated within numerous oval and rectangular frames, filled with brush-strokes fighting each other in different directions, with no evidence of

humour in the painting. Equally humourless were his heads of women, 1970. These were small rigid paintings of stark, staring faces in the midst of painted backgrounds which often extended onto the frame. They were women stripped of such traditional feminine trappings as hair and make up. He uses the bare female skulls to expose the grim condition of their lives. One does not get a sense of life from the heads, only a sense of simple endurance. He painted up to three or four heads on the one canvas, always confined within oval or rectangular frames, further conveying their sense of oppression and despair.

Between these stark, frightening portraits of the early 1970s and the looser more comfortable portraits of the 1980s, he lived in Switzerland, and there he painted portraits of a woman by means of her addition to the environment in which she lived; these were the portraits of Frau Stutz, in the next chapter.

Chapter II. Footnotes.

1. Bourke, Interview.
2. Interview with Ciaran Carty, "Why the Artist has a right to fail". The Sunday Independent, 13th March 1983.
3. Ibid. Note: no intervening reference.
4. Dorothy Walker, "On his own head...." Irish Independent 22nd November 1985.
5. Dorothy Walker, "Brian Bourke" Hibernia 12th February 1971.
6. Bourke, Interview.
7. James White, Catalogue Introduction c. 1965.
8. Bourke, Interview.
9. Ibid. Note: no intervening reference.

CHAPTER III

Frau Stutz.

In 1973 Bourke went to Switzerland, to live there for some months. He was introduced to Frau Stutz when looking for lodging in a village in the countryside. He had been to the village before, but it was his first encounter with this strange woman who was to influence the perspective of his landscapes through the unusual perspective of her mind.

"Frau Stutz was a particualarly interesting woman, she was a Hungarian refugee in Switzerland, her husband had recently died. It was a very remote town up in the hills, a friend of ours introduced us to get a lodging with her in a tiny rural house with hens clucking around the place. The woman barely spoke any German, and Hungarian was her other language, but she hadn't been in Hungary or hadn't met any Hungarians for twenty or thirty years and she'd forgotten Hungarian as well, so she was kind of lost between these worlds.

She was mad, she was about sixty or so years of age, but she wouldn't have known that herself. She was an absolutely marvellous woman, she lived life as other people lived it so she thought; for instance she'd sit down and play chess, she would look at the chess-board and she would start moving the chess pieces around, no game, and then she'd laugh because she had won.

She also wrote novels in hoc-deutsch which she didn't speak. She

would take out this fantastic manuscript, all about a woman called Maria, so she would tell you, a Hungarian refugee, a fantastic "Mills and Boone" adventure, which unfortunately happened to be true, because it was about herself, but what she had written down was in fact a direct copy of copper plate script from a book. She had done all this and as far as she was concerned, it was the story of her life, because she couldn't read it but she could write it.

Then she would come out with me when I was working in the landscape. She would use my materials and she'd sit down laughing. She saw no reason not to do what I was doing, but the funny thing was that she could draw, she was very good. She used pastels on paper and she did absolutely marvellous work. She always drew what was behind her, never what was in front of her, and if you asked her what she was drawing, she'd say; its the dove-cot behind the tree over there and you'd go over behind the tree and right enough; there was the dove-cot. She had a great sense of her environment, more than anybody else.

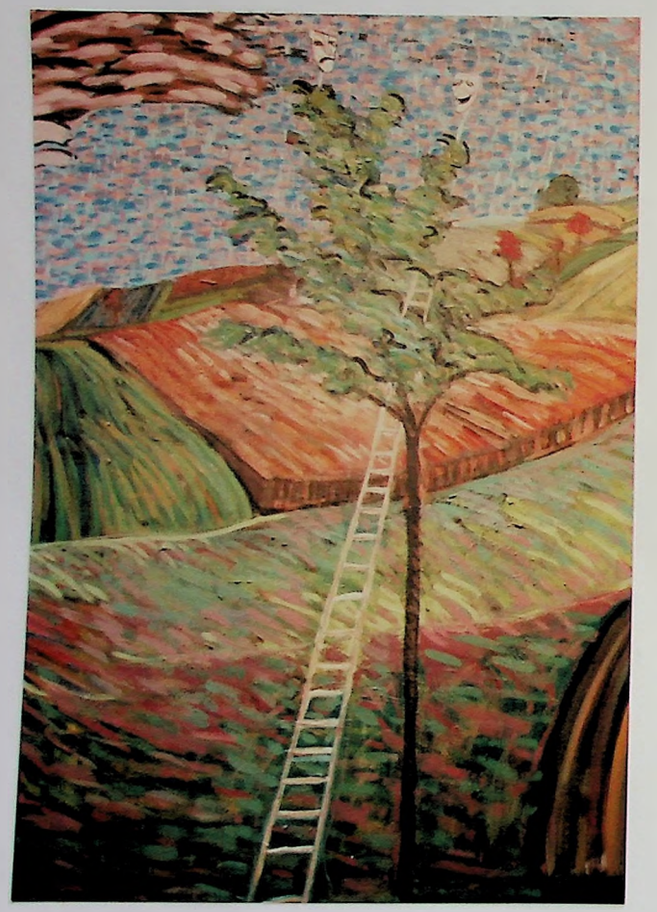
The local farmers put things on their trees to frighten away the birds, but she didn't quite get the idea of what it was about. She thought it was a kind of ceremonial decoration of the cherry trees, and so she put masks on her trees. She was the sort of woman, who, when she brought us in to show us the house, she would turn the light-switch off and on, and point to the light, pleased with herself. And, we would have to listen to the fridge humming, and then applaud. Then she would turn on the tap, to show us the water running out of the tap. We lived with her for a few months

