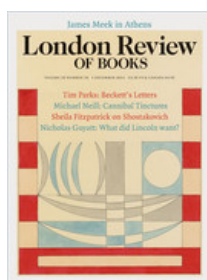


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On Needing to Be Looked After

Tim Parks

The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941-56 edited by [George Craig](#), [Martha Dow Fehsenfeld](#), [Dan Gunn](#) and [Lois More Overbeck](#)[BUY](#)

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At the turning point of this second volume of Beckett's letters, which is also the turning point of his professional life, the moment when, after so many years of 'retyping ... for rejection', his best work is finally to be published with enthusiasm by editors determined to let the world know what they have discovered, the author's partner, Suzanne Déchevaux-Dumesnil, writes to Jérôme Lindon at Editions de Minuit to advise that Beckett does not wish his novel to be entered for the Prix des Critiques. It is 19 April 1951, Beckett is 45, the novel in question is *Molloy*. Suzanne explains:

What he dreads above all, in the very unlikely event of his receiving a prize, is the publicity which would then be directed, not only at his name and his work, but at the man himself. He judges, rightly or wrongly, that it is impossible for the prizewinner, without serious discourtesy, to refuse to go in for the posturings required by these occasions: warm words for his supporters, interviews, photos, etc etc. And as he feels wholly incapable of this sort of behaviour, he prefers not to expose himself to the risk of being forced into it by entering the competition.

Thus is born the celebrated myth of a writer concerned purely with his art, oblivious to commercial concerns and hence somehow superior to those writers who will gladly stand before a microphone, cheque in hand. It was a myth that would eventually play to Beckett's advantage, both critical and commercial. But Suzanne's letter – and it is impossible not to hear Beckett's voice dictating it – makes no special claims. 'Perhaps,' she/he proceeds cautiously,

he has an exaggerated view of a prizewinner's duties. But if, as prizewinner, he could without unacceptable rudeness stay out of it all, he would see no objection to being one. You see, it is not an aversion of principle, but simply the fear of the other side of the coin.

Like so many of the letters in this second volume, this was written in French. It was an excellent decision on the part of the editors to give us throughout both original and translation. Here the French reads:

si, tout en étant primé, il pouvait sans goujaterie rester dans son coin, il ne verrait aucun inconvénient à l'être. Vous voyez, ce n'est pas une aversion de principe, mais simplement la crainte de la contrepartie.

'If he could stay in his corner ... fear of the other side'. Is this a boxing metaphor? Beckett had been a good boxer in his youth. What exactly is feared here: the opponent, or being in the position of the opponent? What would it mean, following the English translation, to fear 'the other side of the coin'? Does Beckett fear success? Five days later Suzanne/Beckett writes to Lindon again to announce that 'Beckett will not hear of being interviewed, whether orally or in writing. I fear that on this he is not to be budged. He gives his work, his role stops there. He cannot talk about it.' There is no assumption here of a high ground or aesthetic purity on Beckett's part; rather he is setting out the rules of a relationship: 'son rôle s'arrête là.' Indeed he 'is really sorry for the extent to which this intransigence may be unhelpful and awkward for you as publisher'. The paragraph ends with a clarification that is also an imperative: 'One must take him as he is.'

This determination to establish rules for relationships emerges again and again in the second volume of letters as Beckett moves in a very short space of time from being a poverty-stricken Irish émigré in postwar Paris, living mainly off handouts from his family and his partner's work as a dressmaker, to finding himself the centre of international literary attention with a rapidly growing income that allows him to buy a piece of land in the country and build himself a house. But rigidly defined and often extravagantly asymmetrical relationships were nothing new to Beckett and had long been a staple of his narratives. In *Murphy* the eponymous unemployed hero lounges blindfold on his rocking chair, philosophising, while his girlfriend is expected to pay for

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Penelope Fitzgerald
Finest People

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everything and obliged to prostitute herself to do so. Murphy is really sorry about this situation (as Beckett was genuinely sorry not to accommodate his publisher), he would like to find some other arrangement, but remunerative work is beyond him. It is not that Murphy needs to dedicate himself to any artistic endeavour. He just can't do it.

