be time for a new beginning to Forster studies, since it becomes clearer what Forster was up against.

Hong Kong Baptist University

STUART CHRISTIE
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A JOURNEY FROM, AND NOT TO


In his poem 'Incantata', written for the late artist and printmaker Mary Farl Powers, Paul Muldoon discerns in his former lover 'what seems always true of the truly great' – that is, 'a winningly inaccurate / sense of your own worth' and a readiness to 'second-guess / yourself too readily by far'. It is a definition of greatness that might be applied to Samuel Beckett as well, certainly to the Beckett we meet in the first volume of his correspondence, covering the years 1929 to 1940. Beckett himself applied it to James Joyce, a formidable if slightly off-stage influence at the beginning of the book and 'just a very lovable human being' by its end: 'He was sublime last night, deprecating with the utmost conviction his lack of talent' (to Thomas McGreevy, 5 January 1938). But Beckett seems never to have recognised that his own lack of faith in his talent could be proof that it was there. 'This writing is a bloody awful grind', he complained in 1933, unable to imagine that *More Pricks than Kicks* would be published the following year, let alone *Murphy* in 1938, *Waiting for Godot* in 1953, and a Nobel Prize given to him in 1969. 'I find it more and more difficult to write and I think it worse and worse in consequence' (to McGreevy, 13 May 1933). This tendency to mistrust and undervalue his writing is a large part of what makes it so fascinating and so difficult to watch Beckett realise, gradually and reluctantly over the course of eleven years and almost 700 pages of letters, that he can do nothing other than write.

He wanted me to apply for a job, oh a very good job, in Capetown or for a job, oh quite a good job, in Cardiff, where I could lie with Rikky. Starkie will probably be appointed at Oxford – he was first man out last time, and then my dear Sam of course they’ll appoint you Professor of Italian Literature juxta Dublin juxta Dublin. That’ll be the real pig’s back. […] No sir. Nothing would induce me to. (to McGreevy, after 15 August 1931)

Beckett had other ideas, vague and changeable but always strongly held, about his future. He did seriously consider or actually apply for some of the jobs that Rudmose-Brown sent his way – usually humdrum positions in exotic locations including Italy, Switzerland, South Africa, and Southern Rhodesia – but always reluctantly, and no sooner is the letter of interest posted than the nervous wait begins, the nerves mostly stemming from the thought that he might actually get the job. At other times, he contemplated careers in the arts – as an assistant at the National Gallery in London in 1933, and an apprentice to Sergei Eisenstein in Moscow in 1936 – and, more surprisingly, in advertising and even, once, aviation:

I think the next little bit of excitement is flying. I hope I am not too old to take it up seriously, nor too stupid about machines to qualify as a commercial pilot. I do not feel like spending the rest of my life writing books that no one
will read. It is not as though I wanted to write them. (to McGreevy, 26 July 1936)

Mostly though, that is what he does, or tries to do anyway. The letters giving insight into Beckett's process of composition are painful to read.

Long bouts of depression – often accompanied by psychosomatic ailments like boils and night-time panic attacks, during all of which Beckett can write nothing, ‘can’t imagine even the shape of a sentence’ – are alleviated only briefly and infrequently by the appearance of that ‘frail sense of beginning life behind the eyes, that is the best of all experiences’ (to McGreevy, 8 November 1931 and 16 February 1937). In these moments the words at last take shape – almost in spite of Beckett, when everything is going well. The three or four poems he likes best, he tells McGreevy, ‘seem to have been drawn down against the really dirty weather of one of these fine days into the burrow of the “private life”’ (18 October 1932). By this he means that they seem to have been formed automatically, like the best art of every age, as a kind of inevitable artistic response to the trials and travails of the human condition. A good poem, according to Beckett, is neither *facultatif* nor *construit*, that is, neither optional nor deliberately constructed, but instead approaches an ideal that he despairs of achieving in his own work: ‘I’m in mourning for the integrity of a pendu’s emission of semen, what I find in Homer & Dante & Racine & sometimes Rimbaud, the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the wind’ (to McGreevy, 18 October 1932). The imagery here is of a piece with a scatological strain that runs throughout the volume and that has been given a great deal of attention by some earlier reviewers. But there is no need to be put off by it, or by Beckett’s occasionally tiresome recitations of his physical maladies, if one tends to be put off by those sorts of things, for these unpleasantries are easily skimmed or skipped at will, and there is a great deal of agreeable information to be gleaned from the letters about his reading, writing, and relationships with friends and family.

