

Steven Connor

President, Master, Distinguished Governors, Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues

It my great honour to present Professor Steven Connor as Fellow of Birkbeck.

In the first sentence of The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), Adam Smith argued that through acts of imagination, other people's lives are made manifest, "and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels".

In all truth, though, there are few writers who can do this for us. In fiction, we have Virginia Woolf; in the theatre, Samuel Beckett; in film, Pasolini; in poetry, Adrienne Rich. Scholars of literature and culture generally don't rank. Steven Connor – one of the intellectual giants of our times – makes the ground shake when he chooses to pass by.

Connor was born in Bognor Regis (famous for causing King George V to utter an exceedingly rude word, for holidaying families in Butlinland to emit banalities, and for birdmen to fling themselves off the pier in desperation).

At the tender age of eleven, Connor was trussed into the absurd blue coat of Christ's Hospital School, near Horsham. Founded in 1553 as a hospice (that is, a place of refuge for "poor children of Christ", rather than somewhere to go in order to be nicely drugged up on the way to meeting your Maker), this boarding school commands all entering its library "turpe nescire", that is, "it is a disgrace to be ignorant". Like Samuel Coleridge, whose ghost still haunts that library, Connor also "brooded" and fixed "mine eye... with mock study" on his books.

Seven years later, and for reasons I hesitate to dwell upon, he was expelled. The remainder of his youth was spent at Bognor Regis Comprehensive.

This was followed by a spell reading English at Wodham College, Oxford (under the tutelage of, among others, that formidable Marxist critic Terry Eagleton). After a period absorbed in Coleridge's notebooks and the unsettling children's stories written by Lucy Clifford (whose Anyhow Stories with its themes of abandonment and the perversity of affection encouraged his talents for disguise and impersonation), Connor finally settled down to write a D.Phil thesis on prose fantasy and mythography.

Then came that fateful job interview. In 1979, after bragging to the head of the English Department at Birkbeck about his tap-dancing skills (which no one seems to have ever witnessed), he was appointed lecturer. As Connor would say, Time passed.

He became a critic. Connor has, I have noted, a nasty habit of following every noun with its etymology – so, perhaps I should say, Connor then became a “Critic”, a word that comes from the Greek kritikos, which means “cutting” or “able to make judgements”,

Connor made merry in the church of Charles Dickens (a book in 1985), Samuel Beckett (1988), the English novel (1995), and James Joyce (1996). In between, he huffed and puffed at the tinderwood houses of Realism, with two epistles – an introduction to postmodern culture (1989 and still the defining text in the field) and Theory and Cultural Value (1992). In 1994, he was finally recognised as a prophet in his own land when he was made Professor of Modern Literature and Theory.

Having been given a chair and ordered to sit still, Connor immediately hopped off and threw himself into researching a history of ventriloquism (the book came out in 2000), skin (2004), “bits of winged shit” (his book on flies: 2006), the ethereal (2010), in 2011, a book on the “lives of things” and another on the philosophy of sport (he is an arsenal fan, and for me, a Spurs follower, it is no mystery why a Gunner needs philosophy to cope with the boredom of his team’s performances).

If this recitation of Connor’s books has been a tad overwhelming, then take a deep breath. He also edited six books or editions and penned 75 chapters in edited books and 55 essays in journals – and I make have missed some because I found a headache coming on and so went for a lie down.

.... But not before I noted his contributions to the academy. In 1992, with Paul Hirst, Mark Cousins, Colin MacCabe, and Richard Humphreys, he helped develop the innovative London Consortium, an interdisciplinary graduate programme between Birkbeck, the Tate Gallery, British Film Institute, and the Architectural Association. In 2002, he took over as its academic director.

He served the College as Pro-Vice-Master (which is not as dirty as it sounds) for International and Research Students from 1998 to 2001 and preceded me (with immeasurably greater wit and grace) as College Orator from 2001 to 2012. He left us that year, to become Grace 2 Professor of English in the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Peterhouse.

So what is it about Connor? It is his expansive vision that fills friends, colleagues, and students with wonder. He seeks not simply to talk to the animals like an exalted Doctor Doolittle; rather, he wallows in a joyous celebration of humans, animals, machines, and things – stuff. If, for others, stuff happens, for Connor, stuff matters. He is disdainful of

“autistic humanism” – that is, the arrogance of those people who “think and write as though they were alone in the world”. The everyday excites him. Flies are “more than just occasions of representation”. They “exert distinctive forms of pull and pressure on the work of meaning”. His language is swollen with lush metaphors, esoteric associations, goosebump-inspiring leaps of imagination.

Like Connor’s flies who, he informs us, were not merely symbols of sin and corruption but were also a kind of painterly defacement of art, Connor regularly thumbs his nose at intellectual pretension. Typically, when I invited him to speak at a forum on “The Intellectual”, he launched into a remarkable diatribe against EggHeads, employing every intellectual trick known in to the esteemed profession.

Like the pianist Glenn Gould who always preferred to practice to the sound of the Hoover – or like Salvador Dali who explained that he liked to paint while being “devoured by flies” because they “drove me to feats of agility I would not have been capable of without the flies”, it seems that Connor thinks while running half-marathons (he is known for “inhuman levels of fitness”) and prefers to mark essays while sweating on his exercise bike. Some colleagues told me, in all seriousness, that he doesn’t eat at all and just drinks black coffee (although more astute observers notice that he does an entire days’ worth of eating and drinking after classes end at 9pm).

Connor also sings, and acts, and mimics the voices and mannerisms of all around him. He played the title role in the Birkbeck Players’ production of Dickens’ farce The Strange Gentleman, at one stage kneeling and hammering on the floor shouting “I’ve nailed him! Nailed him to the spot!”. He produced Samuel Beckett’s unfinished play about Samuel Johnson. He did a particularly decadent Duke in Middleton’s Women Beware Women and an even more evocative devil in the medieval mystery play, The Crooked Rib, once disguising himself as a Serpent with the head of a woman in a platinum wig, a tail made out of an old green bedspread, and wings made from a broken green umbrella. The highlight of the

department's Dickens' Days was his dramatized readers. Students adored him. And administrators were wary of his habit of changing in his office.

In one of his many insightful articles, Connor writes about the act and art of signalling approval by clapping. Perhaps, he suggests, clapping evolved from the act of jumping and slapping, which is characteristic of primates in states of excitement. Perhaps, it developed as the first systematic music produced by humans. Whatever the case, the most effective clap, Connor explains, "aims to compress and explode a little bubble or bomb of air, compressing and accelerating the air momentarily trapped between the palms". As such, it is a kind of magical action, releasing a vital force, like those early primates who perhaps whooped and hollered in adoration of their fellow who used a stick to create a spark that warmed bodies, hearts, minds.

That is what I propose we do now, as we as a group as opposed to a mere aggregate of individuals, welcome Professor Steven Connor as a Fellow of Birkbeck.