First Love, written in French in 1946, strips away realism to make the asymmetry grotesque. Sleeping in a park, the narrator is picked up by a woman who takes him to her flat. There is sex. The narrator, however, then barricades himself in a bedroom, insisting that his beloved bring him food, take away his chamberpot and expect nothing else from him. Needless to say, this one-sided situation is not sustainable and eventually he is thrown out. In *Molloy*, begun in 1947, the equation is altered somewhat: old Molloy lies in what was his mother's room, has his food brought to him and his chamberpot removed, but once a week someone comes and takes away a few pages of writing as well and pays him for it. Throughout his life and frequently in these letters, Beckett refers to his writing as excretion. Never communication. Rather, it is an excretion which, becoming an economic exchange (though Molloy doesn't understand how this happens, since one hardly excretes for money), permits other non-communicative but necessary relationships to be sustained. What is fascinating in these six hundred pages of correspondence with friends, lovers, publishers, translators, aspiring writers, critics and theatre directors, is the slow meshing in our minds of the Beckett narratives we know with the author's peculiar manner of dealing with people, and also with the aesthetic he sets out to define in pages of the most tortuous prose addressed to the art critic Georges Duthuit. The reader understands, that is, just how bound up with Beckett's personality the work is. This makes it doubly frustrating that the editors have only been able to publish letters overtly to do with Beckett's writing, leaving aside those considered merely private. In reality no such distinction can be made.

This second of four volumes, annotated with generous and attentive scholarship, is markedly different in tone from the first, which included letters written between 1929, when Beckett was 23, and 1940. Those years were troubled by a dilemma that threatened the young man's mental health. Beckett's parents had wanted him to get involved in the family quantity surveying business; instead he studied languages and in 1928 went to Paris as a young academic. It seemed a sensible choice, sufficiently respectable for his parents to approve, yet not so onerous as to stand in the way of a career as a writer. However, on his return to Dublin and Trinity College in 1930, Beckett lectured for only four terms before resigning his post – he couldn't face a classroom – and thus declared himself free from parental expectation while ensuring that he would remain financially dependent on those he had disappointed. Like Murphy or the hero of *First Love*, Beckett needed to be his own man, but he also needed to be looked after.

A battle of wills ensued between mother and son, with Beckett frequently setting out for London, Paris or various towns in Germany, in an attempt to establish a life for himself, but remaining all the time economically dependent and afflicted by the anxiety that he was letting the family down. As the impasse continued, he developed a number of physical symptoms – boils, anal cysts, pelvic pains, tachycardia, panic attacks (they feature prominently in the early letters) – and a tendency to oscillate between seeing his plight conventionally, realistically, at which moments he would feel desperate, and then denying or belittling it, as if from some lofty aesthetic distance. So, guiltily abroad in London or Paris, the young Beckett of the first volume might repent and declare himself ready to return to Dublin and the humblest employment; but once back home, he writes to his friend Thomas McGreevy dismissing the problem with much self-conscious wordplay, going on to reflect at length on poetry and painting. One of the high points of the first volume is an unusually candid letter to McGreevy in 1935 in which Beckett, now in Jungian analysis in London, acknowledges a possible psychosomatic basis to his ailments:

For years I was unhappy, consciously & deliberately ... so that I isolated myself more & more, undertook less & less & lent myself to a crescendo of disparagement of others & myself ... The misery & solitude & apathy & the sneers were the elements of an index of superiority & guaranteed the feeling of arrogant 'otherness' ... It was not until that way of living, or rather negation of living, developed such terrifying physical symptoms that it could no longer be pursued that I became aware of anything morbid in myself. In short, if the heart had not put the fear of death into me I would be still boozing & sneering & lounging around & feeling that I was too good for anything else.

There is little of all this in the second volume of letters. Gone are the guilt and dilemma, gone the sometimes elaborately contorted prose which had previously served as much as a bolthole as a means of saying anything. In his fine introduction Dan Gunn suggests that the war and Beckett's protracted stay in France from 1939 to 1945 must have worked the change. The back and forth between Dublin, Paris and London, with the different personal destinies those cities implied, had been interrupted; he had settled into France and French and now had a life of his own; besides, he had seen so much turmoil and destruction, lost friends and known friends who had lost their loved ones, that his own problems must have seemed less urgent. This makes sense. Perhaps there were other factors too. He had offered to serve in the French army in 1939; he wasn't accepted, but he did then work for the Resistance. That he'd been able to commit

himself and take risks on behalf of others may have attenuated the guilt he had felt at not being able to engage in a 'respectable' life as his parents had wanted. But most of all there was Suzanne. Already acquainted with Beckett, she had drawn close to him when he was at his most vulnerable, hospitalised in 1938 for stab wounds received in a mugging. Six years older than Beckett, Suzanne would allow him to depend on her economically, while letting him retain an independence of action few partners would have granted. She would also provide a buffer between Beckett and the literary world, taking his manuscripts to publishers, writing to them for him and later going to productions of his plays to check that all was being done as he wished. It wasn't quite the scenario of *First Love* – the man barricaded in his bedroom while the beloved provides – but Beckett had found a remarkable facilitator.

