

MEMORIAL DISCOURSE  
Trinity College Dublin  
Trinity Monday 15 May 2006

**Samuel Barclay Beckett 1906-1989**

By Dennis Kennedy, PhD, MRIA, Memb. Acad. Europaea, FTCD  
Samuel Beckett Professor of Drama

This address, given at the time of the Beckett Centenary in 2006, is published in part as the Foreword to *Reflections on Beckett*, ed. Anna McMullan and S. E. Wilmer (University of Michigan Press, 2009). All rights reserved.

You might ask if we need to memorialize further one of the most famous artists of the twentieth century. A month ago, his instantly recognizable face was hanging from every other lamppost in Dublin. So much has been written about our Sam that it is difficult to recapture him as anything other than world property. What I propose this morning has modest intention, to consider his relationship to Trinity College, our private recognition of the centenary of Trinity's most famous graduate of the twentieth century.

**PART 1: to 1927**

As he wrote in his seventies, 'Birth was the death of him.' And on top of that, his birth certificate is in error about the date. 13 May 1906, it states, but Samuel Barclay Beckett entered the world on Good Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> of April, as he always claimed, his arrival being announced in the *Irish Times* three days later. His mother May did not give birth 'astride of the grave' but in her bed in Cooldrinagh, the house her husband Bill built in Foxrock a few years before. This birth took place five days before the great San Francisco earthquake. If there were a Richter Scale for modernism, Beckett's arrival might be registered at the level of the deaths that same year of Ibsen and Cézanne, or the births that year of Shostakovich and Greta Garbo.

Bill was a quantity surveyor, with offices opposite Greene's bookshop in Clare Street. And Beckett was set to continue that bourgeois tradition, schooled as he was at Earlsfort House in Dublin, then at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, where Oscar Wilde had preceded him, though the school didn't brag about that, and where Sam's brother Frank was already a boarder. To the extent the new boy distinguished himself it was as an athlete, playing cricket and rugby, gaining a reputation that followed him to Trinity in October 1923.

Walking thru Front Gate, he was 'a shy, retiring 17-year-old', the authorized biographer, James Knowlson (1996: 47), tells us, just another cricket-loving schoolboy heading for an Arts course. His tutor was the philosopher A. A. Luce, father of John Luce (present today), and A. A. marked as likely careers on his tutorial card law or chartered accountancy. Perhaps that was Beckett's way of placating his father, assuring his parents that their skinny son was what they hoped he would be. Thomas Brown Rudmose-Brown, Professor of Romance Languages, took an interest in Beckett soon after; known to play favourites, 'Ruddy' would have been able to spot talent immediately, as classes in arts subjects were small. Red-faced, large, and excitable – students inevitably called him 'Red-nose Brown' – he was appointed Professor in 1909, though never elected a Fellow. There's no doubt that he was Beckett's greatest early influence. Much later Beckett said, 'Ruddy was a very warm, friendly person. You could talk to him as a student. We used to go out for drives together in his car.' He 'opened all kinds of doors for me', Beckett wrote to Roger

Little in 1983; ‘much needed light came from “Ruddy”, from his teaching & friendship. I think of him often and always with affection and gratitude.’ Rudmose-Brown was unusual for the time in that he actually taught modern authors like Proust and Gide, and was well-informed about contemporary Parisian arts and culture. He was an unconventional thinker, attacking the ban on contraceptives by the Irish Free State, as well as book censorship. He once defined the best government as the one ‘that charges you the least blackmail for leaving you alone’, a cynical witticism Beckett never forgot. Late in life Beckett said: ‘My Professor of French at Trinity College was a very human sort of man and an excellent scholar.’ He lived with his wife in Malahide but had a flat in Dublin, and used to give parties for students. ‘Very sexy they were!’ Beckett said. ‘He had the lights down low to make it more relaxed and easier’ (Knowlson 2006: 24).

