

THE KEY WORDS

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was born in Dublin. He was one of the leading dramatists and writers of the twentieth century. In his theatrical images and prose writings, Beckett achieved a spare beauty and timeless vision of human suffering, shot through with dark comedy and humour. His 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature citation praised him for ‘a body of work that in new forms of fiction and the theatre has transmuted the destitution of modern man into his exaltation’.

A deeply shy and sensitive man, he was often kind and generous both to friends and strangers. Although witty and warm with his close friends, he was intensely private and refused to be interviewed or have any part in promoting his books or plays. Yet Beckett’s thin angular countenance, with its deep furrows, cropped grey hair, long beak-like nose and gull-like eyes is one of the iconic faces of the twentieth century. Beckett himself acknowledged the impression his Irish origin left on his imagination. Though he spent most of his life in Paris and wrote in French as well as English, he always held an Irish passport. His language and dialogue have an Irish cadence and syntax. He was influenced by many of his Irish forebears, Jonathan Swift, J.M. Synge, William and Jack Butler Yeats, and particularly by his friend and role model, James Joyce. When a journalist asked Beckett if he was English, he replied, simply, ‘Au contraire’.

Family_

Beckett was born on Good Friday, 13th April 1906, in the affluent village of Foxrock, eight miles south of Dublin.

He was the second son of William and May Beckett.

The family were solidly middle-class, Protestant professionals. Bill Beckett, a successful quantity surveyor, was a robust, kindly and affectionate man with whom Beckett was very close. They would often go for long walks together in the Dublin and Wicklow hills, a landscape that pervades Beckett's work. During the Easter Rising of 1916, Beckett's father took him and his brother to a hilltop where they could see the fires burning in the city centre. It was an image that would stay with Beckett for his entire life. His father's early death in 1933 would leave a terrible absence in Beckett's life and give him his major theme – the arbitrary, undeserved nature of human pain. May Beckett was both affectionate and domineering and her 'savage loving' would have a huge impact on her son's development.



Beckett attended primary school at Earlsfort House in the centre of Dublin. He then boarded at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, the alma mater of Oscar Wilde. In 1923 he entered Trinity College Dublin where he studied French and Italian.



He excelled academically, winning a prestigious scholarship in modern languages at the end of his third year. He graduated in 1927, first in his class and was awarded the college's gold medal.

Enniskillen



Sport_

Beckett became an accomplished sportsman at school and at university, excelling at rugby, cricket, tennis, golf and boxing.

At Portora, he played scrum-half on the rugby team and in his final year was captain of both the rugby team and the cricket eleven. He played cricket for Trinity and went on the university's two tours of England, for which he is mentioned in *Wisden*, the cricketers' bible. Even in old age, he would watch Ireland's international rugby matches on television in his Parisian apartment.

A large, stylized pink letter 'C' with a white circular cutout in the center.

Career_

A large, stylized pink letter 'E' with a white circular cutout in the center.
A large, stylized pink letter 'N' with a white circular cutout in the center.
A large, stylized pink letter 'O' with a white circular cutout in the center.
A large, stylized pink letter 'R' with a white circular cutout in the center.
A large, stylized pink letter 'S' with a white circular cutout in the center.
A large, stylized pink letter 'A' with a white circular cutout in the center.

Beckett's friends and family expected him to follow an academic career. After a brief stint teaching in a private school in Belfast, he went as a teaching assistant in English to the distinguished *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris in October 1928 on a two-year exchange fellowship.

Shortly after arriving, he met his predecessor in this post, the Catholic Irish poet and critic, Thomas MacGreevy, later curator of the National Gallery of Ireland, who would become a lifelong confidante and close friend. McGreevy introduced the young Beckett to influential writers and publishers in Paris, most crucially to James Joyce. His immersion in the Parisian literary scene had a profound impact on the young Irishman. On his return to Dublin, Beckett was unhappy lecturing in Trinity, and resigned after little more than a year. He said he could not teach others what he himself had not yet learned.

Early— LOVE

Throughout his life Beckett earned the love and esteem of a number of women, many of whom remained long-term friends. He fell in love for the first time as an undergraduate, with a compelling fellow student, Ethna MacCarthy, who is thinly disguised as ‘The Alba’ in some of Beckett’s early fiction and poetry.