Yet we hear almost nothing about her from his correspondence: Suzanne sends her greetings, Beckett tells us at the close of many letters; she asks to be remembered; she thanks someone for chocolates. In one letter he mentions her 'heroically spreading out her dressmaking' and in another that she has painted a wheelbarrow red. But nothing about their relationship or her opinions. What letters Beckett wrote to her and she to him have not survived; one assumes this was deliberate. Towards the end of a letter to Duthuit, written from Dublin in August 1948, Beckett comments: 'Suzanne writes, letters that are more and more dismal. At bottom, she is inconsolable at living.' And a few days later: 'Suzanne's letters are becoming more and more desperate: do get in touch with her, even if it's not your turn.' Both comments come in the middle of long paragraphs and are immediately preceded and followed by quite other considerations. The remark 'even if it's not your turn' recalls Beckett's constant attention to the rules governing relationships and the question as to what things may be expected of us. Not, as it turned out, in Beckett's case, sexual faithfulness. What Suzanne knew about his affair with Pamela Mitchell, whom he met in 1953 and corresponded with regularly and affectionately, we don't know. Spoken or unspoken, there must have been an agreement between the two as to what Beckett's role was and where it stopped.

The first years covered in the volume are ones of serious poverty and remarkable creativity. During the war, half of it confined to a village in Unoccupied France, Beckett writes *Watt*, in some ways the most extraordinary of his novels and the last to be written in English. In long central sections of the novel, we see Watt, who is telling his story to the narrator, Sam, inverting the order of words in his sentences, of sentences in his paragraphs, of letters in his words, as if unsure whether he wants his story to be understood or not. When Beckett returned to Ireland via London in 1945, the manuscript was seized by the English authorities as possibly containing coded messages. Why else would anyone write in such a way?

In the immediate postwar period Beckett switches to French – not a code or game of inversions now, but a language not easily understood by Dublin literati or customs men, as if Beckett were not eager to be read back home – and produces, first, a series of shorter pieces, including *First Love*, the novella *Mercier et Camier* and the play *Eleutheria*; then, in 1947, his French apprenticeship over, he launches into *Molloy*, which he finishes in just six months, immediately begins *Malone Dies*, finished in 1948, takes a break from fiction to write *Waiting for Godot* (in four months), then writes *The Unnameable*, which he completes in January 1950. In three years, and all in French, this man who 'simply can't' do so many ordinary things had produced the work on which one of the greatest literary reputations of the 20th century stands.

Not surprisingly, many of the letters of these years are full of news about what he is doing and where he is up to. 'Forgive all these details about my work,' he tells his old friend McGreevy in January 1948. 'My life seems to be little else.' And again: 'Suzanne earns a little money with her dressmaking. That is what we are living on at present ... it's a quiet and meagre life. With no friends, with only work to give it meaning.' Rarely enlightening about the nature of that work and the huge leap forward he was making, these details that Beckett apologises for mostly have to do with his difficulties getting published: 'My play in French,' he tells George Reavey of *Eleutheria*, 'was almost taken by Hussenot-Grenier,' while '*Watt* was "nearly" taken in London, I forget by whom' (a footnote informs us that Herbert Read at Routledge read the novel with 'considerable bewilderment' and found it 'wild and unintelligible'). Having been through the same interminable round of rejections with *Murphy* in the 1930s, Beckett seems resigned to disappointment and even claims to have forgotten what the novel was about. Perhaps he is buoyed up by the new work he is producing so rapidly: 'I see a little clearly at last what my writing is about,' he tells McGreevy with unusual optimism, 'and feel I have perhaps ten years courage and energy to get the job done. The feeling of getting oneself in perspective is a strange one, after so many years of expression in blindness. Perhaps it is an illusion.' Illusory or not, Beckett does not tell McGreevy what he has seen and put in perspective.