In their academic history of Trinity, McDowell and Webb (1982: 458) conclude that Rudmose-Brown ‘is a difficult man to estimate, for his undoubted literary sensitivity and awareness of contemporary French poetry was masked by a partly assumed cynicism and an all too genuine laziness.’ In his later years much of his energy was devoted to a guerrilla war with Walter Starkie, Professor of Spanish since 1926. Anthony Cronin (1997), one of Beckett’s three biographers, says Ruddy was a dogmatic figure, the kind of academic who gives the impression ‘of being at odds with academia, but whom only academia can really accommodate’. (He died in 1942.)

At the time all honor and professional students took a final Freshman exam at the end of year two, called ‘Little-Go’. It included Latin, logic, maths and two elective subjects, a system that remained in force until 1953. In his second year Beckett had poor attendance in English, where Professor W. F. Trench’s dour lectures on versification and metrical evidence in Shakespeare failed to hold his attention; on the other hand, he had full attendance with Ruddy in French. Overall he achieved a Second Class result in the exam. He took the Scholarship Exam in his third year, in May 1926, coming in fourth of the candidates in modern languages, one of only sixteen Scholars elected. At the time Scholarship gave dinner at Commons, half the usual rate for rooms, minimal fees and £5 per quarter as emolument. But for Beckett the most important reward was being marked out academically. So he became, as Vivian Mercier said, ‘that rare, almost unique creature – a literary artist whose first ambitions were scholarly rather than creative’. Though I’m not sure ‘ambitions’ is the right word, since he seemed to be moving on a course others set for him. Scholarship took its physical toll nonetheless: in spring 1926, he was regularly suffering from insomnia, night sweats and panic attacks, and what he called ‘the old internal combustion heart’: he thought he was being paralyzed by it all, especially the palpitations (Knowlson 1996: 64).

But sport had not disappeared from his life. He reported that he’d been given his first golf clubs when he was about ten; he represented College in golf and joined the Carrickmines Golf Club as a student member, only about a mile from Cooldrinagh. According to Knowlson, Beckett could play as many as seventy-two holes in a day in vacations. Since it was a nine-hole course, that was any times around. He said golf was for him ‘all mixed up with the imagination’, the ocean and the Dublin hills, that he knew ‘every blade of grass’ on the course. When he continued to suffer from insomnia, even much later in France, he would play all the holes again in his mind. He was an unorthodox golfer, as he was in most things in life, playing chiefly with four clubs and using a number two iron as a putter.

And he played a lot of cricket. Beckett characteristically underrated his ability, saying that ‘there were only about forty men who played in all, so you didn’t have to be too good to get into the team!’ (quoted in Knowlson 2006: 27). Nonetheless making the First XI in the Junior Freshman year must count for something. He participated in the Dublin

University tours of England in summers of 1926 and 1927, with a match against the Northamptonshire county team the climax of the trip. The first year, batting low down at no. 8, Beckett scored 18 and 12 then bowled 8 'economical overs' for only 17 runs. But his side was beaten heavily and in his second year trounced again. Even if Beckett did not bring the Trinity team up to high standard, he achieved a unique distinction: he remains the only Nobel Prize winner to be mentioned in *Wisden's Cricket Almanac*. In the last year of his life he still remembered playing Northants: 'they were a happy band, drinking and whoring and so on between matches, and I'd go off alone and sit in a church. I wasn't at all what you would call a sociable sort of boy. The main requirement was to be alone.' He played the more solitary games as well, including a number of chess matches with the College club.

He seemed more excited by competitive motorcycles; his father bought him a 2 ¾ hp AJS, which was a side-valve 350cc machine, on the back of which he joined the DU Motor Cycle Club and raced in trials. In March 1925 he was in an open novice's trial from Donnybrook for sixty-three miles in hills and forests. Beckett was 'an intrepid motorcyclist', driving too fast for his own and his passenger's safety. He took corners too tightly and had numerous spills over the years, injuring himself slightly. But like his car driving he was more of a plough-ahead rider than a skilful one, whether due to his poor eyesight or his lack of care. His friend Bill Cunningham fell off the back of the AJS one frosty morning on the cobbles in what is now Pearse Street when Beckett skidded. Apologizing, Sam said only 'I like driving fast'.

