Ignorance Regained

BY CASSANDRA NELSON

B eckett is vastly improved and was extremely agreeable and nice about everything,” Maria Jolas reported to a friend in March 1940, not long before the start of the letters under consideration here. And so he is—almost wholly freed in volume two of his correspondence from the tendency to lash out at himself and others on display in volume one, the need to assert his independence as a writer from James Joyce and as a person from May Beckett, the unkind words and scatological humor, not to mention the boils, heart palpitations, and other psychosomatic troubles prominent in his earlier correspondence—though he is sadly disimproved, in a different way, by the end. In more ways than one the message of this volume seems to be, be careful what you wish for.

GEORGE CRAIG, MARTHA DOW FENSENDELA, DAN GUNN, AND LOIS MOREOVERBECK

THE LETTERS OF SAMUEL BECKETT

VOLUME 2: 1941–1956

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It emerges most clearly in the trajectory of his literary work. Beginning with the philosophical observation at the heart of Murphy—“I am not free, and I never have been free. I have never met a man in whom co-exist together in such high degree, nobility and meanness, lucidity and goodness. I would never have believed that anyone could exist who is at the same time so real, so truly great, and so good.” This praise is tucked away in an endnote to a letter to Lindon, who emerges as a correspondent of the period. He expressed in the first words of his Section of a character who appears in the notes. To that end, or a similar one, George Craig in his role as French translator has done a fantastic job of alerting us to plays on words in the French, either in his translations or accompanying notes, that readers may go back to the original and judge for themselves.

All in all, these letters are a boon to Beckett scholars and enthusiasts and the third volume is eagerly awaited. Though many details are left unsaid, or hidden in the half-light, the series’ reticence is at least as fitting as it is occasionally frustrating. “He gives his work, his role stops there,” as Deschevaux-Dumesnil explains in an early letter to Lindon. “One must take him as he is.”

For a long time now, more or less aware of this extraordinary Littératurnoir affair, I’ve thought often of the man who, in his cage, read, translated, put on my play. . . . I am no longer the same, after what you have done, all of you. In the place where I have always found myself, there I will always find myself, turning round and round, falling over, getting up again, it is no longer wholly dark nor wholly silent. . . . To whatever my play may have brought you, I can add this only: the huge gift you made me by accepting it.

Still, one cannot help but think that a great deal of light remains hidden under a barrel. There are only a few letters to Pamela Mitchell, a New Yorker with whom Beckett struck up an affair in Paris in 1953, and we glean little from these, so little that we must be told in the appendix of Profiles that he confided in Mitchell’s struggles with early drafts of Fin de partie (Endgame) and that the two often suggested and sent each other books to read. In the text itself, the biggest indication we have that Beckett’s attentions and affections have shifted from Deschevaux-Dumesnil to Mitchel is that he ceases for a time to sign letters to close friends “from us both to you both.”

Aside from the selection issues raised above, this volume as an edition improves on the first. The editors have refined in their contextual annotation somewhat, thankfully, though their decision to correct the spelling of names in the copy-text is troubling (wcrdlly, this policy is not followed with place names). My sense, to paraphrase a post-friend, is that at least some of these errors are correct. To change Beckett’s “Fouché” to “Fouchet” in a letter about whether or not he has accidentally offered his story “Suite” to two publishers is to miss the possible association with touché—since he is, as he admits, “jumpy” about potentially giving offense. I don’t know what exactly is at stake in changing Gwyndd to Gwynned (it’s a verb?), but I wouldn’t be at all sur- prised if there were something. Better to leave such errors as they are, to catch the eyes of clever readers, and spell names properly in the notes. To that end, or a similar one, George Craig in his role as French translator has done a fantastic job of alerting us to plays on words in the French, either in his translations or accompanying notes, that readers may go back to the original and judge for themselves.

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