But as to Beckett’s conception of fiction-writing as an instinctual and involuntary process, we find that one unfortunate side effect of this theory is that it leads him to regard the finished product as curiously both his and not his. A work is just enough his that rejection pains him: his outraged responses to uninterested and imperceptive editors are the closest he comes to acknowledging the value of his work. ‘Heard from Frere-Reeves yesterday’, he writes to McGreevy of the troublesome Murphy manuscript, ‘a curt rejection. “On commercial grounds we could not justify it in our list.” And of course what other grounds for justification could there be’ (to McGreevy, 7 August 1936). Harsher is Beckett’s reaction to the suggestion by another publisher that he pare down the manuscript, though in fairness the rest of the letter suggests that he was drunk when he wrote it:

Reavey wrote enclosing a letter from Greensletand-hindrance. I am exhort to ablate 33.3 recurring to all eternity of my work. I have thought of a better plan. Take every 500th word, punctuate carefully and publish a poem in prose in the Paris Daily Mail. Then the rest separately and privately, with a forewarning from Geoffrey, as the ravings of a schizoid, or serially, in translation, in the Zeitschrift für Kitsch [Magazine for Kitsch]. (to Mary Manning Howe, 14 November 1936)

But his works, both of criticism and of fiction, never quite belong to Beckett enough for him to take any real satisfaction in them, or in any credit they might receive: ‘I feel dissociated from my Proust – as though it did not belong to me, ready of course to get any credit that’s going but – genuinely, I think – more interested than irritated at the prospect of the nose-pickers’ disgust’ (to McGreevy, 3 February 1931). Such distancing must have provided a useful defence mechanism in the difficult early years, but it is also forever pushing Beckett back into his own personal Slough of Despond, where the ‘idea itself of writing seems somehow ludicrous’, more or less immediately after the process of composition is complete (to McGreevy, 4 August 1932).

Little wonder then that commercial aviation and film-editing in Stalinist Russia should have come to seem appealing options. Nor is it a surprise that almost all of the non-literary roads Beckett considered taking led away from Dublin. Irish
parochialism — what he saw as a stubborn narrowness of mind in matters of art as well as religion — is a persistent goad. In cryptic, clever pronouncements and earnest explanations, mostly to McGreevy, who was himself a poet and critic as well as an ardent Irish nationalist and a devout Catholic, Beckett tries to elucidate the reasons for his unease. ‘This obstinate sobriety in all modes here is beginning to hurt seriously’, he writes in October 1932, weeks after returning from an eight-month stint in Paris and London, ‘but I haven’t the guts to make a dash for it again out into the cold cold world’ (to McGreevy, 8 October 1932). In 1938, commenting on an essay by McGreevy about the Irish painter Jack B. Yeats, he is more serious, confessing to a chronic inability to understand as member of any proposition a phrase like ‘the Irish people’, or to imagine that it ever gave a fart in its corduroys for any form of art whatsoever, whether before the Union or after, or that it was ever capable of any thought or act other than the rudimentary thoughts and acts belted into it by the priests and by the demagogues in service of the priests, or that it will ever care, if it ever knows, any more than the Bog of Allen will ever care or know, that there was once a painter in Ireland called Jack Butler Yeats. [...] 