For some account of this new understanding, we have to turn to his letters to Duthuit, where the energy that produced *Godot* and the trilogy spills over into the most complex French prose to be found in this volume, a prose that pushes George Craig, the translator, to the limit, and which in both languages challenges the reader's powers of comprehension. Duthuit had asked Beckett to write something to promote the artist Bram van Velde, whose abstract paintings Beckett greatly admired. A debate ensues as

to what van Velde's qualities are. The premise for both men is what Beckett calls 'the avalanche of one's impossibility at every fragment of a moment': that is, experience cannot be captured in art, so mimetic art is always a failure, when not complacent and mendacious. The special nature of van Velde's work, as Beckett sees it, is that he has had the courage to drop every pretence of making his art relate to anything else, whether in the outside world or the mind (the 'non-I' or the 'I'), since, as Beckett remarks with an insight worthy of a Vedic *rsi* or a contemporary neurologist, 'what are called outside and inside are one and the same,' each bringing the other into cognitive existence. Such an approach shows

respect for the impossible that we are, impossible living creatures, impossibly alive, of whom neither the time of the body, nor the investment by space are any more to be retained than the shades of evening or the beloved face, and painting quite simply a destiny, which is to paint, where there is nothing to paint, nothing to paint with, and without knowing how to paint, and without wanting to paint ...

Very soon it is clear that Beckett is writing about his hopes for his own work. 'I shall tend irresistibly to pull Bram's case over towards my own,' he confesses. And: 'Bear in mind that I who hardly ever talk about myself talk about little else.' To talk about van Velde, then, insisting all the time on the impossibility of talking about anything, is actually to talk about himself; and in advocating a form of expression free from all relation to the world Beckett is clearly becoming more and more intimately involved with Duthuit, to the point that when Duthuit asks Beckett to set down his thoughts in an essay, he declares that he can only pursue the argument if stimulated by the dialogue, otherwise the ideas won't come. As he later explains, he has not yet reached the day 'when I shall not need another hand to hold in my wrongness'.

Eventually, so paradoxical is the aesthetic being offered that Beckett ties himself up in the most tortuous knots, in describing a form of expression that neither expresses anything in the world or the self, nor is about the impossibility of expression, but is rather a 'vomiting one's whole being', an expulsion or excretion, before he finally declares that the debate 'is turning into a kind of madness into which no one has the right to drag anyone else'. What the reader brings away from this exchange, by far the most remarkable in the book, is Beckett's aspiration towards something he knows makes no sense. It comes as a clarification when he confesses: 'I have this frantic urge to fix up for myself a situation that is literally impossible.' His frequently stated loathing of his own writing – each work declared nauseous almost as soon as it is finished, whoever he is writing to and often apropos of nothing – is perhaps partly due to his awareness that however hard he tries to achieve this relation-free form of art, his writing is always very much both about the world and, above all, about himself. 'Shall I be incapable, to the end,' Malone complains, 'of lying on any other subject?'

Despite or perhaps because of his insistence on the impossibility of evocation, on the incommensurable otherness of things ('All flesh is not the same flesh: but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, and another of birds,' he quotes St Paul), these letters contain some extraordinary descriptions of birds and beasts. From 1949 on he and Suzanne rented rooms near Ussy-sur-Marne, then bought a patch of land, then in 1953 built a small house on it. Beckett's pleasure in digging the ground to plant vegetables and trees, and his fascination with all forms of life, come across with a spontaneity and warmth as unaffected as it is unexpected: 'Never seen so many butterflies in such worm-state, this little central cylinder, the only flesh, is the worm. First flights of the young swallows, the parents who feed them on the wing.' Or: 'Yesterday ... we startled a huge woodpecker, green and yellow (of course). It dug its claws into the trunk, briskly put that between us and it, then ran up, to the top branches, I suppose. An absurd joy welled up in me.' Typical here is Beckett's renunciation of meticulous description ('green and yellow (of course)'), his readiness not to understand ('ran up, to the top branches, I suppose') and above all his excitement that the bird is putting distance between itself and him, running round the trunk, disappearing into the top branches. 'Other' the bird may be, but it has the same instinct Beckett has when confronted with the press.

