

## Undead Letters: Beckett's Anus Accidentels

Steven Connor

A talk given at the Samuel Beckett Symposium, marking the publication of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Vol. IV. 1966-1989*. Ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), King's College, Cambridge, 25th November 2016.

There is always something a little prurient in reading other people's letters to other people still. But there is something yet stranger in reading a letter meant for someone else and realising that the writer knows you will be reading it. Something of this soft, slowly-diffused shock, of recognising that the letters may be directed, if not addressed to us, after all, attends the reading of Beckett's letters, and especially his last ones, which are at once painfully private and intimate, especially where they concern the frequent 'death of friends, or death/Of every brilliant eye/That made a catch in the breath', and also constitute a strangely grudging public address system.

There are, as the editors of the fourth volume of Beckett's letters point out, many more letters to many more correspondents. For these reasons, the letters are much shorter, often, in fact, postcards. Moreness, in the form of the avalanches of correspondence which are the constant complaint in these letters ('I have no secretary & am crushed with mail' Beckett 2016, 672), was held at bay by the pent lessness, or 'sinéity' that Beckett attempted to deploy against it, even as his letters are full of pleas for forgiveness for their lateness or scantness.

Those of us who have toiled over difficult letters, and, more commonly nowadays, emails, to students, colleagues, and even funding bodies, realising that they are somehow getting the better of, and therefore taking the best of us, might sometimes have fantasised about the appearance one day to universal acclaim of our *Collected Bureaucratic Works*. Some of Beckett's most remarkable epistolary performances occur in Beckett's office correspondence, to publishers, producers and academics. But, in his last letters, Beckett seems to have written with the awareness that his most private jottings and remarks are likely to have been written in some kind of premonitory foreglare of publicity, in something of the way anticipated by the 'one and hundred and five loose sheets' of Louit's fictitious dissertation, *The Mathematical Intuitions of the Visicelts*, which he claims to have lost in a railway waiting station, 'his MS., which, qua MS., could not be of the smallest value to any person other than himself and, eventually, humanity' (Beckett 1972, 171). Perhaps the turning point was the appearance of Deirdre Bair's biography, about which Beckett began polite, but soon became barbed, as in the letter of 1981 to Elizabeth Stockton, in which he said "I have not read Mrs Bair's by all accounts nescience fiction' (Beckett 2016, 556)

Some of these letters are gentle rebuffs to academics asking him for explication, or forcing their work on him for his approval, like the letter he wrote in October 1975 to William Bysshe Stein regarding his essay on 'Whoroscope', that had appeared in *ELH*:

Dear Mr Stein

Thank you for Turdy Ooscopy. Greatly impressed by your erudition & semiotic pyrotechnics. You do me more than proud. Had I had, in my head, when writing in haste that piece, a tenth of what you find, I would deplore it less today. (Beckett 2016, 410)

He had to be particularly vigilant with friends, who might feel he would more readily unfold to them: "Eluard's spätzeit is among the innumerable questions on which I have no opinion', he vouchsafed to Brian Coffey (Beckett 2016, 467). He could not resist the opportunity given him by Yasanuri Takahashi, who had asked whether he had ever had any special interest in

Japan, and whether he thought there were any similarities between his work and the Noh drama, to which Beckett was able to reply: '1. I don't remember. 2. No' (Beckett 2016, 567).

Some of these letters work in the mode of *occupatio*, putting things into play even as they appear to be being ruled out, as in his brief remarks in response to a query from James Knowlson about a reference to 'Dupuytren' in the French text of *Catastrophe*: 'In my mind was Dupuytren's contracture (from which I suffer) which reduces hands to claws. No conscious reference to the Museum nor even to his speciality, the artificial anus.' Unless Dupuytren's medical career was also in Beckett's mind, he would presumably have had to leaf through his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in order to select this fact in particular of which to disavow knowledge. This un- or anti-annotation itself of course requires or at least irresistibly solicits commentary, which is duly if also with admirable dryness supplied by the editors, who inform us that Dupuytren was the author in 1828 of a *Mémoire sur une méthode nouvelle pour traiter les anus accidentels*. Beckett seems to have known, or informed himself for the occasion, that *anus accidentel* is known as artificial anus, and in fact refers not as one might imagine to a piece of medical apparatus but to a condition in which faecal matter escapes from the intestines not through the proper channels, but via an accidental tear. 'When once established', we read in the English translation of Dupuytren's essay that appeared in *The Lancet*, 'artificial anus becomes not only a source of annoyance and disgust to the patient by the constant and involuntary discharge of the faecal matter, but also brings with it consequences of a more grave and dangerous character' (Dupuytren 1833, 261) Given Beckett's lifelong tendency to associate writing with evacuation, and balked writing with what Krapp calls 'unattainable laxation' (Beckett 1986, 218), the attractions of the artificial anus might have been clear – even as the buttoned-up dread of what might accidentally slip out through unofficial channels is also palpable.