Beckett's extreme devotion to sport might suggest an uncertainty of academic purpose: thirty-six holes of golf in a single day during term time could certainly be interpreted as 'turning the golf course into some sort of open-air hermit's cell', as Cronin puts it. He remained socially independent and shy: when he went to student parties he held himself back, 'tall, thin, silent, rather morose figure, who leaned against the wall . . .'

After a summer in the Loire valley, he returned to his final year in College, benefiting from Schols with rooms in 39 New Square with Gerald Parkenham Stewart, a friend from Portora, on the ground floor left, with a large shared living room and small separate bedrooms, and a small scullery. In his final year Beckett hired a piano for the sitting room; he liked French music, especially Debussy's preludes. One night, Stewart remembered, after he'd gone to bed, Beckett sat playing 'sad chords in the dark' (Knowlson 1996: 66).

In those days, of course, women students had to leave College by 6 PM, could not dine on Commons, and even required special permission from the Junior Dean to attend an evening event on campus, such as a recital. But the sexes mingled at cafes like Patisserie Belge by Westland Row Station and Switzers in Dawson Street. Beckett rarely frequented such places, though it has been reported that he could be seen at the brothel in the Grosvenor Hotel in Westland Row (which Belacqua frequents in Beckett's *More Pricks than Kicks*). His early romantic attractions, to a much-admired fellow student named Ethna MacCarthy and to his own cousin Peggy Sinclair, did not appear to take him out of himself.

His final exams were in October 1927 – it was the practice then to sit the exams after a summer of study – and he came in 'first of the firsts', getting the large gold medal and a Moderatorship prize of £50.

One of the most useful arts arrangements in place at the time was an exchange lectureship with the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, an elite institution of the highest reputation. Alfred Péron was the exchange lecturer from ENS to Trinity in Beckett's final year, a cultured, witty, charming and slender young man who transformed Beckett's experience in College. Péron had earlier shared a study with Jean-Paul Sartre and Paul Nizan in Paris. Though Jewish, he was accepted even by Beckett's socially conscious mother at home in Cooldrinagh. Friendship with Péron was part of Beckett's de-

provincializing process, as well as a further expansion of the gap that was opening between son and parents, made unnecessarily worse by Beckett's half-hearted attempts to explain his new intellectual enthusiasms. Met with incomprehension at home, he responded with adolescent disdain and withdrew into silence. During this time he also became aware of the amount of poverty and suffering in the Dublin slums compared to his luxurious life in Foxrock, with beggars, tramps, and wounded or gassed ex-soldiers in the streets of the Fair City. By his own account it was on the issue 'of pain, suffering & death that Beckett's religious faith faltered and quickly foundered' while still a student. Perhaps Ruddy had hastened this with his freethinking, anti-clerical attitudes, volubly expressed, not to mention the sceptical authors taught on the Mod Lang course.

Also part of his civilizing process was the National Gallery, which he visited regularly, attracted particularly to Low-Country realism. He loved the theatre and went to all types of shows from variety to tragedy, at the Queen's near the College back gate, the Royal and the Olympia. He admired the variety show aspect in Sean O'Casey's plays and wrote a decade later in *The Bookman* that O'Casey 'discerns the principle of disintegration in even the most complacent solidities', a thought worthy of Beckett's eponymous character in the early novel *Watt*. 'I was a weekly visitor to the Abbey', he told Knowlson (2006: 30), going usually with Geoffrey Thompson, his best friend from Portora. They were in centre of the front balcony for O'Casey's version of the Easter Rising, *The Plough and the Stars*, when the disturbances began on the Thursday night of opening week in 1926, that famous moment when Yeats said to a roaring audience: 'You have disgraced yourselves again . . .' Beckett was still upset in 1989 that two years later Yeats had turned down O'Casey's great war play, *The Silver Tassie*. Beckett always tried to occupy the same seat; 'at the centre end of one of the balcony aisles', he said; 'you got a good view for 1/6 as opposed to 3/- in the centre'. He remembered fondly Lennox Robinson's *The White Blackbird* and T. C. Murray's *Autumn Fire*. But he was affected most of all by J. M. Synge; he saw *Playboy*, *The Well of the Saints*, and *The Tinker's Wedding*. He was also delighted by films, especially Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.*, *The Navigator*, and *Go West*, and Chaplin's *The Kid* and *The Gold Rush*.