The affection seems to have been one-sided and she later married A.J. ‘Con’ Leventhal, a lifelong friend of Beckett’s. His first serious love affair, much to his parents’ horror, was with his first cousin, Peggy Sinclair, who is the ‘Smeraldina’ in *More Pricks than Kicks*. The premature deaths of both these women, Peggy of tuberculosis in 1933, Ethna of cancer in 1959, caused Beckett tremendous anguish. In Paris, Joyce’s daughter, Lucia, who was later diagnosed as a schizophrenic, fell for the handsome young visitor to her father’s house. The awkwardness of this unreciprocated infatuation led to a temporary rupture in Beckett’s relations with the Joyce family.



Dante —

Beckett was a tremendously well-read, intellectual man, steeped in European culture and with a lifelong love of music and painting. His writing draws on the work of a huge range of European writers and philosophers.

However, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the Italian author of *The Divine Comedy*, was, arguably, the source of most abiding fascination. The hero of Beckett's early short story collection, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, Belacqua Shuah, is named after an indolent character in Dante's *Purgatoria*. Throughout his work, vivid images of suffering from Dante's masterpiece often resurface. His student copy of *The Divine Comedy* would be at his bedside when he died in December 1989.

In 1929, while still in Paris, Beckett published his first critical essay, on Joyce's 'Work in Progress', which became *Finnegans Wake*, and his first piece of fiction, a short story called 'Assumption', both in the avant-garde literary magazine *transition*.

The following year he published a long poem, drawing on the life of the philosopher René Descartes, entitled *Whoroscope*. In 1931, he published a short critical book entitled *Proust*, on the French writer's novel *Remembrance of Things Past*. This work articulates Beckett's bleak outlook on life and his reading of the German pessimistic philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer. After leaving Trinity, Beckett spent a spell in Germany and then returned to Paris, where he made his first serious attempt at a novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. He failed to get the book published, though much of it was reworked into his short story collection, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934). The next year he published a slim volume of poetry, *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates*. In need of money, and in contrast with his later critical silence, he wrote a number of reviews in literary magazines and an article acerbically criticising censorship and provincialism in Ireland.

