

Fig. 1 – Michael Warren, *Go deo*, homage to Samuel Beckett (2006), bronze, height: 220 cm. Photo, Ros Kavanagh.



MICHAEL WARREN'S *GO DEO*, HOMAGE TO SAMUEL BECKETT

Yvonne Scott

But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it's covered with leaves.
– Vladimir, in *Waiting for Godot*, Act II.

Michael Warren's sculpture, *Go deo, homage to Samuel Beckett* (2006, fig. 1) is placed in the cobbled courtyard of the Provost's House Stables. As with all of this artist's work, the relationship to site has been carefully thought out, and, while conceived before its donation to this particular space, it has been placed and angled as though to point the way to the Irish Art Research Centre in its new home. This work represents also the intersection of both the writer and the artist with Trinity College: Beckett was a graduate in 1927, and subsequently taught here from 1930 to '31, while Michael Warren studied philosophy, psychology and English here in the early 1970s. *Go deo* is a homage from one of the most important Irish sculptors to one of the most important Irish writers of the last hundred years.

The Irish term *go deo*¹ (forever) plays on the French pronunciation of the title of Beckett's famous tragicomedy, *Waiting for Godot*.² The bronze sculpture appears to be a radical departure from the type of work for which Warren is most celebrated: the geometric, abstract, minimalist works made from enormous beams of solid wood, and assembled like giant constructivist puzzles that question and resolve issues of gravity and balance. *Countermovement* (1984–5, fig. 2), also in the College collection, is a prime example. Sited at the opposite end of the Trinity College campus, the work embodies a rational, ordered aesthetic and is located, appropriately, it might be argued, near the science and engineering quarters. It is constructed of timber, and has no obvious literal content. By contrast, *Go deo* presents itself as the diametric opposite: it is made of bronze and includes a mimetic element that is rare in Warren's oeuvre – a gnarled branch twists around its supporting, somewhat abstract, cross-shaped structure (fig. 3). The elements of branch and of cut timber are created not by modelling, however, but by casting directly from wood, thereby blurring the boundaries between reality and illusion, and between original and copy.

Michael Warren's Go deo, homage to Samuel Beckett was donated to Trinity College Dublin in 2006 by David Arnold to mark the centenary of the birth of Samuel Beckett (1906–1988). The location, in the stableyard of the Provost's House Stables, was proposed by Prof. David Spearman, Fellow Emeritus, Trinity College Dublin.



Fig. 2 – Michael Warren, *Countermovement* (1984–85), Spanish chestnut, 117 x 330 x 428 cm. Photo, Michael Warren.

Opposite: Fig. 3 – Michael Warren, *Go deo, homage to Samuel Beckett* (detail) 2006, bronze, height: 220 cm. Photo, Ros Kavanagh.

Because Warren's work is typically non-figurative, while the material and organic quality of the wood in examples like *Countermovement* are always paramount, it presents itself primarily as timber, with its origin as a tree disguised by the functionality of the constituent beams. *Go deo*, paradoxically, while made of bronze, asserts its inherent quality as a tree. Appropriately, the model from which it has been cast was made from a variety of woods sourced in Ireland; the base is oak, the stem is elm, and the horizontal element is made from sycamore. In deference to the text of the play, and to the aesthetic of the tree itself, the branch configuration is cast from willow:



ESTRAGON : (*Looking at the tree*). *What is it?*

VLADIMIR : *It's the tree.*

ESTRAGON: *Yes, but what kind?*

VLADIMIR: *I don't know. A willow.*

– *Waiting for Godot*, Act I

As the single element of 'scenery', the tree is typically presented in stage productions as stunted, misshapen, and/or flimsy, and its role has been variously interpreted. While it is argued that Beckett did not intend it as a symbol, at least not in a specific or prescriptive way, it nonetheless carries a range of associations, some of which are suggested by the text. Most commentators on the play identify biblical connotations;³ the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis, significantly, marked the origins of human frailty, and the wooden cross of the Crucifixion represented for Beckett not so much the salvation of man as the tortuous nature of his existence.

Warren points out that the tree of the play was not intended as a functional stage prop, but indicates its complex role:

*Does it depict the Tree of Knowledge/of Life, a hangman's gibbet, a cross, a crown of thorns... or is it after all just some sort of 'bush'?*⁴

He qualifies this comment by reference to the inability of the play's characters to decide on whether it is a tree, a shrub or a bush, a factor that clearly indicates its relatively diminutive scale.