As Knowlson (1996: 55) summarizes, though Beckett turned away from his training at Trinity, 'from the quest for more knowledge to the exploration of impotence and ignorance after the war years, he remained one of the most erudite writers of the twentieth century, with a range of easy reference. that extended widely over many literatures.' It's fair to say that whatever future reservations Beckett had about knowledge and learning, Trinity – and especially Rudmose-Brown – 'made an intellectual out of a cricket-loving schoolboy.' As John Luce (2001) wrote, 'Trinity had formed his mind and shown that he could achieve intellectual excellence.'

## **PART 2: 1928-31**

Ruddy recommended Beckett for the ENS exchange post after graduation, but due to a confusion over the reappointment of the incumbent, the move was delayed until October 1928. The time was filled with teaching at Campbell College in Belfast, starting in the autumn of 1927, a post Ruddy also obtained for his protégé. This was a disaster. He willingly admitted he was hopeless as a teacher of French there, except for playing cricket with the boys in the summer term. He did not seem capable of getting up in time for his first lesson, even though he skipped breakfast. Brian McConnell, a pupil at the time, remembered him as 'a myopic young man who strode gloomily about the classroom making a half-hearted attempt to teach French' (in Knowlson 2006: 34). Among his other faults, Beckett refused to administer corporal punishment. The Headmaster, Duffy Gibbon, chided

Beckett again and again: you must attend properly to these boys, he said, as they are the 'Cream of Ulster'. Yes, Beckett replied, 'rich and thick.'

In the autumn of 1928 he finally got to Paris, where he would eventually find his home, artistically and literally. He had been preceded as the Trinity exchange lecturer at ENS by Thomas MacGreevy, a native of County Kerry and thirteen years older than Beckett. MacGreevy stayed on during Beckett's tenure and they rapidly became friends; Knowlson claims that until the Second World War MacGreevy 'was Beckett's only true friend and confidant', despite the fact that superficially MacGreevy, as an ardent Catholic and Republican, appeared his opposite. MacGreevy became director of the National Gallery of Ireland in 1950, the very place where Beckett in his youth had learned about art. Beckett started to drink in Paris and began to enjoy social life. His athletic capabilities were useful: after he lost the key to the ENS gate, he often came in after hours by climbing over the railings.

Dominating the Paris experience was not work – there was very little teaching for him to do – but the gradual awakening of a larger artistic and intellectual world. And certainly dominating that was James Joyce, with MacGreevy providing the introduction. The relationship became difficult after Joyce's unstable daughter Lucia fell in love with the handsome young Sam, but sixty years on Beckett could still remember Joyce's phone number without hesitation: Ségur 95-20. 'When I first met Joyce', Beckett said in 1989 (Knowlson 1996: 105), 'I didn't intend to be a writer. That only came later when I found out that I was no good at all at teaching. When I found I simply couldn't teach . . . But I do remember speaking about Joyce's heroic achievement. I had a great admiration for him . . . it was epic, heroic, what he achieved. But I realised that I couldn't go down that same road.' Joyce's influence was '*ab contrario*', Beckett said: he had gone 'as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, in control of one's material. He was always *adding* to it [*Finnegans Wake*] . . . I realised my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and taking away, subtracting rather than adding.'

But the sojourn in Paris ended. 'In the Irish lexicon', as Cronin (124) says, 'there ought to be a word for the despair of returning, particularly in youth . . . between the 1920s and the 1950s a return to the old, obsessive, dull, puritanical, provincial Ireland often created a special sickness in the returning heart.' For Beckett, coming back to Dublin in 1930 was a huge change from the freedom of Paris, where he could go even to an occasional brothel without being noted. His return was 'claustrophobic and frustrating' and led to 'a long period of confusion, self-doubt and unhappiness'.