God love thee, Tom, and don’t be minding me. I can’t think of Ireland the way you do. (to McGreevy, 31 January 1938)

But despite the inconveniences of life in Ireland, Beckett found in the inconveniences of leaving Ireland a convincing case for staying put: ‘a few minutes consideration equiposed so perfectly the pros & cons that as usual I found myself constrained to do nothing’ (to McGreevy, 4 November 1932). There is the disapproval of his family to consider, for one thing, particularly his mother — a figure who, like Joyce, looms large in the first part of the volume, and with whom Beckett has more or less come to terms by the end. There is also the matter of money, for Beckett is always running out of it, and most of what he does have comes ‘from the “blue eyes of home”’ (to McGreevy, 18 August 1932).

Thus for long stretches he finds himself, as does Belacqua Shuah in Dream of Fair to middling Women and More Pricks than Kicks, trapped or revelling — it is hard to say which — in a state of ‘gress’. The word, of Beckett’s own invention, is glossed by the editors of the Letters as ‘movement; a noun derived from “gressus,” supine of Lat. verb “gradior, gradi, gressus” [to walk, to step]’ (p. 191 n. 7). But it might be better and more easily understood by simply subtracting the prefixes from ‘progress’ and ‘regress’ (or ‘gress’ and ‘egress’) and considering what remains: a kind of neutral directionless motion, without clear aim or agency: a ‘delicious conception of movement as gress, pure and mere gress’, as Beckett puts it (to Nuala Costello, 27 February 1934).

He did eventually manage to work up enough guts and momentum to leave Ireland, for Germany in 1936 and for Paris in 1937. The first sojourn, which lasted seven months, was a disaster. Halfway through, Beckett wrote to Mary Manning Howe, a friend since childhood, that the ‘trip is being a failure. Germany is horrible. Money is scarce. I am tired all the time. All the modern pictures are in the cellars. [...] It has turned out indeed to be a journey from, and not to, as I knew it was, before I began it’ (13 December 1936). Paris the following year provides him with a positive happiness at last, a journey to a place enjoyable in its own right and not simply for the escape it offers from distressing things elsewhere. Even a stab wound, incurred during a random attack in Montparnasse within a month of his arrival, cannot diminish the city’s charms: ‘How lovely it is being here. Even with a hole in the side. A sunlit surface yesterday brighter than the whole of Ireland’s summer’ (to McGreevy, 27 January 1938). In a way, it is fitting that Beckett — who in one letter calls himself a ‘Manichean as far as darkness is concerned’ and in another expresses great relief at the return of spring and sun and flowers for ‘the promise’ they offer ‘of a life at least bearable, once enjoyed but in a past so remote that all trace, even remembrance of it, had been almost lost’ — should have been so taken with the City of Light (to Morris Sinclair, 5 May 1934 and 4 March 1934).
And also that he should have been drawn to the French language. A number of letters are written in French and German (accompanied by translations by George Craig and Viola Westbrook, respectively), while other letters chart his growing disenchantment with English. The best such explanation is the one Beckett offers in 1937 to Axel Kaun, an editor for the Berlin publisher Rowohlt who had met during his stay in Germany, given here in English translation:

It is indeed getting more and more difficult, even pointless, for me to write in formal English. And more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. Grammar and style! To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentleman. A mask. It is to be hoped the time will come, thank God, in some circles it already has, when language is best used where it is most efficiently abused. Since we cannot dismiss it all at once, at least we do not want to leave anything undone that may contribute to its disrepute. To drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through – I cannot imagine a higher goal for today’s writer. (9 July 1937)

And on it goes, for four more wonderfully illuminating paragraphs, the closest to a manifesto of Beckett’s style and artistic vision that we have. Here we see what it is that Beckett hints at and then dodges in his contemporaneous fiction, as when, for example, the narrator in More Pricks than Kicks tells us of Belacqua: ‘He lived a Beethoven pause, he said, whatever he meant by that’. Beethoven pauses, the letter to Kaun suggests, are a good approximation of what it would look like to get behind the veil, to the something or nothing beneath, which Beckett wishes his fiction to expose: ‘Is there any reason why that terrifyingly arbitrary materiality of the word surface should not be dissolved, as for example the sound surface of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony is devoured by huge black pauses, so that for pages on end we cannot perceive it as other than a dizzying path of sounds connecting unfathomable chasms of silence? An answer is requested’. He must have held Kaun in very high esteem indeed.

