

*Beckett, Samuel. The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume I: 1929-1940.* Edited by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

The enormous scale of this publishing venture can be illustrated by the number of letters involved. Beckett, “one of the great literary correspondents of the twentieth century, perhaps of any century,” claim the editors in their general introduction, wrote more than 15,000 letters; 2,500 of these will be published in four volumes; some 300 are published in Volume I, which starts with a short letter to “Mr [James] Joyce” on 23 March 1929 and ends abruptly, and dramatically, with a letter from Paris on 10 June, 1940, four days before the Germans entered the city. Because of the severe selection process the publication may at first seem like a huge compromise and *une sorte de pis-aller*, but it very quickly turns into a triumphant success that provides us with a window on Beckett’s soul. Even a letter applying for a reader’s ticket at the British Museum reveals distinctive individual characteristics.

As early as 1985 Beckett agreed to have his letters published after his death, but it was not until 20 years after he died that the first volume appeared. The process of selection was difficult, drawn-out and at times fraught with disagreements. Beckett’s stipulation that only letters “having bearing on my work” should be published was, unsurprisingly, open to differing interpretations. Are his frequent and sometimes obsessive, psychosomatic worries about his health, for instance, relevant to literary scholars or the general reader? On this question the editors did not agree with Beckett’s literary executors. There are no letters here to members of his own family although these must at times have made some reference to his work and provided valuable biographical information. It is instead the correspondence to his friend and soul mate Tom McGreevy that dominates Volume I and where his private feelings are revealed. His father’s death in 1933 is one such occasion: “I fear he suffered a great deal before he died about 4 o’clock in the afternoon. We were all with him. He was very beautiful when it was all over. I thought Mother would go to pieces, but she was and is wonderful. It is a very blank silent house now.”

Volume I trains a fascinated eye on Beckett between the ages of 23 and 34, a young man who is a complex mix of shy passivity and cheeky bravado. He doubts his abilities as a writer and, clearly besotted with the new medium of film, he writes to Sergei Eisenstein asking to be admitted to the Moscow State School of Cinematography (he received no reply). Increasingly perceiving himself to be an outsider in the Irish Ireland that emerged after the creation of the Free State in 1922, he is attracted by the diversity and variety of continental Europe. A talented linguist, he is drawn to the classics as well as contemporary European languages and literatures. He peppers his letters with words and ideas from both, and the young Beckett sometimes

wears his learning ostentatiously and pretentiously. He had a promising career in Irish academia lined up, but, fortunately for world literature, his deep dislike of formal pedantry took over, and he decided to gamble his whole being on becoming a writer instead.

The Irish-European axis is well known in Beckett studies, but what these letters make clear is how London served as a weaning-off period in relation to Ireland and the idea of 'home'. The time he spent there in the mid-thirties helped shape his future in at least two fundamental ways: undergoing psychoanalysis sharpened his awareness of himself as man and as writer and improved his physical relationship with the world, and access to the rich cultural life of the city helped him liberate himself from his pinched and puritanical family background in Dublin. In linguistic terms too, because he was able to function in his native Hiberno-English, London eased his entry into Europe by providing a more measured translation and transition.

For many years Beckett was studied as a theoretical modernist whose placeless, universalised work was perceived as having little Irish or personal specificity. This was a view largely based on an internationalist reading of his plays and his late fiction. Gradually this perception has changed: the Irishness of his work has been explored by critics and links between the work and biographical 'fact' have been effected. Many of the letters certainly bear this out: the ending of *Murphy* is prefigured in a letter to McGreevy about Beckett's experiences in a London park, and in another there is a suggestion that the episodes concerning the nanny, the black ball and the stormy night on the jetty in *Krapp's Last Tape* may contain more than a passing echo of personal memory.

There is no doubting the importance of these letters as biographical source material. Even a cursory reading of James Knowlson's monumental *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* shows how much its author relied on the letters to tell Beckett's story. But whereas a biography always imposes a structured and ordered interpretation on its diverse materials, in the letters themselves Beckett's voice speaks naked to the reader, giving an authentic sense of the moment, revealing the ifs and the buts, the detours and the doubts of his life. We hear about a shoemaker refusing to mend his shoes because they were too worn, which may make us think about *Waiting for Godot*, about his frustrated attempts to get his work published and about his surprisingly muted reaction to some early successes. In our age of email attachments we are reminded of a time when sending 'hard copy' manuscripts across Europe entailed the risk of losing them.

Editorial perfection is difficult if not impossible to attain. The scholarly standard of Volume I is extremely high, and the painstaking work the editors have carried out in pursuing loose ends and in explicating the texts and contexts of Beckett's letters is superlatively impressive. But there are also a few problems and lacunae. No reason is given for choosing a letter written in 1929 as the beginning of Beckett's corre-

spondence, other than perhaps to make possible the neatness of the 60 years referred to in the title and in the introduction. Was there nothing of interest written before then? In the general introduction it is stated that Beckett's correspondence during "the early years" (referring to Volume I) included letters to Edward Titus and Jack B. Yeats, but there are no such letters included here. The page references in the list of Beckett's correspondents are erratic and seem frequently to skip two pages forward. A useful section on "Profiles" identifies and describes important players in the letters, but the editors inform us that (for some unexplained reason) this section will not be included in subsequent volumes. 1939 is represented by just nine letters, whereas other years have many more, and one wonders what may be hidden behind these numerical differences. But, inevitably, in matters such as these, the reader has to trust the editors in the difficult process of selection that they have undertaken and in their judgment in picking letters that matter. Based on what is included in Volume I, there is little reason to question their judgement.

The editors also make the claim for an extended relevance of the letters in relation to Beckett's work by asking the reader to treat them as some kind of preparatory experiment for the fiction, that Beckett the correspondent is also Beckett the writer. Volume I gives a fascinating insight into the early development of one of the most important writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and reveals glimpses of moments when letter writer, man and artist meet. Two examples will have to suffice to reveal how the mention of seemingly ordinary and quotidian events in Beckett's letters take on added meaning and expand like epiphanies in a reading of the larger context of his life and work. On 18 April 1939 he mentions for the first time a French girl that he says he likes "dispassionately." This young lady, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, was later to become his wife. On 8 September 1935 Beckett reports to McGreevy that Miss Costello (a friend) had told him: "You haven't a good word to say for anyone but the failures." These words and his response ("quite the nicest thing anyone has said to me for a long time") can now be seen as his statement of writerly intent. They express his honest and uncompromising vision: "No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (*Worstward Ho*). They guide us towards his own and his characters' attempts to negotiate between negation and obligation, between despair and hope, so memorably expressed in those familiar and much-quoted words at the end of *The Unnamable*: "I can't go on, I'll go on." They define for us Beckett the existentialist pessimist, who writes to find some accommodation in the haunted space between the two final sentences at the end of his early story "Dante and the Lobster." Watching his aunt put a live lobster in the boiling water, its protagonist, Belacqua, muses: "It's a quick death, God help us all. It is not." They contain the same contradiction expressed in the citation used by the Swedish Academy to justify his Nobel Prize 34 years later, where Beckett's work is praised for finding "elevation" in "the destitution of modern man."

This is Beckett the writer that we are all familiar with from his work. It is to the great credit of this volume that in addition to showing us the budding writer, these letters also provide us with a portrait of the artist as a young man.

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