In other places empathy, irony and practicality come together in wonderful glimpses of a Beckett who can't get enough of mud and digging and planting:

I keep an eye on the love-life of the Colorado beetle and work against it, successfully but humanely, that is to say by throwing the parents into my neighbour's garden and burning the eggs. If only someone had done that for me!

I scratch the mud and observe the worms, an observation entirely devoid of scientific detachment. I try not to hurt them with the spade. All the while knowing that, cut in two, they at once fashion a new head, or a new tail, whichever is the case.

All my trees are down in the cold ground where I shudder to think what is happening to their roots.

It is nature's inarticulateness, its speechlessness, its making no demands on him, that seems to draw Beckett so strongly, and whenever he feels it would be better to give up writing, disgusted as he is by his inability to achieve the goal he has set himself, it is simply in order to sink into the soil of Ussy-sur-Marne. 'I ask for nothing more,' he

writes to Georges Belmont in September 1951, 'than to be able to bury myself in this beetroot-growing hole, scratch the earth and howl at the clouds.'

Despite this propensity for retreat and sometimes quietism, the story these letters tell, inescapably, is the banal tale of the dream come true, of long labours at last rewarded. And that is one reason they make such good reading. Unexpectedly, there's a feel-good factor. In March 1950 a frustrated Beckett closes a letter to Duthuit: 'Still do not understand in what way art can help us to wait patiently.' But in December of the same year he is able to tell George Reavey: 'I have signed a contract with the Editions of Minuit for all work' and 'Pretty well certain now that the second play, *En attendant Godot*, will be put on by Blin at the Noctambules.'

In truth there would be another two frustrated years waiting for finance before *Godot* premiered on 5 January 1953. Anyone who has read these two volumes of letters will sense at once where the idea of the interminable wait for some life-changing encounter, ever announced, never materialising, perhaps feared as much as hoped, came from. Beckett was now 46 and had been waiting twenty years. 'Godot himself,' he later writes, 'is not of a different species from those he cannot or will not help. I myself know him less well than anyone, having never known even vaguely what I needed.' A good publisher and a fine director with adequate financial support might have been one, superficial answer to that question.

Needless to say Beckett did not go to see the play at once – he was too anxious – but sent Suzanne to give him the lowdown; a letter of 9 January establishes his protective attitude to his work for years to come. It is addressed to the play's director, Roger Blin, who was also acting the part of Pozzo:

There is one thing that bothers me: Estragon's trousers. Naturally I asked Suzanne if they fall down properly. She tells me that he holds on to them halfway down. This he must not do – it's utterly inappropriate.

Beckett offers some half-hearted explanation: Estragon, he says, would hardly be worrying about holding his trousers when preparing to hang himself; and the 'spirit of the play' demands that tragedy be seen as grotesque. But then he adds:

I have lots of other reasons for wanting this business not to be underplayed, but I'll spare you them. But please ... let the trousers fall right down, round the ankles. It must seem silly to you, but to me it's vital.

What is all this about? What are the 'lots of other reasons', reasons which, we feel, can only be the real reasons? In a letter to a journalist asking for elucidation about the play Beckett seems at first almost rude: 'I have no ideas about theatre. I know nothing about it. I do not go to it. That is allowable. What is less so, no doubt, is first of all, in these conditions, writing a play, and then, having done so, having no ideas about it either.' If the letter were to end there, it would indeed be rude. But Beckett pushes on with such a generous list of things he doesn't know and cannot be expected to answer that by the end he has made it clear how he intends the play to be seen: as something excreted that the author has introduced into the public space, something that simply is what it is. 'As for wanting to find in all this a wider and loftier meaning to take away after the show, along with the programme and the choc-ice, I am unable to see the point of it. But it must be possible.'

Along with the falling trousers, another thing Beckett would strenuously defend in the play, against the wishes of the English censor, were references to farting and erections. And only months after the premiere of *Godot*, in a serious falling-out with Jean Paulhan, editor of the *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, what infuriates Beckett is the omission, from an extract taken from *The Unnameable*, of a few lines mentioning the penis, erection and masturbation. 'This affair concerns far more than just me,' he writes with uncharacteristic pomposity to Lindon. On this occasion, unlike those where he refused to get involved in promotion, Beckett is willing to move into the public arena to defend his text and talks excitedly about legal action: 'I'll have the bastard's hide, even if it means losing my own.'

