

The “Intimate and Proximate” Beckett

Review of Erika Mihálycsa, *“A Wretchedness to Defend”:
Reading Beckett’s Letters* (Debrecen: HJEAS Books, 2022)

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The letters of Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), an invaluable staple for any Beckett scholar, were edited in four volumes between 2009 and 2016 by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Dan Gunn, and published by Cambridge University Press. This extensive and wide-ranging correspondence is, as Mihálycsa claims, “undoubtedly the most important find for scholars, students, and readers of Beckett since the publication of James Knowlson’s authorised biography” (13). For an effective confrontation with the Beckett corpus, these letters provide useful guidelines for experts and non-experts alike. Constituting a staggering wealth of information regarding the life and the work, they equip the researcher with Beckett’s insights, inspirations, reservations, amendments, clarifications, regrets, and preferences behind the scenes, and with the often interpenetrating private and career-focused decisions that shed unprecedented light on the circumstances of artistic creation and provide crutches for “understanding” the uniquely convoluted and multilayered texts. Ever since the birth of the epistolary novel and the first attempts to capture psychological realism in the eighteenth century, the sequence of letters has invited its readers to eavesdrop on events, ideas, and personal affairs not intended to be made public. Thus, we are offered “an intimate and proximate experience of the voice of this legendarily reclusive author,” Mihálycsa says, bypassing, on the one hand, post-structuralist disclaimers of any

intimacy and proximity where writing supplants voice, and on the other, the precariousness of the adjective “reclusive” in case of a writer who could never ultimately resist the “obligation to express,” and who sought to be staged and published until the end of his life. Nevertheless, the letters do have the potential to elucidate, complicate, and modify widespread convictions and deep-seated critical methods of exegesis. In this capacity, however, they are not texts that boast a closer proximity, but rather a corpus of writing that further complicate any intimacy with, and proximity to, Beckett’s work. These qualms aside, Mihálycsa’s contribution to Beckett-scholarship is immense and all-important. The correspondence is read meticulously and discussed with impressive expertise.

The letters “recast our understanding of Beckett’s texts and their place in the vaster, infinite conversation also called literature” (26), avers Mihálycsa and treats the objects of her study as intertexts, documents highlighting Beckett’s positions, reportages of creative engagement with historical and private affairs. Indeed, these letters bear testimony to an astonishingly wide range of interests, influences, and aspirations that signpost Beckett’s artistic development.

In the introduction, Mihálycsa anchors her readerly position in two cardinal points of critical orientation. First, the project promises “an overview of the thought processes and the articulation of a poetics, pursued stubbornly and with rare radicalism, evidenced in the letters.” Second, together with resisting “the temptation of a reductive biographical reading,” the plan is “to highlight the consubstantiality not only of the published work and the letters, but, more broadly, a co-belonging of Beckett’s singular work and his exercise of life” (13–14).

As a critical approach, this project follows suit with what the author confidently terms the “archival turn that has dominated scholarship over the two decades” (12). Indeed, a large segment of Beckett scholarship has taken interest in the archival material and resources, the largest collection of which is available at the University of Reading, thanks to James Knowlson. Archival research aspires to uncover ever new aspects of Beckett’s writing, examining the telling nuances and neglected minutiae of the work of an author who himself had an astoundingly keen eye for detail. For instance, there are six notebooks of Beckett’s wartime novel, *Watt*, and several manuscripts and typescripts to navigate the enthusiastic researcher. Moreover, Mihálycsa is, of course, aware of the non-negligible fact that Beckett wrote most of his works in French (to avoid “style” and the pitfalls of the mother tongue) and (mostly) translated them himself into English. This, to be sure, provides further grounds for

the methodical unearthing of textual particulars. Although together with the “archival turn,” terms like “archive” and “archival research” are mentioned several times in the book, Mihálycsa does not discuss this field of critical studies and theory. This is unfortunate, since an enterprise that is itself concentrated on the archive of letters would have benefited much from literature that complicates the relationship between performance, art, and archival documentation (see the respective contributions of Peggy Phelan, Diana Taylor, Dennis Kennedy, and others). The lengthy introduction, instead, maps the major trends in Beckett scholarship. Here, Mihálycsa demonstrates what transpires as a long-term personal involvement in Beckett studies, tracing the not-so-recent schools of Beckett criticism of the 1980s–1990s together with the most up-to-date ones, including both the grand philosophical approaches to Beckett, like Badiou’s, Blanchot’s, or Deleuze’s, and a selection of “microtextually sensitive recent readings” (16). This thoughtful and creative summary initiates the reader into the realm of the heterogeneous trends of Beckett studies and forms a useful backdrop to the discussions that follow. Mihálycsa handles the not always reader-friendly texts with confidence and ease, betraying an exuberant enthusiasm for her subject. Reading through the introduction, one (scholar or layman) is left with no doubts as to the greatness and importance of Samuel Beckett for late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century literature and culture.