and she charged us something like four pounds a month rent. She was poor and she fed us, so, after a while she completely ran out of money. She started getting depressed, so then we started feeding her.

She loved us passionately for the time we were there, she probably wouldn't even remember us now. She was the kind of person from whom, in Ireland, you'd probably try and hold off for a while, but with her, you'd regret holding off, because she was pure gold all the way through.

At the end of it all, she lived in such a fantasy world, the paintings that she did and the paintings that I did; she thought she had done mine, and I had done her's. She signed mine even though she could barely sign her name. So the whole Frau Stutz cherry trees were Frau Stutz, they were a portrait of her."(1)

A show of Frau Stutz's Cherry Tree paintings was held in the Dawson Gallery, Dublin, in 1974. The two illustrated were painted in 1973. They are in an extremely fervent and energetic style, like most of his landscape painting. They are recognisable as having been conceived in some other country than Ireland, although one is not quite sure why they look like a foreign scene, at first glance. As landscape paintings, they are surprising, because, in each one, a tall thin cherry tree stands in the foreground, with a long ladder leaning into it and theatrical masks flying from the top. The two paintings are very alike, as if the same scene might have been captured at two different times of day. The tree is so tall, in each, that the masks have found themselves flying into



the clouds, which are raging in a flurry of colours over the hills and fields.

The masks are the symbols of comedy and tragedy in theatre; one laughing and one crying, thus, further representing the character of Frau Stutz with its comic and tragic sides. The idea of painting a portrait of a woman, who Bourke became so involved with in everyday life, in this way, is more powerful than just a painting of the woman herself. She was such a complex personality, that if he had painted her in the usual manner, it would have given him a choice of a number of different anecdotes or props to portray her with. He has reached the core of the situation, the truth and reality of the woman, by choosing some activity of her's which aptly displays the eccentricity of her personality. By painting something that she put in her own environment, he is conveying, first of all, the environment that she lives in, then, its effect on her and subsequently, her effect on it. Because he went to this remote village in Switzerland to paint in the landscape, the atmosphere that he was working in is apparent in the paintings. By portraying Frau Stutz through painting a landscape, he makes known to us how he was living and working during the time he spent with her. The fact that she went outside and painted with him shows that she responded to the landscape as much as he did and felt naturally justified painting it. Bourke suggests that her placing of these masks in the trees was a coincidental but inevitable display of her own situation to the world at large. Without realising it herself, the masks she chose to use, symbolised her own predicament. He perceived this irony and used it to portray her.

Frau Stutz is so caught up in her own imaginary world in a remote place in the countryside, that the area she lives in is very much a part of herself, it its remoteness and its primitiveness, the reality of itself, yet its distance from everything else. Bourke was intrigued by Frau Stutz because of his natural inclination towards female sentiment expressed in a dramatic manner, like his earlier portraits of womens' heads. Contrary to disregarding her because of her madness, as we understand it, it was just this state of mind which compelled him to her. She was quite content in her madness and as far as she was concerned, could carry out any task applied to her. She had a very different perspective from most, but she could live quite happily among other people.

The perspective of her mind, and thus her painting when she joined Bourke in the landscape, was comparable to original Oriental perspective which Bourke had already discovered and adopted for use in his landscapes, generally. That is, rather than looking at a landscape from the outside, you should be placed within the landscape, you are in the midst of the scene, given the impression that it rises to either side and behind you. Bourke, who had adopted this technique of painting, must have been impressed and surprised by Frau Stutz's natural perception of her environment in this way. She had not made a conscious decision to paint using Oriental perspective. The fact that "she painted what was behind her", is taking it a step further, instead of placing the viewer of the painting in the centre of the painting, she was placing herself in the centre and painting whatever might be around her, not necessarily before her eyes. Later on Bourke did paintings of

The Baker takes a Walk, No. 1 (Bavaria) oil on canvas (20x83 cm [Courtesy, Ann Bourke]

a baker in a landscape using a similar idea as regards the baker's dog, except that Bourke didn't paint the dog because he didn't see it whereas Frau Stutz painted what she didn't see.