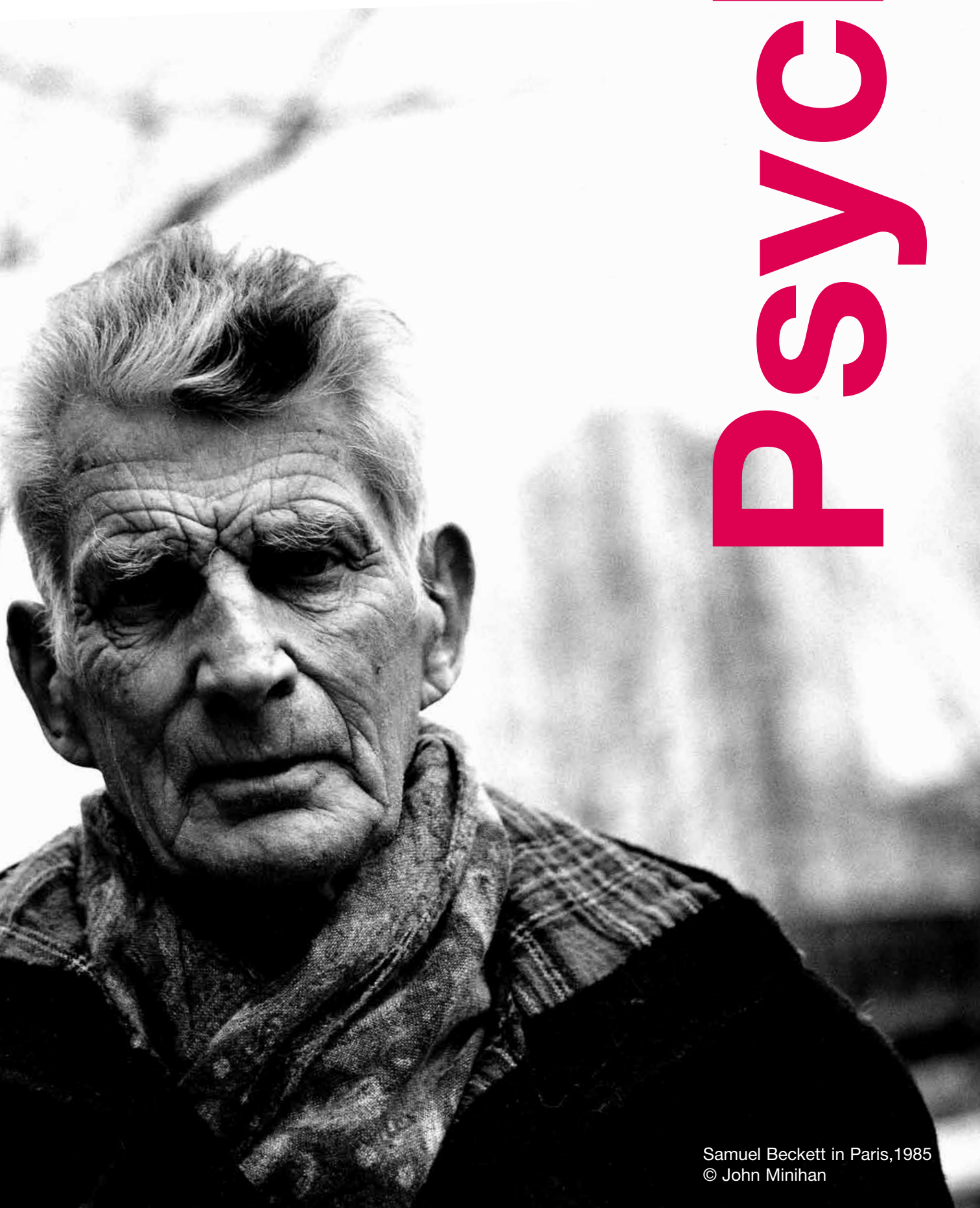
Literary

Beckett's

Beckett had often suffered from panic attacks, anxiety and depression. In 1933, these reached such intensity that he decided to go to London to seek psychological help. He underwent psychoanalysis for almost two years and also read books on psychology by Freud, Adler, and Rank.

He visited the Bethlem Royal Hospital, where an old Portora friend worked as a doctor. These visits were used in the asylum scenes in his novels *Murphy* and *Watt*. The imprint of his personal experience of psychotherapy is to be felt throughout his work. Much of it is cast in the form of a monologue in which a speaker, often lying on his back in dimness or dark, gabbles in a kind of delirium to a faceless listener. Beckett began *Murphy* in London in 1935 and completed it in June 1936. The starting point for many modern readers of Beckett, this comic novel of ideas is probably his least experimental work, though this did not stop it going through forty-two rejections, before finally being published by Routledge in 1938.

Psychoanalysis



In November 1937, after a six-month tour of Germany, Beckett appeared as a prosecution witness in a notorious court case in Dublin. Harry Sinclair, Peggy's uncle, had taken a libel action against the well-known writer-cum-medic Oliver St John Gogarty, himself lampooned in James Joyce's *Ulysses* as 'Buck Mulligan'.