The scrupulous reading of Beckett’s letters finds importance in virtually everything this writer found worthy of writing about. The relevant is seldom distinguished from the irrelevant, showing a reluctance to “separate the grain from the husks,” to speak with Beckett’s Krapp featuring in the short monodrama, *Krapp’s Last Tape*. It is at a relatively late stage in the monograph that Mihálycsa tackles the issue of relevance in terms of the editorial selection of Beckett’s correspondence. In a letter to Martha Fehsenfeld, who was to become the principal editor of the corpus, Beckett voiced a preference for the inclusion of “those passages only having bearing on [his] work” (101). As Mihálycsa contends, this “stipulation is uniquely open to debate, for it is easy to see how a wealth of passages apparently personal in content reverberate with the concerns and sensibility of the published work” (101). Although it is perhaps not so unproblematic to apply personal content and information as evidence for artistic sensibility, Mihálycsa leaves it to her readers to consummate Krapp’s job and find the grains for themselves. The letters bear testimony to circumstances that are no doubt relevant to Beckett’s writing, like the inspiration drawn from a portrait in the National Portrait Gallery for an aborted dramatic fragment on the life

of Dr Johnson (31), or when a painting by Caravaggio inspires the idea of the helpless Auditor in *Not I* (96). Indeed, the vast knowledge of art history and his personal encounters and prolonged relationships with artists proved lasting resources for Beckett's work. Yet sometimes the relevance of the letterwright's experiences, like his aversion to "the annoying habit of covering paintings with a protective glass sheet" during his visits to Galleries, is the reader's task to judge. The same applies to determining which authors from the inventoried samples of the "wildly erratic nature of the young Beckett's reading" are relevant to his work (28). The omnivorous contemplation of all the minutiae in Beckett's letters makes not for the dusting of the cult of genius and the consequent lapse into untimely positivism, but rather a painstaking and modest diligence of an author, who invites the reader to cherry-pick the information they need.

What the meticulous concern with the letters reveals and illustrates is the sometimes stubbornly authoritative, sometimes collaborative nature of the process of Beckett's artistic expression, often taking on board suggestions from friends, but frequently remote controlling directors and theatre-makers. Besides the mentioned role of visual arts in his writings and the literary legacies that inform the entire corpus, we also learn a great deal about his taste for music, his concert experiences, and favourite composers. This is all relevant information given Beckett's sustained interest in music, which is conspicuous throughout his career, perhaps mostly in his late minimalism.

On the political and ideological plane (which is never severed from the cultural for Beckett), Mihálycsa highlights Beckett's complicated relationship with Irishness and the Irish artistic tradition, and traces "the delicate process of disidentification with Beckett's native Ireland," which culminates in referring to Paris as his "home" (33). Furthermore, his aversion to totalitarianism, and Nazism in particular, is repeatedly mentioned and collated with developments in his writing, "the journey through Germany is an existential turning point as well as a journey to a sense of writing, to a sense of the failure of all claims to expression and to the ethical imperative of addressing the 'mess'" (27). At these points in the book, the information gleaned from the letters assist the reader in positioning Beckett in a shifting cultural milieu that shaped his art.

Devoted to a chronological unpacking of the contents of Beckett's correspondence, the four chapters guide the reader through a stunning miscellany of subjects which puts a strain on the narrative arc. The author faces this challenge

with relaxed idiomaticity and erudite mastery. There are minor flaws that constitute stumbling blocks in reading: for instance, referencing the Beckett-quote, “no symbols where none intended,” only 13 pages after its first mention (the last line in the novel, *Watt*’s addenda), or explaining who George Duthuit was only in Chapter 2. (Duthuit was Beckett’s new intellectual partner after MacGreevy and the conductor of the famous interview series, “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit,” which contains much of Beckett’s *ars poetica*.) In the sections on Beckett’s postwar writings, especially in connection with *Waiting for Godot*, absurdism is not examined at all but simply relegated to a passing reference made to Martin Esslin’s book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. This is a lacuna that is surprising, given that Beckett’s all other generic contributions, such as full-length and minimalist plays, television and radio plays, mimes and poems, etc., are addressed in some detail.

Despite these reservations, Mihálycsa’s thorough excavations of this rich correspondence and her original and inspiringly provocative style make this study a rewarding and enjoyable read for Beckett scholars, students, and all those interested in this singular life and work.

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Iván Nyusztay is an Associate Professor at the Department of English Studies, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest, Hungary). Specialising in the history and philosophy of drama, he authored two monographs on drama theory (*Myth, Telos, Identity: The Tragic Schema in Greek and Shakespearean Drama*, Amsterdam–New York: Rodopi, 2002, and *Configurations of Identity in Absurd Drama: Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard*, Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2010), with a forthcoming third on Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett. He has also published a number of articles and book chapters on the philosophy of absurd drama.