Bruce Arnold wrote: "The figure of a German baker appears in two of the landscapes in Brian Bourkes exhibition of oil paintings at the Dawson gallery. The Baker is a small busy, self-important, bustling little man, dressed in white trousers, jacket and peaked cap, and he moves from left to right across the landscape, very much aware of his presence in the picture. Brian Bourke was asked at the opening to his exhibition, "Why a baker?", "Because he was there", he replied, "His dog was there too, but the dog went behind the tree, so I didn't paint him". The figure of the baker gives the landscape a more personal appeal and adds a slight hint of humour and human involvement. At the same time it brings to the picture a subtlety and strength by posing that simple question that few people would ask, why the baker?, with its unexpectedly obvious answer; because he was there."(2)

He brings humour into his landscapes in the rise of everyday activity, the baker going about his usual business- in a landscape. The landscapes are usually so energetically painted and look so wild and remote that it is a surprise to see , within them, a figure like this. The scenes Bourke paints give the impression that no one may have ventured near them for years. Also in his self-portraits, the same turbulent landscapes are interrupted by his own figure which demands our attention as much as the landscape in which it has appeared. Therefore one must adjust the vision to take in a combination portrait and landscape.

Bourke explains how he came into contact with the idea of certain perspectives and shapes in portraiture and landscape when he first started buying canvas to paint on.

"Years ago, if you went into an art shop and asked for a canvas, the sales person would ask you if you wanted portrait or landscape. Landscape would inevitably be a horizontal rectangular shape and portrait, a vertical rectangular shape. So it was presumed that you were going to do your landscape in the classical manner, with vanishing point etc and the lines converging on the horizon, and the portrait with the hands resting on the lap. In Oriental art the perspective is behind you, you're looking into a bowl, you're in the landscape, so that was really the perspective I was using. In Ireland the perspective is an obvious one, because no matter how clear the sky is, it's bluer above your head than it is on the horizon, it grades downwards. In the Mediterranean it's all the same colour. One of the reasons why I don't go down to warmer climates, like in Bavaria, is that the sky is all one colour, that would irritate me no end. In Germany, it hasn't got that particular phenomenon, for instance, if the sky is broken with clouds, the patch of blue above your head is much more intense than the blue that's down at the horizon, I love that. In Switzerland and in Germany, particularly in Bavaria, just above the Alps, the sky seems to drop like a curtain, unlike in Ireland, we have it like a canopy over us. There, it seemed to drop like a fantastically high curtain, behind the landscape. The mountains were there, the curtain dropped and the clouds climbed up it. It took a bit of getting used to after the Irish landscape, and it was only when you see the landscape like that, that you begin to

understand the Bavarian high Baroque and its decoration, how they worked things up and up forever. In Bavaria, I did a lot of paintings which were quite long vertically. I tried to climb up with the sky, but then for practical reasons, I had to come down and bring it into its circle. Then I could concentrate on everything I could see by bringing it into the circle. So that instead of things going out- they were coming in."(3)

Being placed in the centre of the scene, the way the viewer is when subject to Oriental perspective, is a very realistic manner of conveying a scene. By involving people with landscape, the reality of the human factor and that of the land is obtained together. The combination of humans and landscape is pushed to its limits in the cherry tree paintings, where the human element is only left to be glimpsed through the reproduction of human qualities in masks, thereby omitting a direct display of humanity, but by doing this bringing it into closer contact.

James White wrote: "It appears that he is primarily seeking to set up a harmony between the human figure and the landscape or between prominent fearures of landscape and the total atmosphere. In this regard he makes simplifications between his main focal points and the background so that space is often rendered by a sudden alteration in tone and colour. As a result his pictures take on a remarkable force and artistic cohesion which is outside our experience of the visible world. This he reinforces by muted absorbent textures which invites the eye to dwell inside the form. It is very much the reversal of the polished and glimmering surface beloved by artists of former decades."(4)

An element of surprise is often present in his landscapes. In the cherry tree paintings it is the masks, in the landscapes with the baker, it is the baker himself. Bourke believes in art as a form of communication. He is relating to us a time and place, it may be an occasion of no importance, or it may be as serious as war, as in the "Starfighter" series. These are forest landscape paintings in dark colours, a tiny metallic shape flies above the trees through the dark sky, barely visible at first glance, yet making such a clear statement when recognised.

Bourke:- " The Starfighter series was done in Bavaria during the 1968 Czechozlovakian crisis. During which time the starfighter became part of the landscape. The Starfighter is a reality. It is also an allegorical truth, which should be much more potent. I use the Starfighter, the landscape, standing figure and heads as a symbol, a starting point, a guideline for myself."(5)

Bourke has not only related stories of contemporary Europe in his landscapes, but also of Irish legendary figures, such as "Sweeney". All of Bourke's drawings of Sweeney take place in the landscape where he lived the last years of his life. However the character of Sweeney imposes himself so much that it dominates the paintings with a piercing sadness and charm. In the next chapter the Sweeney series illustrates the story of this dramatic figure of Irish mythology.

Chapter III. Foctnotes.

1. Bourke, Interview.
2. Bruce Arnold, "Art Now"
   The Sunday Independent c. 1970
3. Bourke, Interview.
4. James White, Catalogue Introduction. c. 1965
5. Quotations from Bourke. Catalogue Introduction.
   "Brian Bourke Paintings and Drawings" 4th April 1969

CHAPTER IV

Sweeney.