Beckett was anxious to restrict his published letters only to material that was of relevance to his work, but in his later years, his letters came more and more to be continuous with that work. It is not just the fact that he so often included in them examples of the rather boneless little squibs and quatrains that he continued to produce and seemingly to value when everything else seemed to have run into the ground for him. It was also that he used the space of the page or the postcard as a little exercise-yard in which to pace out the kinds of sentry-go to be found in his published work. 'Work at a standstill. It feels so wrong & so refuses to budge that I sometimes wonder if it's not all right', he writes to Barbara Bray in 1976. By late 1981, when Beckett was putting this gadgetry of inversion to systematic work in *Worstward Ho*, it spilled over into a letter to Andra Samelson thanking her for the gift of a pen: 'Many thanks for most pleasing ink...together with charming sailor pen. None other for me henceforward. If with it I fail to fail better worse I only deserve to succeed' (Beckett 2016, 563). Sometimes he contents himself with the feeblest of lessenings, as in enclosing for Barbara Bray six articles written about his work in a letter of May 1986: 'I wouldn't want them back. Not with the ashes in me now' (Beckett 2016, 674).

One of the most insistent kinds of jeopardy towards which writing in and for an implied but unintended public, is that it highlights patterns of repetition, making them seem more performative than they would to their individual addressees. A ghostly lament echoes through the last letters: 'Ochone, ochone/Dead and not gone' (Beckett 2016, 694, 695, 713). There is something at once strained and standardised about these assertions of anguish at the impossibility of carrying on, which becomes a tried and (mis)trusted tropology in Beckett's late letters. Beckett speaks of his horror at having to revisit his writing – especially the famous 'German Letter' to Axel Kaun, which he tried to persuade Ruby Cohn not to include in *Disjecta*, calling it 'embarrassing kitchen German bilge' (Beckett 2016, 578) – but seems to replay its gestures and routines constantly. He writes to Nicholas Rawson in December 1981 'Of me nothing tellable to tell. I fare slowly on, in the long farewell' (Beckett 2016, 567). The little inside joke that seems to allow for some welling up even in the taking leave is nicely turned and it is a pity that Beckett didn't find somewhere to put it to work in anything published.

Elsewhere, he knocks together a characteristically rattling contraption of woe for Avigdor Arikha:

Rien ne va plus dans ma veille tête. La carcasse se traîne entre monts et vaux. Un oeil mi-clos la suit de loin.

Nothing doing in my old head. The carcass drags itself up hill and down dale. A half-closed eye follows it, afar. (Beckett 2016, 591; translation modified)

It is increasingly hard to believe that Beckett believed that such private effusions would remain inaccessible for long. He would write in early 1982 to Mary Manning Howe Adams, the mother of the poet Susan Howe, urging her to sell their private correspondence when she was in need of money, 'So many of my letters are now public property that those to you & Susan might as well join them' (Beckett 2016, 574). In 1986, Beckett unconditionally gave up the ghost of any kind of restriction, writing formally to Martha Fehsenfeld: 'M.F. has my permission to consult my letters and take copies, in view of eventual publication, of such passages as are relevant to her research. This permission applies to all my letters, to whomsoever addressed, and wheresoever preserved' (Beckett 2016, 676).

Occasionally, Beckett allows himself the fantasy of publically addressing the condition of having to live out a life that is itself, as he put it in a draft of *That Time*, 'like something out of Beckett' (RUL 1447/4; Topping 2007, 261). In a letter to Barbara Bray, he evokes the following idea for a dialogue that he is trying to write for Rick Cluchey, to form a double-bill with *Krapp's Last Tape*:

Senile tandem:

A. What's on after us?

B. Krapp.

A. Good God. (Beckett 2016, 559)

Birthdays and other such celebratory dates were a particular torture for Beckett, since they often produced spring tides of mail to be answered: a card dated on Good Friday has the salutation: 'Greetings on the current excruciation'. Perhaps the most remarkable of Beckett's semi-splenetic ventings of the pent is a reply that he sent by telegram in December 1983 to *The Times*, in response to an invitation issued by the newspaper to authors to reveal their hopes and resolutions for the New Year. I remember reading this at the time and being convinced, or maybe hoping against hope, that it was a spoof, which I suppose it actually was in a way:

RESOLUTIONS COLON ZERO STOP PERIOD HOPES COLON ZERO STOP  
BECKETT (Beckett 2016, 626)

There may be an extra little bit of jizz in the otherwise rather strained effort to put a final full stop to the oozings of the colon in the fact that telegrams had in fact already been discontinued in the UK in 1982 – though telemessages persisted, largely for the congratulation of centenarians and suchlike.

## References

- Beckett, Samuel (1972). *Watt*. London: Calder and Boyars.  
 ----- (1986). *Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber.  
 ----- (2016). *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Vol. IV. 1966-1989*. Ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dupuytren, Guillaume (1833). 'Clinical Lecture on Artificial Anus, and Its Cure with the Enterotome.' *Lancet* 2, 261-7.

Tonning, Erik (2007). *Samuel Beckett's Abstract Drama: Works for Stage and Screen, 1962-1985*. Oxford et. al.: Peter Lang.