Beckett’s sense that words can only obscure meaning has implications for two very different aspects of the Letters, both of which deserve more attention. The first is Human Wishes, a play Beckett intended to write about Samuel Johnson and his household (particularly about Johnson’s changed relationship with Hester Thrale before and after her husband’s death), but which, after years of brooding and endless notes, amounted to nothing more than a draft of a dozen pages. In Beckett’s imagining, the antipathy Johnson directed at Hester Thrale’s second husband, Gabriel Piozzi, was merely a blind, a way of deflecting attention from what really tortured him: his own sexual impotence. Such a scenario ‘explains what has never been explained, i.e. his esteem for the imbecile Mr Thrale’, Beckett writes, in one of the half-dozen letters that shed light on his plans for the work, in a way the existing draft never could. ‘What interests me above all is the condition of the Platonic gigolo or housefriend, with not a testicle, auricle or ventricle to stand on when the bluff is called’ (to McGreevy, 26 April 1937; to Manning Howe, 13 December 1936). One wonders if there isn’t a parallel to be drawn here with Beckett’s own fears of artistic impotence, which seem to have increased around the time that he gave up steady academic work and started to pursue a literary career – that is, when constraints on him were lifting and his bluff was in danger of being called – and also if this closeness to his own situation wasn’t what made the project ultimately impossible to realise.

The second aspect of the Letters with significance for Beckett’s conception of language as a veil is the scope of the edited volume itself, and its numerous excisions, omissions, and truncations. He entrusted the editors with the absolutely impossible task of reducing his correspondence ‘to those passages only having bearing on my work’ (impossible because the life and the work are hopelessly, necessarily, intertwined), and it seems that both the editors and the Beckett Estate have attempted to carry out this charge in good faith (to Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, 18 March 1985). On the whole, they have done a tremendously good job of it, introducing us to Beckett at the very start of his
career: a figure both likable and unlikable, petulant and brilliant by turns, a writer of poetry and prose and hilariously negative letters, already with the impulse to give that would develop into his famed generosity in later years, but not yet the means. The only real annoyance with the volume is the inclusion of far too much information in the contextual notes following each letter, which belies claims of a ‘minimalist’ approach in the General Introduction. (Do we really need a gloss on ‘Guinness’ – one which reads in its entirety ‘Guinness stout’? Or information about how the wind changed direction from 6 to 9 March 1931, in which case, why not tell us how fast it was blowing? Or a note that suggests Beckett’s ‘statement of Manichaeism is a grammatical and logical fragment’, when it is not? Even if it were, the answer would be the same.) More than mere distractions, these indulgent notes have no justification for inclusion beyond the pains taken to compile them.

One account on which we are often kept guessing is his family. There are four Becketts listed in the Profiles section of the appendices, counting Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil Beckett, but none in the List of Recipients. Among the letters to his aunt, Cissie Sinclair (we have letters to her husband, Henry ‘Boss’ Sinclair, and son Morris as well), Beckett proves himself a uniquely callous and loving nephew in the one dated 14 August 1937. In it, he manages to open deep wounds with his poem ‘Whiting’, which includes the line ‘cough up your T.B. don’t be stingy’ – tuberculosis had killed Cissie’s eldest daughter, Peggy, four years earlier – and then signs it, one has every reason to believe sincerely, ‘Love ever Write often | dein Sam’. How one would have liked to see what lay between, which has been excised in this edition. But there is some consolation in this and the other ellipses too, in the thought that much of import should linger in the spaces between the dots, where silence and nothingness labour to express what words cannot, the very places Beckett would have us look for meaning.

Harvard University  
CASSANDRA NELSON  
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