In 1983 Seamus Heaney initiated a great surge of interest in Sweeney by translating J.G. O'Keefe's "Buile Suibhne" into a version of his own. Since then many artists, writers and musicians have been inspired by the story of Sweeney, and in 1986 a number of artists put on shows using Sweeney as a central theme. At the annual arts festival in Kenmare, Co. Kerry, the "Cibeal Cincise", Brian Bourke made a series of drawings of Sweeney. He was attracted to his character because of its comic, tragic and religious aspects. He could identify with Sweeney as an artist, and because of the importance of landscape in his own work, he saw Sweeney, whose story took place in the landscape, as a natural source of inspiration. He sympathised with Sweeney because of his admiration for women and music, which is described in the work.

Previous to Heaney's translation, Flann O'Brien used Sweeney in his book "At Swim-Two-Birds", treating his character in a slightly different manner. In the last couple of years he has been dealt with in a variety of art forms by many Irish artists, including Michael Mulcahy, who has allowed him a happier countenance in his paintings than most of the artists who have taken part in the Sweeney revival. Bourke explains how he first became involved with Sweeney:

"Sweeney for me represents Ireland much more than any of the other

mythological characters I have come across, he's really a very peculiar character. I happened to have Seamus Heaney's translation in my pocket when I was going down to Clare, where I met in a pub some traditional musicians. One of them, Jackie Daly, was already preoccupied with Sweeney. It was like picking up a book to read, and then finding everyone around was reading the same book. The same day someone asked me would I do something for the "Cibeal Cincise" in Kerry. I suggested doing a show about Sweeney, people rose to the idea and so Pat O'Connor, Jay Murphy and Michael O'Sullivan all had shows about him. Next year we're going to do a show in St Mullins, where he was speared to death and died.

Sweeney straddles the pagan and the Christian world, he is the pagan under the thin skin of Christianity. He is a relatively new character to me, I didn't know him in my youth, except in Flann O'Brien's "At Swim-Two-Birds", but I didn't care for that character, there was an acidity, a sourness about him which didn't appeal to me. I saw the comic possibilities in the character, but there was something of Flann O'Brien's own acidity in him. He wasn't cheerful enough and the elements of comedy in him weren't strong enough for me." (1)

Synopsis of Story.

The story of Sweeney dates back to the Battle of Moira (AD 637). There was a priest called Ronan Finn living in Ireland, at the time, a very devout pious man, following in God's footsteps in every way he could. Sweeney was king of Dal-Arie and one time Ronan went there to build a church. When Ronan was measuring the site for the church, Sweeney heard the chink of his bell. He asked his people what the sound was and when he discovered that Ronan was preparing to build a church in his territory, he became very angry, and rushed off to send away the cleric. His wife, Eorann, tried to hold him back and grabbed a hold of his cloak, but it came away in her hands and Sweeney ran off to challenge Ronan, stark naked.

He found Ronan reading from a beautiful holy book, he grabbed the book and threw it into a nearby lake. Then he went to drag Ronan away from the church but as he had a hold of Ronan, a messenger came with orders from Congal Claon, summoning Sweeney to battle at Moira. Sweeney went immediately with the messenger, leaving Ronan humiliated and upset over the loss of his book. However, a day and a night later, an otter rose out of the lake and brought Ronan's book back to him, completely unharmed. Ronan thanked the Lord for this miracle, and cursed Sweeney saying:

He shall roam Ireland, mad and bare.
He shall find death on the point of a spear.
Bare to the world, here came Sweeney
to harass and to harrow me:

therefore , it is God's decree
bare to the world he'll always be.(2)

Ronan went to the battle field at Moira to try and make peace between the opposing clans. He did not succeed but his presence there was taken as a guarantee that the rules of the battle would be upheld. However Seeney continually broke the rules, slaying men before and after the agreed hours of battle. On the day of the final and most important battle, Sweeney was there first. Ronan had come with eight psalmists from his community to bless the soldiers with holy water, and they sprinkled Sweeney with the rest. Sweeney thought they were making fun of him and he speared one of Ronan's psalmists to death. Then he picked up another spear and threw it at Ronan, piercing the bell that hung from his neck. Ronan put a further curse on Seeney saying:

My curse fall on Sweeney
for his great offence.
His smooth spear profaned
my bell's holiness,

Cracked bell hoarding grace
since the first saint rang it-
It will curse you to the trees,
bird-brain among branches.

Just as the spear-shaft broke
and sprang into the air
may the mad spasms strike

you , Sweeney , forever.

My fosterling lies slain,
your spear-point has been reddened:
to finish off this bargain
you shall die at spear-point.(3)

Then the two clans went into battle and amidst the war-cries and sounds of fighting, Sweeney found himself possessed with a terrible energy.