Back in Trinity, the understanding was that Beckett would be an assistant lecturer in French under Ruddy's supervision while conducting postgraduate research. But in the end Beckett's appointment was upgraded to a three-year lectureship at a salary of £200, rising in increments of £50. This was a generous starting circumstance for anyone interested in an academic career, clearly designed by Ruddy to set his star pupil on his way. But instead of gratitude and enthusiasm for a promising career, Beckett discovered that Trinity only added to his unhappiness; Paris had given him a life that was 'reasonable', while the Senior Common Room in the Ruddy circle was a combination of 'cheap quip and semi-obscene entirely pointless activity', which he hated.

As to teaching, 'He delivered his lectures with his back to the window beside the rostrum and with his eyes apparently fixed on a point on the ceiling above the door, speaking slowly and deliberately but with little expression.' Some students nonetheless thought him impressive. He was a better university lecturer than schoolmaster, as well as more punctual, at least at first, but he completely lacked the theatrical impulse that would have made his teaching interesting for himself and his students.

Knowlson (2006: 53-4) polled a number of Beckett's former students about his effect as a teacher in Trinity. Here are a few responses.

- He 'gave the impression of being a tall thin streak of misery – standing front of the fireplace, leaning against the mantelpiece, a large lock of hair falling down on forehead. He hardly ever looked up at us. The term he was missing, I asked "Where's our Sam?" Someone replied: "Gone to Paris to commit suicide"' (Sheila Dobbs Jones).
- He 'appeared to be talking to himself' (Elliseva Sayers).
- 'He was such a dull lecturer and such a dull man, as he thought himself too good for the job and held his students in contempt. The only thing which roused us from our somnolent lethargy was when he set himself on fire by letting the sleeve of his gown drop down into the open fire when he was leaning his fevered brow on the marble mantelpiece' (Jesse Brown Forbes Yates).

In his second academic year as lecturer, in the autumn of 1931, he usually dressed in a grey shirt, grey Aran sweater and grey flannel trousers – what became the Beckettian uniform – but in those days the uniform showed considerable traces of 'food, drink and other matter' (Cronin: 139). A belted trench coat was topped off by a black beret, which was a source of considerable amusement in Dublin.

The unsolvable problem was that standing up to speak in public was sheer torture for him. Aside from lacking 'any exhibitionistic streak' he said 'he could not bear teaching to others what he did not know himself' (Knowlson 1996: 126). His Michaelmas Term notes on Gide and Racine (preserved by a student) show his lectures were wide-ranging and filled with insight but must have been pitched over the heads of the duller undergraduates. He expected more of his students and was shocked to find them uninterested – compared to the *Normaliens* in Paris they were strikingly inferior. In any event Beckett proclaimed to MacGreevy, 'I don't want to be a professor'.

If his ailments were psychosomatic, as the biographers suggest, it's no wonder that they grew in severity. Certain situations caused him 'acute stomach upsets, fevers, colds, heart palpitations' – that old internal combustion heart – 'dizziness, boils, cysts, facial rashes', all contributing to insomnia and nightmares, despite his athletic strength (Cronin 131). Since he had suffered much less in Paris, the ailments were associated with returning home. During Trinity Term 1931 he contracted a severe bout of pleurisy and was unable to teach. Recuperating at home in Foxrock, one day while he was out walking his mother came across some writing he had left on a table. Reading it with growing 'horror and disgust', on his return she was in 'blind fury', appalled at what she had seen and adamant that she would not have him writing 'such monstrous work under her roof' (Knowlson 1996: 130). Her reaction was swift and implacable: he was to be exiled from Cooldrinagh, and nothing Beckett, his brother or father could say would change her mind. It's not clear which of Sam's early work she had stumbled on; possibly sections of what would become *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* or *More Pricks than Kicks*. I'm sure he hated the emotional upset, but Beckett may have secretly been glad of another chance to escape the confines of Foxrock. He left for France in June with his brother Frank, matters still highly tense at home.