There are precedents in the representation by artists of Beckett's 'tree'. However, while Warren's work is intended as an independent sculpture, some artists were commissioned to produce the stage prop itself, the most famous of which was by Beckett's friend, the sculptor Alberto Giacometti.⁵ Warren explains that Giacometti's 'interpretation is at once symbolic, surreal and deliberately ambivalent. So too, *Go deo* remains open to a number of interpretations.'⁶ A clue to a reading of the dominant cruciform shape of Warren's interpretation is his familiarity with the idea that the names of the two main protagonists in the play, Vladimir and Estragon, are 'reputedly references to Vladimir the Russian saint on



the one hand, and on the other, estragon, a plant botanically belonging to the family *cruciferae*.⁷ Such religious connotations are unavoidable, and Beckett was certainly familiar with the implications, given his upbringing by a mother noted for her religious devotion, his own stated familiarity and intention to use it, together with his possession of biblical concordances.⁸ When Estragon removes his boots, and Vladimir comments in Act II that he cannot go barefoot, Estragon retorts 'Christ did!'; he goes on to point out that he has always compared himself to Christ and makes reference to the Crucifixion.

The theme of the Crucifixion has recurred in Warren's work, subtly presented in the occasional, abstract, 'triptych' pieces, and culminating in the installation exhibition in 2007 at the Royal Hibernian Academy, *Of Weight and Wings*, which drew elements of the series together with a major new work, collectively making reference to Andrea Mantegna's *Calvary* of 1450 (figs. 4 and 5). In visual art, the narrative sequence surrounding the Crucifixion traditionally includes a partially dead tree that also demonstrates signs of life, with sprouting leaves and branches – signifying the end of the old dispensation, and the new order heralded by Christianity. In *Waiting for Godot*, there are references to new leaves, and Vladimir comments: 'Everything is dead but the tree'. However, any interpretation of hope and the future has apparently been refuted by Beckett, who indicated that the leaves were intended simply to signify the passing of time and therefore the very nature of existence. Leaves are indicative of seasonal cycles, and spring is referred to in that



Fig. 4 – (Top left) Michael Warren, *Piazza* (2007), painted MDF, 40 x 1150 x 1150 cm. Photo, Donal Murphy.

Fig. 5 – (Above) Michael Warren, *Triptychos* (1982–84), oak and forged iron, 150 x 150 x 20 cm. Photo, Donal Murphy.

context, while references in the play to the sun and the moon, and to sunrise and sunset, indicate the relentless passing of the days. Leaves are mentioned in the dialogue in relation, also, to sand and to ashes, clear references to time and to death. This element is suggested also by Warren's title 'forever', with all its various temporal implications. His tree is noticeably barren, placing it early in the unfolding of the play. Warren's work has other temporal elements, to do with the time it takes to cross a space. The linear, horizontal qualities of the longer arm indicate, for Warren, duration and therefore the passage of time, and it has been read as a signpost pointing the direction.⁹ There is the element of the inferred journey: the base of the structure has been likened to a mounting block – appropriate in the context of the Provost's House Stables.

Notwithstanding the lack of a functional role for the tree in the play, there are attempts in the dialogue to make use of it: to hide behind it and, in the final lines, for the protagonists to hang themselves from it. The latter project is abandoned, however, for lack of a rope, but the irony resides in the patent unsuitability of the tree to successfully facilitate either of these possibilities of 'disappearance'. Denied the means to absent themselves, time moves relentlessly on for them.

The ambiguity of the play, described by the *New York Times* in 1956 as 'a mystery wrapped in an enigma', is, of course, part of its attraction and continued fascination.¹⁰ For all its apparent bleakness, the text on which Warren's work is based evokes a wry humour, and the play itself has sparked endless debate over its potential meaning. The relationship between art and text is the basis of art history, which depends on language to record, describe, analyse and debate the nature of the image. Interestingly, it was a painting that prompted Beckett to write his play. He explained that it was based on Casper David Friedrich's *Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon* (1824)¹¹. Warren's sculpture, in turn, is the progeny of Beckett's text. The juxtaposition in *Go deo* of the literal and the abstract, realism and illusion, nature and art, in a work that addresses both the immediacy of the present, and the boundlessness of the infinite, is entirely appropriate as a pointer to the Centre.

- ¹ Pronounced 'guh djo'.
- ² *Waiting for Godot* was written by Samuel Beckett in 1948, in French. The first public performance took place in 1953, and it was first performed in English in 1955. The version of the text consulted for this essay was: Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot, a tragicomedy* (London, 2004).
- ³ There are numerous instances; see for example, Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett, the last modernist* (London, 1997), pp 20–21.
- ⁴ Correspondence from Michael Warren to Yvonne Scott, 28 Dec. 2006.
- ⁵ See Riann Coulter, 'Introduction to the exhibition: part 2' in National Gallery of Ireland, *Samuel Beckett: A passion for painting*, exhibition cat. (Dublin, 2006), pp 22–33.
- ⁶ Correspondence, 28 Dec. 2006.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Cronin, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 21.
- ⁹ Correspondence from Michael Warren to Yvonne Scott, 16 and 17 Feb. 2008.
- ¹⁰ Brooks Atkinson, 'Beckett's "Waiting for Godot"', *New York Times*, 20 April 1956.
- ¹¹ James Knowlson, *Damned to fame: The life of Samuel Beckett* (London, 1996), p. 378. Apparently Beckett had suggested elsewhere that it was based on an almost identical painting by Friedrich, *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819).

CONTRIBUTORS

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