His brain convulsed,
his mind split open.
vertigo, hysteria, lurchings
and launchings came over him,
he staggered and flapped desperately,
he was revolted by the thought of known places
and dreamed strange migrations.
His fingers stiffened,
his feet scuffled and flurried,
his heart was startled,
his senses were mesmerized,
his sight was bent,
the weapons fell from his hands
and he levitated in a frantic cumbersome motion
like a bird of the air.
And Ronan's curse was fulfilled.(4)

For the rest of his life Sweeney travelled all over Ireland and

Britain, shifting from place to place, never content and unable to sleep. He spent some time in Glen Bolcain, a renowned home for mad men, he often returned there seeking refuge by its clear wells with watercress surround and green pastures. He was constantly being followed by his brother, Lynnseachain, and others, trying to entice him out of his madness and back to the world he knew previously. On his travels he met another mad man, a Briton, who he spent a year with. At one stage he was harassed by a mill hag. He accepted his life as a bird of land and air, and bore the hardships and discomforts of the natural world, never ceasing to utter in verses his trials and tribulations. He became used to his life style and grew to love the environment in as much as he depended on it, despite its cruelty and harshness. Because he accepted the fate that Ronan cursed him with, he was too stubborn to return to his family in Dal-Arie and Lynseachain always had to trick him and bring him forcefully, but he managed to escape. However, towards the end of his life, becoming very tired of his weakness and loneliness in the open, he decided to go back, but when Ronan heard this, he begged the lord not to allow Sweeney release from his punishment until he died. So, while journeying back to Dal-Arie, Sweeney was haunted by strange ghosts convincing him of his madness. That was his final unsuccessful attempt to return there.

In the last year of his life he went to St Mullens, which he had frequented before, to eat watercress from the well. Moling was a priest who lived at St Mullens. When he saw Sweeney he offered him food and shelter, and so for a year Sweeney accepted the hospitality of Moling although every day he would leave the priest

and go on his scout around the country as he was used to, but always returning for Vespers in the evening. Moling's cook, Muerghil, used to leave Sweeney the left-over milking of the day in the yard where he would sneak in and sup it from a hollow in a cow dung. One day Muerghil was having a row with another woman and the woman accused her of being unfaithful to her husband with Sweeney. Muerghil's sister-in-law overheard this and the next day when Muerghil was leaving the milk in the yard for Sweeney, the sister-in-law went to her brother and told him that his wife was in the hedge with Sweeney. He became so enraged with this news that he grabbed a spear from the house and went out to the yard. He saw Sweeney crouched over his milk with his side exposed and he threw the spear at Sweeney; it pierced his lower chest and went right through his body, leaving him dead shortly afterwards. Ronan's curse had been fulfilled to the end. Sweeney's dying words were these:

There was a time when I preferred
the blackbird singing on the hill
and the stag loud against the storm
to the clinking tongue of this bell.

There was a time when I preferred
wolf-packs yelping and howling
to the sheepish voice of a cleric
bleating out plainsong.

The herd's sharp spear wounded me
and passed clean through my body.

Ah Christ, who disposed all things, why
was I not killed at Moira?

To you, Christ, I give thanks
for your Body in communion.
Whatever evil I have done
in this world, I repent. (5)

Sweeney in the Landscape.

Bourke sees the landscape as a source of historical and contemporary events. In the cherry tree paintings, he used the landscape to portray Frau Stutz, and by painting the marks she made on her environment, he revealed her character. Bourke found himself drawn into the story of Sweeney through, among other aspects, the significance of the landscape within it. The story is situated in the landscape, Sweeney was plunged into the natural world, completely bereft of protection, even clothing. He had to fend for himself by eating and drinking off the land and sleeping in bushes and trees.

The trees are significant in Bourke's work, for he displayed Frau Stutz's unique mind through her cherry trees, and he chose to make a series of drawings of Sweeney, who spent a great part of his life in trees, sleeping in them etc. The trees that he lived with are included in many of the drawings. Bourke obviously finds the landscape and environment has an important effect on the human mind. Perhaps he identifies trees in particular with inducing or comforting an alternate way of thinking. Sweeney took to the trees as a place of hiding and for whatever protection he could find among them.

A year until last night
I have lived among trees,
between flood and ebb tide,
going cold and naked

with no pillow for my head
no human company
and, so help me, God,
no spear and no sword! (6)

His entire life as a madman, he spent shifting around the country from one place to the next, never staying long in any one resting spot. He was completely dependent on the land and through this dependence grew a love-hate relationship. There was a place called Glen Bolcain which was a natural asylum where all the madmen of Ireland used to assemble once their year in madness was complete. Sweeney sought refuge there and praised it, saying:

Glen Bolcain is like this:
it has four gaps to the wind,
pleasant woods, clean-banked wells,
cold springs and clear sandy streams
where green-topped watercress and languid brooklime
philander over the surface.
It is nature's pantry
with its sorrels, its wood sorrels,
its berries, its wild garlic,
its black sloes and its brown acorns. (7)

