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The Letters of Samuel Beckett]

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**Craig, George, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn & Lois More Overbeck (eds). *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. (ISBN: 978-1316506-57-8)**

‘Those passages only having bearing on my work’; with these words Samuel Beckett consented to the publication of the correspondence he had with friends, family, acquaintances, publishers, directors, actors, editors and academics. What these letters show in particular is the more famous Beckett was becoming, the more he was losing the battle to shield his private and intimate life from public view. His letters show the frustration of a writer for whom the private and the public increasingly blend into each other, until by the end of his life he eventually understands that it is no use opposing the publication of his letters, many of which had been released already. Cambridge’s four-volume box set marks the end of a long struggle that started with his downright outrage at the prospect of having his private life publicised, and his infuriation at the publication of his biography by Deirdre Bair which infuriated Beckett. Knowing that he could never win, he then concluded that he might have at least a say in the selection of the edited letters.

And a selection was necessary. In the span of sixty years Beckett wrote some 15,000 letters that are immensely diverse in scope; the 2,500 letters deemed most relevant to his work have now been published in four volumes by Cambridge University Press. The project was initiated in the mid eighties, but it was not until 2009 that the first volume with the pre-war letters was released. Now the fourth and final volume, spanning the period from 1966 until Beckett’s death in 1989, has been published, providing for what may well be the most thrilling and expansive collection of literary letters of the twentieth century.

Given the amount of letters available, as well as Beckett’s idiosyncratic writing style, editing these letters must have been a tremendous amount of work. The editors started by tracing the most relevant correspondents, and had to decide for every letter whether it had a bearing on his work. (Many Beckettians would purport that each and every word that the master has jotted down is of importance to his work.) A second equilibrium needed to be found between the unique and the representative. Letters of particular quality needed to be included, but the overall picture should not be distorted by a possible omission of the less remarkable correspondence. Of course, even despite the determination, patience and perseverance with which the editors have approached this huge task, they are the first to realise that this is not the definitive *Letters of Samuel Beckett*; the last

volume includes an appendix with letters from earlier periods that were not yet accessible for publication in the previous corresponding volumes. Since all letters have been transcribed in the original annotation and language, the editors have chosen to translate the French (and occasional German) letters to English. Yet, as in his prose work and plays, Beckett moulds his very own language, consisting of puns and idiosyncratic word plays that combine English and French, which makes any translation sheer impossible. In addition, although Beckett mostly adapts his language to the mother tongue of his addressees, he sometimes does write in French to his English friends, thus making the choice of language a deliberate and meaningful aspect.

Letters were always very important to Beckett to bridge distances both geographical and mental. As an Irish expat in France, he writes many letters to his family and childhood friends. This makes Tom McGreevy the central addressee of the first volume (1929-1940), while professional relations are building up in the next volumes. The second volume (1941-1956) features the infamous dialogues with Georges Duthuit, with whom Beckett collaborated for the journal *transition*. But we also see some relations appear that will become valuable friends to Beckett, such as Jérôme Lindon and Barney Rosset, his French and American publisher respectively. With BBC art critic and translator Barbara Bray, the key correspondent of the next volume (1957-1965) for the first time is a woman. Here, it becomes quite clear that selecting the letters that have a bearing on his work must necessarily end up on a slippery slope, for not only was Bray Beckett's direct contact with the BBC Radio Drama Department, helping him overcome his hesitations and uncertainties with regard to this wireless medium, the widow with two children also developed a more intimate relationship with Beckett. Because he feels so at ease with her, he does not feel restrained in his correspondence with her at all, making his letters to Bray without doubt the most revealing and interesting of the volume. Correspondence with her extends well into the final volume, as well as correspondence with new acquaintances and aspiring young writers such as Harold Pinter. Quite amusing, moreover, are Beckett's increasing complaints about the growing pile of letters that he needs to answer--while always disregarding the letter that he is currently writing. And maybe that is not just being polite; Beckett encouraged his addressees to write to him and keep in touch. There is a simmering conflict between Beckett the writer and Beckett the manager that eat up each other's time.

A few things strike the reader in the development of these six decades of letters. Whereas in the first volume Beckett seeks out the addressee's attention, his

growing fame after the war provides him with a more assured audience to whom he is also more open about the progress of his work – although Beckett speaks much more in terms of non-progress. Perhaps due to his changing audience and to a (slightly) growing confidence in his writing, he talks far more about his work and its genesis in later periods than during the first stages. What remains fairly constant are his complaints about his health, although it is remarkable that he refers far less to his own ailments after the war, as if he is aware of the disproportionateness of his pains in light of the war atrocities.

More important, though, is Beckett's learning process of how to entrust his work to other people. Although he soon realises that directors and actors need to be allowed enough personal freedom to develop their own ideas of how to stage his plays, he often finds it hard to loosen the reins. His letters testify to a constant balancing between licence and control. This may confirm Beckett's reputation as an intransigent writer opposed to any adaptation or slight alteration to his texts when performed or broadcast, but surprisingly, his letters are a manifestation of the exact opposite. Not rarely does he express his approval of his plays being adapted for film or another medium, and there is little irony in his suggestion of staging an all black production of *Waiting for Godot*. Even towards instances of censorship Beckett shows a lot of leniency. Although in London, *Endgame* was performed in French in a closed circuit to avoid the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain, he did agree with a few changes to *Godot* to pass it nonetheless.

In conclusion, the four volumes of Beckett's correspondence is a joyful read, a skilfully and professionally edited series that does justice to one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. All letters are provided with explanatory notes and the editors clearly did not leave a stone unturned to uncover the location from where they were written. Equally illuminating is each volume's appendix, including profiles of all its addressees.

While reading through the missives from one dead man to numerous other ghosts from the past, one realises that this edition also silently testifies to a past age, that in these digital times in which stamps have almost gone extinct, this collection of letters is most probably the last in its genre. On the other hand, this assembled correspondence is a genre in its own right that we can juxtapose to Beckett's plays, prose, poetry and essays. Many of the writer's preoccupations in his fictional work return in his letters. The reader should not expect any 'authorised' explanations or comments about his work; Beckett does not grow tired of emphasising how little he knows about the meaning of his own writings.

Nonetheless, some biographical elements can be recognised from his fiction. For instance, there is the sense of nowhere quite feeling at home; while being in Paris, Beckett longs for the rural environment of his house in Ussy, but once he is there, the city is pulling him back. Also, the sense of failure and the downplaying of his own work are subjects that pervade his letters from beginning to end.

LAURENS DE VOS

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