Georges Pelorson, who had been one of Beckett's students at ENS, came to Trinity as exchange lecturer the next year and a long-lasting friendship developed. The two young men would talk in New Square until the early hours, sitting in large wicker armchairs on either side of a turf fire with glasses in hand and a bottle of Jameson on the floor between them. But Pelorson left Dublin in October 1931 and Beckett was more alone than ever. To MacGreevy he described how he spent hours over the fire each evening 'mooching about between the bed and the dark'. He was beginning to find even the smallest transactions in

life unbearably irksome, like buying a stamp or a tram ticket. On weekends he shut himself in his room, lying in bed hopelessly thinking of another bout of lecturing waiting to ambush him. He hated 'this terrible D' [Dublin], could not read much or write at all. Relations with students were now very poor, lecturing a daily torture, neglect of elementary hygiene becoming severe, the heart a constant worry. He planned to decamp for Germany after Christmas, realizing now he was incapable of continuing.

He knew that leaving his post would cause practical problems for Ruddy and disappointment for his parents. The Trinity position was the first and perhaps only accomplishment that his father, who died in 1933, could have understood as success. Half a century later Sam could still 'remember his father's pride' when he opened a wicket gate into College with a staff key. He spoke to no one about his impending flight. At last, on 20 December 1931, when the boat to Ostend was already booked, he wrote MacGreevy: 'If I have let them down, tant pis. Some charming little cunt of a gold medallist will be nominated deputy for a term . . . as usual I'm not burning any boats! I'm hoping to be able to spit fire at them from a distance' (Knowlson 1996: 142-3).

It was what Hugh Leonard has called an Irishman's resignation. Eventually he sent a telegram to Ruddy which excused his sudden departure on the grounds of ill health. Beckett regarded himself as a coward and traitor, but the Trinity authorities were less concerned about the disappearance of a lecturer than the disappearance of a College master key he neglected to return, and decided a number of locks had to be changed.

### **PART 3: 1959**

Beckett's rise to fame was not quick but by the time he returned to College in an official capacity in 1959, he was internationally respected as a writer in both French and English, the creator of some of the most innovative fiction and drama of the twentieth century. His war service in the Resistance in Paris and then in the south was rewarded with the Croix de Guerre in 1945 – he dismissed it all as 'Boy Scout stuff', though the danger was real enough. But his literary rewards began though the trilogy of novels written in French immediately after the war, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnameable*. And most of all, of course, with *Waiting for Godot*, written only because he was tired of the 'impossible' fiction he was struggling with. Through *Godot* Beckett discovered the power achievable thru the limitations of the theatre as compared to the non-limitations of prose, as he put it. Finished in French in 1949, the year before his mother died, *Godot* was first produced by Roger Blin in Paris in 1953 and within weeks had made Beckett famous in France, in a brief time in Britain and America as well, and then throughout the world. In one of his most revealing comments, Beckett explained that he sent the manuscript to Blin because he had seen that director's production of Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata* and was struck with two things: 'the fidelity to the author and the near emptiness of the theatre' (Gussow 1996: 32).

Beckett's relationship to Ireland had declined even further but he had not been forgotten at Trinity. It was an extraordinary period of creativity for him after the war – within a decade he completed the trilogy and *Godot*, as well as *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and *Embers*. He also settled in to a life that bore resemblance to hermitage, avoiding or attempting to avoid publicity and the growing attention of the press, the public and the academic critics. But he was 'damned to fame', as he said himself – a resonant phrase that Knowlson uses as title for his biography. Adding to the notoriety, in January 1959 H. O. White, Trinity emeritus professor of English, wrote asking if Beckett would accept an honorary doctorate (Knowlson 1996: 465). Since this was precisely the kind of attention Beckett ran away from, his reply to White is intriguing:

I am knocked all of a heap by the news that the Board contemplate giving me a D.Litt. to which I honestly feel I have no title . . . But there is no question of my

declining such an honour from my own university. I shall accept it . . . with emotion and gratitude. (Beckett manuscripts, Trinity College Library)

He was more explanatory to Con Leventhal:

The first movement is to decline as usual, but I finally realize this is hardly possible . . . I don't underestimate it, nor pretend I am not greatly moved, but I have a holy horror of such things and it is not easy for me. If I were a scholar or man of letters it might be different. But what in God's name have doctoracy and literature to do with work like mine?

He did indeed hate public events, and the Trinity honorary degree is the only one he ever accepted, though offered many. Knowlson proposes that he 'regarded it as a gesture of forgiveness for having walked out of his lectureship over twenty-five years before'.