For all the torment and discomfort he bore, beaten by the wind and rain and freezing temperatures, cut to ribbons in thorny bushes and trees, he knew he could return to Glen Bolcain and enjoy its natural pleasures, but his restlessness prevented him from settling. He believed his fate was to live and die in the open

with no comforts and no protection from the elements. He was tormented by the natural world, barely able to survive it but he made himself a servant of it. In most cases, it was the only company he had. Believing himself to be a bird, he became a kind of wild animal or wild human, allowing himself to wallow in his madness. In his first weeks alone, he yearned for that which he had as a king; women, music etc, but as he sank further into despair, all he pined for were the fruits of his life in the open. He gave up all hope of retrieving his senses and the prestige he enjoyed as king. When Sweeney's soldiers came looking for him after the battle he told them:

> The life God grants me now
> is bare and strait;
> I am haggard, womanless,
> and cut off from music.
>
> God has exiled me from myself-
> soldiers, forget the man you knew. (8)

After he had spent a year without his kingdom and he had lost all hope of regaining it, this is what he said:

> No sweet talk with women.
> Instead, I pine
> for cresses, for clean
> pickings of brooklime.
>
> No surge of royal blood,

camped here in solitude;
no glory flames the wood,
no friends, no music.

Tell the truth: a hard lot.
And no shirking this fate;
no sleep, no respite,
no hope for a long time.

A great gulf yawns now
between me and that retinue,
between craziness and reason.
scavenging through the glen

on my mad royal visit:
no pomp or king's circuit
but wild scuttles in the wood.
Heavenly saints! O Holy God!

No skilled musicians cunning,
no soft discoursing women,
no open-handed giving;
my doom to be a long dying. (9)

He turned himself into a figure of ridicule, amusing himself with the idea of being a mad king, "scavenging through the glen on my mad royal visit", so far was he then from the days of being a respected ruler, "A great gulf yawns now between me and that retinue, between craziness and reason". Being an outcast, he had

lost all faith in his senses and powers of reason, although all his thoughts and feelings, cries of despair came pouring out in wonderful, literate verse, incredibly perceptive and clear, much more than just the ravings of a lunatic, but with a sharpened sense of his environment and an urgency forced on him by the severity of his circumstances. His poetry was the outstanding proof of his sharp wit and ability of mind, yet he continually convinced himself of his madness. His predicament had increased the output of his verse, using it as a necessary relief, or escape route for his emotions.

He became more introverted, and became a part of the landscape, permanently attached to it, sceptical of any escape and retreating into it by keeping himself hidden in trees etc. Bourke painted him as a very thin nimble figure, raw and toughened by the environment. Although he suffered tremendously in this life, he refused to leave it because he had grown used to it, because it was his fate, and because he was invigorated by it. For us now, and for Brian Bourke, Sweeney revitalises the landscape by injecting it with a sense of history. The land that he covered during his escapades of madness echoes with the adventures of this historical character.

Bourke has always rejected art within a defined social setting. For instance, in the very beginning of his career as an artist, he dismissed art schools, finding them "insulting" and "destructive". After attending one in dublin and two in London, he said: "If you've been to a school of art for five years it will take anything up to twenty-five to get over that. The consciousness of another viewer, which is always present in art schools, is the most destructive single thing in the whole business of art and exhibiting etc. I find schools of art fantastically insulting to the students working there- destructive." (10)

He rejects the social art scene in Dublin, avoiding openings etc and avoiding becoming involved in the circumference of the art world instead of with the actual work itself. For these reasons he left Dublin to live and work in a remote part of the West of Ireland. There he found he could concentrate more seriously on his work, which is what he enjoys most, and for relaxation he could listen to live Irish music, of which some of the best in Ireland takes place in the area where he now lives. In this way, he has outcast himself, to some degree, from the social art world of Ireland, which is centred in Dublin. He was always an eccentric and even more as an artist, has a different perspective and philosophy on life. As all artists are outcasts of society to an extent, so is Bourke. However, while most artists take refuge in creating their own society or clinging to that of the "art world"; Bourke was not prepared to become a part of this either, in fact

he rejected it more than any other aspect of society, and therefore he has been considered eccentric even within the Irish "art scene" for this mild offence. Sweeney was outcast and considered mad for his great offence to the church. Bourke was mildly cast out, but not in such dramatic circumstances as Sweeney, for being eccentric, in that he was outwardly opposed to art colleges, cynical of the art society and not an artist who followed fashionable trends. However Bourke continues working within the Irish art world, he shows in galleries regularly but tries to remain on the fringes as much as possible. His avoidance of the social art scene in Dublin is comparable to Sweeney's acceptance of the natural world over that which he knew before, when he says:

> I prefer the elusive
> rhapsody of blackbirds
> to the garrulous blather
> of men and women. (11)

Bourke is more openminded than most, and willing to accept other people's eccentricities or differences of perspective. This was how he came to develop such a strong bond of friendship with Frau Stutz, and was not afraid to come into close contact with her, benefitting from her very much as a result. He mentioned in the interview how she was the kind of person from whom most people would be inclined to hold off, but in her case this would be regrettable because she had so much to offer. She was commonly recognised in her community as being mad. It is precisely this term which Bourke questions in his portraits of her, and

comparatively of Sweeney. What we know as "mad" could be a greater sensitivity of mind, or a higher degree of intelligence, but because those with different attitudes are usually considered eccentric, or depending on the degree of divergence from the norm, mad, they also tend to be considered inferior and therefore outcasts of society. By leaving himself open to Frau Stutz, and trying to understand her way of thinking, he became aware of a wider horizon and a whole other side to his perceptions. Sweeney was also presumed to be mad, although he created an abundance of fine poetry.