A passage from *Molloy* helps to explain why these issues matter so much to Beckett. The narrator is talking about how he keeps warm in winter:

And in winter under my greatcoat, I wrapped myself in swathes of newspaper, and did not shed them until the earth awoke, for good, in April. The *Times Literary Supplement* was admirably adapted to this purpose, of a never failing toughness and impermeability. Even farts made no impression on it. I can't help it, gas escapes my fundament on the least pretext, it's hard not to mention it now and then, however great my distaste.

My fundament! The fart is the inescapable emission that will never penetrate the pages of the *TLS*, a journal which until that moment had indeed been entirely impermeable to Beckett's effusions. To miss out the farts, along with the unnameable's penis or Estragon's nether parts at the end of *Godot* is to miss out the uninterpretable fundament that the work is discharged from. 'It is this dailiness and this materiality that need to be brought out,' Beckett writes to Carlheinz Caspari, the first German director

of *Godot*. To Alan Schneider, director of the American premiere, who had been having difficulty understanding the part of Pozzo, he remarks:

Pozzo's sudden changes of tone, mood, behaviour etc, may I suppose be related to what is going on about him, but their source is in the dark of his own inner upheavals and confusions. The temptation is to minimise an irresponsibility and discontinuity which should on the contrary be stressed.

Quite simply we have a character who comes out with things that may have nothing to do with what is going on around him. Like farts, they are private to him, but nevertheless heard and, as it were, smelled. Indecipherable. It sounds like a manifesto for the play itself.

The work achieved in French, there was the question of translation. Beckett writes frequently to Marie Péron, a prewar friend who checked his French for possible errors, and to Jacoba van Velde, Bram van Velde's younger sister, who translated his writing into Dutch. There is a pleasantness and ease in his letters to these women contemporaries that marks them out from the tenser missives to his male friends. But when it came to translating his French into English, Beckett was hesitant. If the work was expulsion, excretion, what sense was there in going back to it? 'I am not particularly keen on seeing all this come out in English,' he tells Lindon of *Molloy*, reminding us that one of the reasons for writing in French might have been to say things in a language that wasn't easily read back home. *Molloy* begins, we remember, with the narrator's obsessive search for his mother.

At first, in his distaste for returning to work he claimed to loathe, Beckett assigned the task of translating *Molloy* to Patrick Bowles, a young South African. The decision was extraordinary. In the late 1930s, after an early attempt at collaboration, Beckett had taken over the French translation of *Murphy* and done the job himself. It was an immense task to bring into a foreign language a work of such wilful and arcane complexity. How much easier, surely, to translate the linguistically simpler *Molloy* into his own language. And if he was to give the work to someone else, why to someone who had no distinguished track record in translation? Perhaps it was significant that Bowles was neither English nor Irish, so that the language he was working into was not that of home. In any event it was a decision Beckett regretted. Letter after letter has him sweating over Bowles's drafts, realising he will have to do all the work himself. After which there was *Malone Dies*, then *The Unnameable*, then *Godot*, not to mention the need to bring *Watt* into French. 'This will go on for years,' he tells McGreevy, lamenting that he can no longer write anything new: 'an indigestion of old work with all the adventure gone'. 'Sick of all this old vomit,' he tells his American publisher, Barney Rosset, 'and despair more and more of ever being able to puke again.'

Yet if ever a translation was creative, equal to or more important than new work, it was Beckett's of his trilogy. The French was to prove a stepping stone to a new voice in English, one so much more beguiling than the voices of *Murphy* and *Watt*, however remarkable those novels remain. Answering a casual inquirer about the reasons he wrote in French (Beckett is always more generous when responding to the curious reader rather than the predatory journalist or academic), he declines to give a straight answer but offers a tantalising clue: since he falls into 'the dismal category of those who, if they had to act in full awareness of what they were doing, would never act', he felt 'the need to be ill-equipped' in order to write. Because he didn't know French so well, writing in it would encourage impulsiveness. Now, in translation, Beckett could bring that greater impulsiveness, the unknowing and vulnerability of his French, into English, adding a sparkle of knowing puns on the way. 'In any case, this whole question of climate left me cold,' *Molloy* concludes the discussion of the impermeable qualities of the *TLS*. 'I could stomach any mess.'