Whatever the explanation he was quietly delighted by the honour. He forced himself to put up with the ceremony because to refuse the tribute from the institution that made him an intellectual would have appeared truculent and discourteous. With regard to Trinity, though his parents were both dead, perhaps it also seemed 'a belated justification for a decision which at the time had so bitterly disappointed them', when he abandoned an academic career. Nonetheless he dreaded the 'Commencements farce', as he called it. He fretted at the public nature of the event and the thought of dressing up: 'I have no clothes but an old brown suit,' he continued to Leventhal, 'if that's not good enough they can stick their *Litt. D.* up among their piles.'

Despite his dread, the ceremony and the Commencements dinner were much more pleasant than he expected. He wore his brother's dinner jacket – which didn't fit, since Frank was much larger in frame – and could not fix the bow tie, which he let hang around his collar. The Latin oration at the ceremony referred to him as a 'modern Diogenes' who has 'exposed the stupidities and vanities of our age'. *Waiting for Godot* was described as the modern equivalent of the Psalmist's *expectans expectavi*, 'I waited patiently [for the Lord]'. The Orator went on to say that the play is 'a rhapsody for those who despair of the present generation.' Written by Professor Wormell, I'm afraid the oration said more about the Orator than the honouree, making Beckett a Juvenalian satirist, a serious misunderstanding of *Godot*.

Among Beckett's many generosityes was a substantial gift to the fund for the Berkeley Library. In John Luce's account (private correspondence), when appealing for funds for the new Library in the late 1950s, 'I wrote personally to him asking for support, and received a very nice reply in which he promised the donation of one year's royalties from *Krapp's Last Tape* then playing on Broadway. This brought in over 6,000 pounds, a very substantial sum in those days.' Characteristically he gave away most of his Nobel Prize money as well, one of the chief beneficiaries again being the Trinity Library.

It's worth stopping a moment on the Nobel Prize, which was given in 1969, especially as Beckett is one of only two Trinity graduates to have been so honoured. The other Nobel laureate was Ernest Walton, who received the Prize in Physics in 1951. They were at College together, Walton graduating a year before Beckett. But unlike the physicist, who was an academic researcher, Beckett saw the award chiefly as a trial. He heard the news while on holiday in Tunisia in 1969 when his French publisher and agent, Jerome Lindon, telegrammed the Becketts on 23 October:

Dear Sam and Suzanne, In spite of everything they have given you the Nobel Prize – I advise you to go into hiding. (Knowlson 1996: 570)

His wife Suzanne turned to Beckett and said 'quelle catastrophe'.

#### **PART 4: 1986-2006**

---

But the honours rolled on. The final scene in Beckett's relation to College occurred in 1986, when Provost William Watts paid him a visit in Paris. As Watts relates it in his autobiography (2008): 'I was driven by curiosity more than anything else . . . I decided to ask him if we might have his permission to name our new theatre, then under construction, in his honour.' They met in the usual bar, Beckett dressed in the usual Aran sweater, and Beckett 'began by saying that he owed Trinity an apology for his sudden departure' and losing the key. Otherwise ' . . . he talked about cricket and rowing. I asked for permission to use his name which he gave without hesitation.'

It is not possible to sum up the life of such an important artist in a short talk, and I wouldn't want to try even in a longer one. Beckett sought to create art out of human anxiety, suffering, and loss, what he considered to be the twentieth-century human condition. Beckett's writing is art after Auschwitz, art made from chaos and despair, from remorselessly looking death in the face, from the awareness of the absence of salvation. Beckett's concern with the body in pain is a constant throughout the work, from *Watt* and *The Unnameable* to the overt dramatisation of torture in his last plays, *Catastrophe* and *What Where*. Perhaps he learned this from Dante, first studied in Trinity and read throughout his life; his student copy of the *Divine Comedy* was on his bedside table when he died. Parallel to this is the frequent requirement for actors to be located in tortured positions in order to effect the plays, from Hamm who can't stand up and Clov who can't sit down – 'every man his speciality', Hamm says – to the rigidity of the actress in *Not I*, strapped onto a stool so only her mouth remains in spotlight. The failure of sight in Pozzo in *Godot* and Hamm in *Endgame*, the loss of mobility in Nagg and Nell in ashbins in that play, of Winnie buried in a mound in *Happy Days*, and the characters kneeling in urns in *Play*, the dismemberment of the body in *Not I* and *That Time*, the reduction of life to nine paces in *Footfalls* – all these are ultimately concerned with the aesthetic exploitation of impotence, failure, and decrepitude as the momentous facts of existence. Just as everyone now knows Mr Godot is not going to come, no matter how eagerly expected, so the epigrams of Beckett's characters became the anthems of the age of anxiety:

---

- 'You're on earth, there's no cure for that.'
- 'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness.'
- 'I can't go on. I'll go on.'
- 'One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage.'
- 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'

The comic grimace, the smile of the skull from ear to ear, the man crawling in the mud, the memorialist muttering in the dark: these are the stuff of Beckett's remarkable achievement. In his centenary year Trinity has reason enough to be proud of its part in his formation, even if it was in part a negative formation. And now we have the Samuel Beckett Centre building, its theatre, the chair which I occupy, all named for him, and a new plaque on House 39 where he lived, a major international symposium on his work just concluded, a wonderful exhibit taken from the growing number of Beckett manuscripts in the library, and a new studentship in theatre honouring him as well, the result of the centenary collaboration with the Department of Arts and jointly funded by College and the government. Quite a lot of memorializing, I think, for someone who three-quarters of a century ago walked off with the College master key.

#### References

- Cronin, Anthony 1997. *Samuel Beckett: the last modernist*. London: Flamingo.  
Gussow, Mel 1996. *Conversations with (and about) Beckett*. London: Nick Hern.  
Knowlson, James 1996. *Damned to Fame: the life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury.
-

- Knowlson, James and Elizabeth (ed.) 2006. *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Luce, John V. 2001. 'Samuel Beckett's undergraduate course at Trinity College Dublin', *Hermathena* 171: 33-45.
- McDowell, R. B., and Webb, D. A. 1982. *Trinity College Dublin 1592-1952: an academic history*. Cambridge University Press.
- Watts, William 2008. *A Memoir*. Dublin: Lilliput Press.
-

Samuel Barclay Beckett was an Irish avant-garde novelist, playwright, theatre director, and poet, who lived in France for most of his adult life. He wrote in both English and French. His work offers a bleak, tragicomic outlook on human nature, often coupled with black comedy and gallows humour. He is one of the key writers in what Martin Esslin called the "Theatre of the Absurd". His work became increasingly minimalist in his later career. Beckett was awarded the 1969 Nobel Prize.

Samuel Barclay Beckett was an Irish avant-garde novelist, playwright, theatre director, and poet, who lived in France for most of his adult life. He wrote in both English and French. His work offers a bleak, tragicomic outlook on human nature, often coupled with black comedy and gallows humour. Samuel Barclay Beckett was born on April 13, 1906, in Dublin, Ireland. His father, William Frank Beckett, worked in the construction business and his mother, Maria Jones Roe, was a nurse. Young Samuel attended Earlsfort House School in Dublin, then at 14, he went to Portora Royal School, the same school attended by Oscar Wilde. He received his Bachelor's degree from Trinity College in 1927. Referring to his childhood, Beckett, once remarking, "I had little talent for happiness." Suzanne, his wife, had died in July 1989. His life was confined to a small room where he would receive visitors and write. He died on December 22, 1989, in a hospital of respiratory problems just months after his wife. Fact Check. We strive for accuracy and fairness. Beckett, Samuel 1906–1989 (Samuel Barclay Beckett) Source for information on Beckett, Samuel 1906–1989: Concise Major 21st Century Writers dictionary. (Samuel Barclay Beckett). PERSONAL: Born April 13, 1906, in Foxrock, Dublin Ireland; died of respiratory failure December 22, 1989, in Paris, France; son of William Frank (a quantity surveyor) and Mary Jones (an interpreter for the Irish Red Cross; maiden name, Roe) Beckett; married Suzanne Dechevaux-Dumesnil (a pianist), March 25, 1961.