Bourke could see elements of his own situation in that of Sweeney's, as the poet and figure of the artist. Seamus Heaney says in his introduction: "In so far as Sweeney is a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance, it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation." (12) Bourke would definitely aspire to the religious aspect of the story, having been brought up in the traditions of the Irish Catholic Church, with all the influences of the Church around him, including the holy pictures on the walls of his home. As Sweeney rejected the blessing of St Ronan, thus leading to his exile as a bird of air, Bourke rejected the Catholic Church. He rejected the constraints of religious and domestic obligation. By not allowing himself to be constrained by domestic obligation, he was further rejecting the Church. But by freeing himself from these constraints, his work improved with his state of mind, as Sweeney's poetry blossomed during his time in the open. In the beginning of the story, Sweeney made himself an

enemy of the church, earning the curse of St Ronan for his offence. At the end of the story he was offered refuge by the Church and he accepted warily, suspecting that Ronan's curse had not yet been fulfilled. When Moling, the priest who offered him shelter, asked:

> "When your end comes, will it be
> death by water, in holy ground?"

Sweeney replied:

> "It will be early when I die.
> One of your herds will make the wound." (13)

The protection of the Church is questioned in the story, although Sweeney relented at the end to accepting Moling's hospitality, he never trusted the church. Seamus Heaney writes in his introduction: "The literary imagination which fastened upon him (Sweeney) as an image was clearly in the grip of a tension between the newly dominant Christian ethos and the older, recalcitrant Celtic temperament." Bourke sees Sweeney as "straddling the pagan and the Christian world, he is the pagan under the thin skin of Christianity." Sweeney rebuked the Christian world, but then allowed himself to be influenced by it, in that he accepted the fate Ronan bade him, and despite his suspicions in the end of the story, he accepted Moling's hospitality, in whose care he was speared to death. Bourke would see himself as a pagan who was brought up under the guidance of Christianity but disregarded it. He explains how his sense of comedy arose from his rejection of

religion, how he sees comedy as a substitute. Others see religion as consolation in tragedy, the excuse for tragedy or its compensation. Bourke, not being religious, opts for comedy to compensate for tragedy.

"I am attracted to comic literature, I think you either see it as comic or tragic and if you go for the tragic element, I think that you'd probably save yourself by being religious, there not being a holy bone in my body, the only other way I can see life's peculiarities is being comic. If you were more inclined towards the tragic, you wouldn't see the comic." (14)

The Drawings.

In his drawings, of which there are sixteen in the series, Bourke has portrayed Sweeney constantly moving and agile. He has captured him in abrupt, quick movements: flying over the landscape, crouched in the grass, dangling from trees conversing with his hunters, or supping at the "clean-banked well". He always looks startled or alarmed like a hunted bird wary of his surroundings. He has a long pointed beak-like nose and a feathered crest growing from the top of his head, again bird-like, beneath which sit two huge gaunt eye sockets without any clear definition of eyes.

Bourke has conveyed the feeling of Sweeney being hunted and constantly moving, through a technique used by the Futurists in the early twentieth century, ie painting multiple overlapping images to create an illusion of movement. He depicts Sweeney with up to four heads at a time, swung in a circle of awareness and anxiety, peering in all directions around him. Two of the drawings are simply entitled Sweeney. In one he is standing, his feet barely touching the ground, his arms raised from the elbow, at which point they become a double image, to further give the impression of movement. His shoulders are pressed forward urgently and he cautiously surveys his surroundings. In many of the drawings Bourke manages to create a striking quality of raw nakedness in the figure by using red and black pastel to form an outline, and filling this in with deathly white flat areas of chalk. In all of the images he conveys Sweeney with a thin angular body, scarcely covered in flesh, his limbs appearing as if they were all double-jointed. Although he has used mostly warm hues of

orange and red, the figures of Seeney are very cold and bare with frightened expressions on his face.

Bourke treats Sweeney with sympathy and respect in the drawings. One immediatily recognises his state of confusion and uncertainty. He draws us into the story by combining this wild bird-like figure with the landscape. He brings out the humour in the character but with more compassion towards his situation than Flann O'Brien has in his novel, "At Swim-Two-Birds". The humour is apparent in the manner in which he portrays Sweeney, showing him as a mad-looking, wild, gangly figure. It is only when one understands the story, and the state that he was in, that the drawings arouse our sympathy for him, beyond the humour.