Gogarty Case

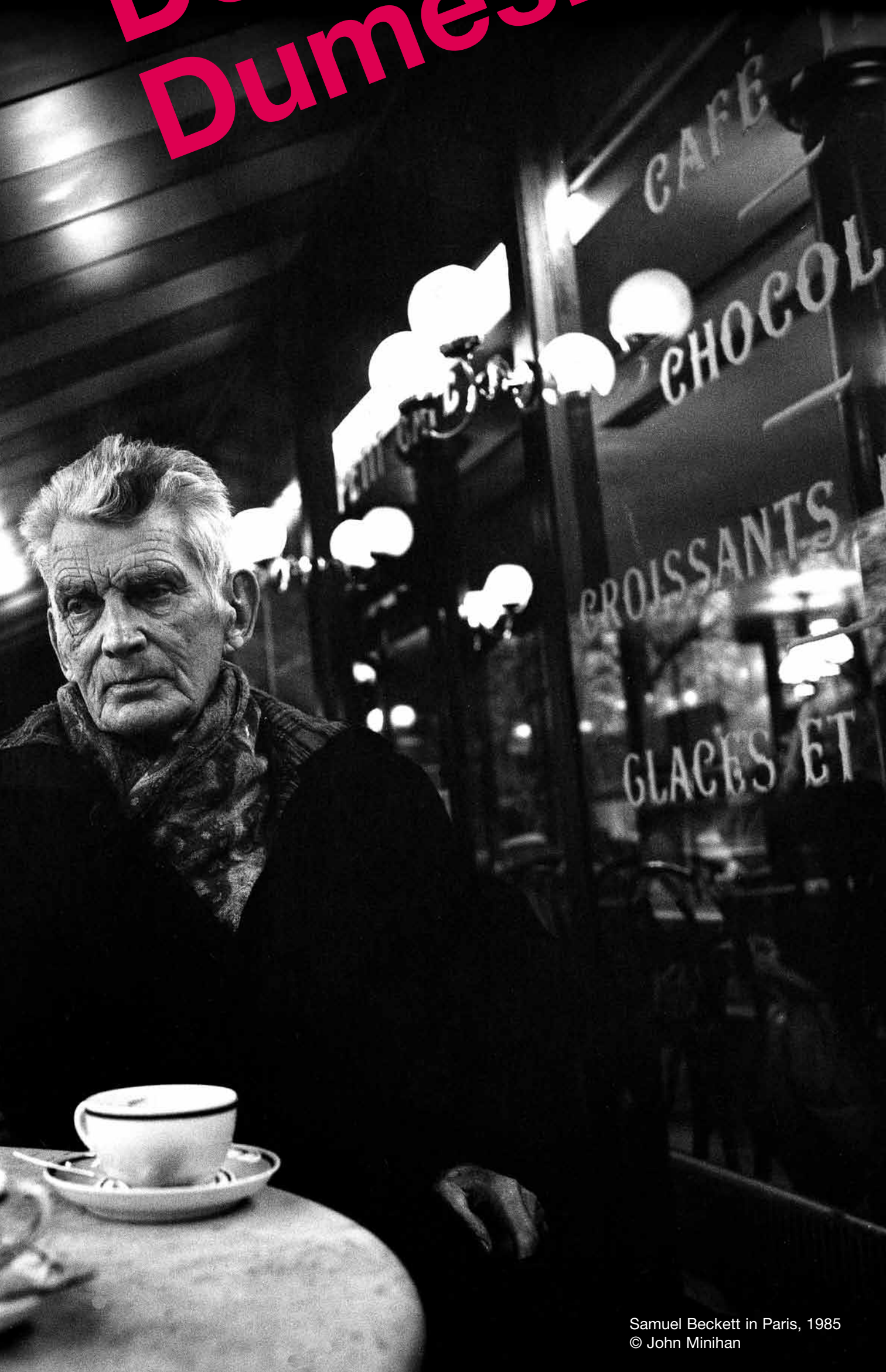
Gogarty had given an offensive depiction of the complainant's family in his memoir, *As I Was Going Down Sackville Street* (1937). Though the libel action was successful, and a disillusioned Gogarty retreated to exile in America, Beckett came out badly from the proceedings. The defence counsel's skilful attempts to discredit the prosecution's witness relied on depicting Beckett as a blasphemous and decadent 'intellectual' living in Paris, a city considered lax by the rather censorious Irish standards of that time. The case was widely reported in the Dublin newspapers. His mother was appalled and the ensuing row hastened Beckett's decision to leave Dublin for Paris permanently.



On 6th January 1938, Beckett was stabbed by a pimp on the Parisian streets for no obvious reason. The knife came very close to his heart. Friends and family rushed to his bedside and he was reconciled with his mother.

While he was recovering in hospital, he was visited by Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil (1901-1989), whom he had first met ten years previously. Though he was at the time involved with the American art patron, Peggy Guggenheim, his relationship with Suzanne gradually supplanted this dalliance. He and Suzanne would remain together for the rest of their lives, eventually marrying in 1961.

Suzanne Deschevaux- Dumesnil



World War II

When war was declared in September 1939, Beckett was in Dublin visiting his mother. He quickly made arrangements to return to Paris, famously declaring his preference for France at war to Ireland at peace.

Appalled by the treatment of his Jewish friends under Nazi occupation, Beckett became actively involved in the Resistance in Paris, principally as an information handler. In August 1942, his cell was betrayed and more than fifty of its members were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Beckett and Suzanne narrowly escaped and managed a hazardous journey to unoccupied France, where they lived out the rest of the war. Working as a farm labourer during the day, Beckett wrote his intriguing experimental novel *Watt* in the evening. After the war, Beckett was decorated for his Resistance activities with the Croix du Guerre and the Médaille de la Reconnaissance Française. With characteristic self-deprecation he would later dismiss his wartime activities as ‘Boy Scout stuff’. Later in 1945, after a stint in Dublin, he returned to France by working as an interpreter and storekeeper for the Irish Red Cross Hospital in Saint Lô, before rejoining Suzanne in Paris.





‘Revelation’

There are few explicit references to the war in his work, but there is every sign that it deeply imprinted itself on his imagination. It seems to have contributed to a radical change of direction.

During a return visit to Dublin, he had a ‘vision’ or ‘revelation’ of literary purpose which marks the divide between his 1930s prose - third-person, erudite, omniscient - and the dwindled, bewildered, first-person story-telling of the trilogy and beyond. Unlike some of his early writing, which shows the influence of Joyce in its wordplay and heavy allusion to other literary works, the post-War work carries its learning more lightly, making ignorance, impotence and failure its key preoccupations. Beckett’s mature style does not bombard us with erudition, but comes as a voice from the darkness, a provisional consciousness uttering forth its own perplexity in bafflement and anguish. This change in direction was accompanied by the decision to write in French. There followed, between 1946 and 1950 a ‘a frenzy of writing’, which included much of the work for which Beckett is famous, namely *Waiting for Godot* and his trilogy of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*.