Success brought new friends and correspondents. Pamela Mitchell came to Paris in 1953 to negotiate an option on an American premiere of *Godot*; the affair with her was thus consequent on a literary success facilitated by Suzanne. As well as Barney Rosset, who contracted to publish all Beckett's work with Grove Press in New York, there were German and Spanish publishers and translators to write to, Irish theatre directors, anxious actors of various nationalities, and critics whose positive reviews often brought gracious thank-you notes from Beckett. In 1954 he replied movingly to a German convict who had put on a performance of *Godot* in Lüttringhausen prison. Responding to a BBC producer, he first declines to write a radio play then accepts with unexpected enthusiasm. There follows a back and forth as to the use of real or simulated animal cries in the recording of *All That Fall*, with Beckett predictably insisting that real animal calls were preferable and the producer assuring him that this was not the case.

Throughout these letters the one piece of information Beckett never fails to convey is how exhausted he is: 'too tired and too sad to be able to write a proper letter,' he tells Blin. It seems that before he can engage with others Beckett has to make it clear that they can expect very little of him. 'I'm so tired,' he tells Barney Rosset from Ireland in the autumn of 1954; all he wants to do is return to Ussy and 'cower till the first cuckoo'. 'Translations on all sides,' he tells Marie Péron, 'people to see, I can't keep up.' 'Overwhelmed with silly requests and letters,' he tells McGreevy, 'most of which I feel I have to answer.' In particular, Beckett is always too tired to travel to premieres of

Godot. Often he talks about his future self as an unknowable creature whose actions he can only guess at. 'I am invited all expenses paid by the producer Michael Myerberg' – to see *Godot* on Broadway – 'but presume I won't go.'

This weary attitude is particularly poignant in the letters to Pamela Mitchell. 'Tired and stupid beyond belief,' he tells her. 'I'm as dull as ditchwater and can hardly hold the pen.' Everything is done to send her the message that he cares for her but has nothing to offer:

Whatever I do I do on impulse and suddenly, so what I feel now does not mean very much. I don't want you to forget me, but I think it would be the best thing for you. I'm over, as sure as if they were on their way to measure me for the box. I wish you were happy, you have all the equipment for happiness – it seems to me. All the mad things I wish – and the sad things I know.

But the constant refrain of melancholy and tiredness also sets up the Beckettian gesture of resilience, the 'I'll go on' that follows the 'I can't go on.' One of the most attractive glimpses of his writing life comes as he embarks on the play that would become *Endgame*, featuring yet another asymmetrical couple, the tyrant Hamm and his servant Clov. In February 1955, before the characters have been given their names, he writes to Pamela:

The losing battle with my maniacs continues, I have A out of his armchair flat on his face on the stage at the moment and B trying in vain to get him back. I know at least I'll go on to the end before using the wastepaper basket.

But from this amusing note, which Pamela was no doubt meant to find endearing, Beckett passes in the space of a few lines to this: 'Bill Hayter' – who was planning a show of engravings of poems – 'asked me for a text and I gave him the following, written a couple of years ago.'

I would like my love to die
And the rain to be raining on the graveyard
And on me walking the streets
Mourning her who thought she loved me

In the original letter the poem is in French – this translation is provided in a footnote – and of course Beckett makes it clear that it was not written for Pamela. But how could his lover not understand it as meant for her at this moment? And how was she to interpret his decision to quote with no further comment? A few lines on, having mentioned a poor Agatha Christie novel he is reading, Beckett concludes:

Paris is lonely, and Montparnasse in particular, without you and I feel remorseful that I didn't give you a better time that last fortnight? Make up for it some day. Je t'embrasse bien fort.

What is the question mark after 'fortnight' about? *Endgame*, we remember, like *Godot*, features a couple who are constantly talking about breaking up without quite managing to do so. Then there is a PS: 'Will you tell me if this letter is sufficiently stamped?' And the story is still not over, for a footnote tells us: 'The envelope of this letter was marked "insufficient postage".'

Whether coded, or in a foreign language, on stage or on an envelope to a friend, Beckett, like Watt, who reversed the order of words in his sentences, never seems able to decide whether he really wants his pessimistic conviction that communication is impossible to reach us. Or is he perhaps afraid that it might reach us, in which case he would be proved wrong. Insufficiently stamped as it was, this letter of 17 February 1955 did make it from Ussy-sur-Marne to New York, and indeed into the pages of this book. Which leaves us wondering what Pamela made of it.

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