In the drawing entitled "Sweeney and the Mill Hag", the mill hag is shown in pursuit of Sweeney, an hilarious sight in itself, but also, in some way frightening because of the wildness conveyed in both their expressions. The mill hag was a terrible influence on Sweeney at one point in his life, where, having been captured by his half-brother, was left in her charge. At a stage where he was about to return to normality, to regain his senses, the mill hag prevented this by tempting him to prove his ability to leap into the air like a bird. She succeeded in tempting him back to his ways in the open, dissuading him from his good intentions to retrieve his sanity. Then she followed him over the land until he finally, through his greater experience in preserving himself from the dangers of the natural world, led her to her death.

In all of Bourke's drawings there is a sense of comedy which is

balanced by tragedy and a feeling of Sweeney's humiliation. In Flann O'Brien's book the feeling of humiliation prevails and the character of Sweeney is belittled, he is regarded as a cumbersome annoyance to the company in which he finds himself. They come across him as they are walking through woods, when they notice some movement in a tree; it appears to be a figure, which is too large to be a bird. While they are standing beneath the tree discussing the possibilities of what or who it might be, Sweeney's voice interrupts their talk with the recital of some verse. He falls out of the tree injuring himself badly and then they have to decide what to do with him: whether he should be shot dead to put him out of his misery, left there to die, or looked after and brought along with them. Some of the company disregard him as a drunkard, some are familiar with him as a madman, some sympathise with him as an ageing man and the poet amongst them respects him as a fellow poet. The latter arranges the dressing of his wounds with moss found in the woods. The general consensus is that his constant spouting of verse is an annoyance to the company but would be tolerated to stave off the guilt of leaving the man there to die alone. Flann O'Brien depicts Sweeney as an utterly helpless character, dropping out of trees, and becoming a burden to others. Although he presents an hilarious description of the scene, he has not honoured Sweeney with the nimbleness of body and spirit, apparent in the work of both Bourke and Seamus Heaney, where he may be perceived as a figure of ridicule , but his attributes as a poet and worthy character are not lost.

The qualities of insanity in Sweeney are reminiscent of such Shakespearian characters as "King Lear" or "poor Tom". King Lear

lost his wits and exposed himself to the elements at the collapse of his rule, as did Sweeney. They were both ridiculed fcr their despair and subsequent decline into madness. The story of Sweeney is like King Lear in that it combines the ambiguities of madness and the emotions of comedy and tragedy to intensify the drama and to engage the audience in every capacity in order to fully convey the moral or underlying theme of the whole work. So that, as Bourke suggested previously, if you are inclined towards the tragic you will identify with that element of the drama, and if you are inclined towards the comic, you will identify with the latter. It is difficult, in this kind of drama, to differentiate or separate comedy from tragedy, but the combination guarantees the arousal of either emotion in the audience, while at the same time, the one being necessary and complementary to the other. The interplay of comedy and tragedy is the core of much Irish drama such as the work of Sean O'Casey.

Chapter IV. Footnotes.

1. Bourke, Interview.
2. Seamus Heaney , Sweeney Astray, p. 6.
3. Ibid. p. 7,8 -no intervening reference but different page.
4. Ibid. p. 9
5. Ibid. p. 82,83
6. Ibid. p. 14
7. Ibid. p. 13
8. Ibid. p. 10
9. Ibid. p. 14,15
10. Bourke, Interview.
11. Heaney, p.43
12 Ibid, p. 79
14. Bourke, Interview.

CONCLUSION.

Bourke is an artist with an unusual clarity of vision. He has remained undisturbed by the ideologies of others, and uninfluenced by changing artistic fashions. It is difficult to classify him in any particular trend of twentieth century art, or Irish twentieth century art, because of the idiosyncrasy of his work. He allows his personality to enter into his work, thus its comic and ironic aspects. Irish writers such as Swift, Wilde and Beckett used wit in their literature, and it is not surprising that this characteristic is prominent in the work of an Irish artist such as Brian Bourke. He uses comedy to reveal the truth, to positive effect. He is in constant search of achieving an inner truth in his portraits and has reached this goal successfully in most, especially those of J and Frau Stutz.

In this search he approaches his subjects with vigour, in some cases almost ruthlessness, as in the heads of women 1970, but he never fails to convey his sympathy and understanding for those he portrays. In the Sweeney series, it was the similarities of Sweeney's predicament to his own which aroused this tenderness. To be capable of an uninhibited display of emotion in such strong, unsentimental painting is a rare talent. This depth of understanding of human existence, whether it be of a legendary figure from the sixth century, or a woman of the nineteen eighties, is necessary to all our lives today.

To end on a quotation from Bourke, explaining how he has finally

learned to relax and enjoy his discoveries:

"When I was younger I worked extremely hard, I'd be working quite simply day and night. I felt as if I had a fantastic amount to catch up with. I had to go through a mountain of rubbish before I found a few things I wanted to pursue. I suppose it was the only way for me to do it, but I think that I probably worked too hard. Its only in more recent years that I've learned the business of relaxation which hasn't done the work any harm at all, but then of course I know how to do it now."

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