***Waiting for Godot* was written between October 1948 and January 1949 as a diversion from the more taxing, as Beckett saw it, business of prose composition. Suzanne approached a French actor-director, Roger Blin, and eventually enough money was raised to put it on in a small Parisian theatre in January 1953.**

Waiting

The play's success in Paris generated international controversy and wide interest. Set on a bare stage, apart from a lone tree, with two characters exchanging inconsequential dialogue while waiting for a character who never comes, the play provoked hostility and confusion. When an English version, translated, like almost all his work, by Beckett himself, transferred to London in 1955, the initial reaction of audience and critics was scornful. However, *Waiting for Godot* would soon come to be hailed as the most revolutionary and influential play of the twentieth century.

for Godot_



Apart from the War years, Beckett spent at least a month every summer visiting his mother. Her death from Parkinson's Disease in 1950 caused him predictable anguish and guilt. He was not to be spared more grief. On hearing of his brother Frank's terminal

illness, Beckett rushed to his home in Killiney, and stayed with him during his final months over the summer of 1954.

The sense of loss, pain, ending and dread haunt *Endgame*, which he wrote later that year.

The fellow-feeling between the two protagonists, which had at moments softened the harshness of *Godot*, was in much shorter supply here. Instead, we have the enduring Beckettian image of human beings in dustbins. Outside their room, all seems dead, yet a black humour endures.

Endgame



Beckett

and Broadcasting_



In 1956 the BBC commissioned Beckett to write a radio play, and the exploration of a new medium seems to have invigorated his creativity.

The result, *All that Fall*, is one of the most autobiographical and overtly Irish plays of Beckett's career, set recognisably in the Foxrock of his childhood. A later radio play, *Embers* (1959), though more ghostly and less clearly located than *All that Fall*, is set on a beach in south Dublin and makes mesmerising use of the sound of falling waves and crushing shingle. His next stage play, *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), with its use of recorded voices on stage, is clearly indebted to his forays into radio drama. In 1965, he worked on a film, entitled *Film* (1965), shot in New York and starring Buster Keaton. He also wrote a play for television *Eh Joe* (1967). In Beckett's first play of the 1960s, *Happy Days* (1961), another theatrical image would sear itself onto dramatic history. In Act I its heroine is buried up to her waist in a mound of earth, in the second up to her neck, though her elegant costumes and cheerful speeches comically contradict the literal gravity of her situation.

During the sixties and seventies, Beckett directed several productions of his own work in Germany, France and England.

Just as his plays become more and more precise, formal and symmetrical through his career, as a director he insisted on exact and prescribed movement from his actors. This is not drama that communicates through vividness of emotion, but rather through highly stylized, mathematical movement and pacing. His dramatic work in the seventies continues his exploration of the female voice, which first emerged in *Happy Days*. *Not I* (1973) was written for his favourite actress, Billy Whitelaw, whom he often directed in the seventies.



Beckett as Director



Later Work

After his novel trilogy, his next major prose text was *How it Is* (1961). Narrated by a man crawling in the mud dragging a sack of canned food behind him, this ‘novel’ if such is the term, is related in bursts of unpunctuated speech.

It was to be Beckett’s last extended prose work, though his later shorter works, such as *Imagination Dead Imagination* (1965) and *Worstward Ho* (1983) continue the mode of unpunctuated utterance, providing glimpses of sparse, purgatorial landscapes. Both plays and prose generally become ever more condensed and minimalist. The less there is to say, the better it is said. In *Play* (1964) three speakers in urns are forced by a spotlight into rapidly telling the story of their adulterous liaison. In *Come and Go* (1967) three women take it in strictly ordered turns to leave the stage, giving the two remaining women the opportunity to commiserate on the terminal illness of the absent party. Their speech, as so much of Beckett’s work in English, is heavily inflected with an Irish colouring. The prose text *Company* (1980) and the play *That Time* (1976), written in English, feature many recollections from his earliest years.

Beckett's

Beckett revolutionised post-war theatre and is an acknowledged lodestar for many novelists, painters and visual artists. His is an immense literary legacy.

Legacy_

Along with Yeats and Joyce, he stands as one of the three Irish writers of the twentieth century who have changed literature forever. Beckett's example endures as one who bravely and unflinchingly explored the darkest and most desolate corners of human experience. Of him it was justly said that he looked at the face of the Medusa but did not turn to stone.

