

REVIEWS

Beckett the Letterwright

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Mihálycsa, Erika. *"A wretchedness to defend": Reading Beckett's Letters*. Debrecen: Debrecen University Press. Ebook. ISBN 978-963-615-047-1. Open Access.

Before reading Erika Mihálycsa's book on Beckett's letters, I thought I had read the Irish-French author's published correspondence. I now know that we are only beginning to read it. Published as an Open Access ebook, Mihálycsa's volume ranges chronologically over the four volumes of his letters published by Cambridge University Press between 2009 and 2016, tied together by recurring thematic groupings such as Beckett's self-translation, theater work, and personal life. According to its author, this book is an attempt to track "Beckett's many letterwright's voices" and "to mark the ways in which the letters recast our understanding of Beckett's texts and their place in the vaster, infinite conversation also called literature" (Introduction). She does so through close attention to the historical, political, and cultural contexts in which the bilingual writer worked. The cover of the book gives a flavor of this approach: a detail from Alberto Burri's *Sacco e bianco* (1953), constructed out of the sacks left by the US Army in postwar Paris, reminds the reader that there is much of value to be found in the detritus of the post-World War II Europe.

Mihálycsa uses the published letters to nuance commonplace ideas about the author and his working process, starting with his influences. So, we read of Beckett's impatience with Marcel Proust being "so absolutely the master of his form that he becomes its slave as often as not" (*LSB I*, 11; qtd. in chapter 1) or, later, the French author's "obsessive need" to reduce everything to "laws" (*LSB II*, 464; qtd in chapter 2). Instead, she makes the point that "there is no book that is discussed at more length than Thomas a Kempis's *Imitatio Christi*" (chapter 1). While many have focused on Proust's influence on Beckett's work, Mihálycsa's reading of the letters reinforce the point that the detrital archive pays to be re-read and may not, indeed, be the final point of exegesis. This is brought home when she points out that James Joyce is "present by his conspicuous absence" in the first volume of the letters (chapter 1). Even detritus, she shows, can have its underseen undersides.

As Mihálycsa herself acknowledges, Beckett's interest in painting and the performing arts is a topic that has been covered elsewhere, but here she does so afresh, providing new insights into the European artworks that he views during his trip to Germany (1936–37). Drawing on the extensive footnoting carried out by the editors of Beckett's letters, she tells us that "in Dresden he spots that the putto with armor at the feet of Giorgione's Venus had been painted over in the nineteenth century, before the X-ray photographs corroborate his verdict" (chapter 1; see *LSB I* 448–49 n4). It takes a writer as erudite as Mihálycsa to track Beckett through the literary, artistic, and musical terrain he traverses in the 1930s. For instance, she admires Beckett's "penetrating critical touch" in his assessment of the first recital of pianist Sviatoslav Richter in Paris: "Too interior was as near as I could get, though this sounds queer for Schubert, when the interior is as genuinely poetic as Richter's." Here, as at many other points of the book, Beckett's "critical touch" is matched by the author's own, as she informs us of Richter's role "in changing the perception of Schubert's repetitive, serial structures as music grappling with the inexpressible," a theme clearly relevant to Beckett's own work (chapter 3).

It is worth noting the sheer range of scholarly ability brought to bear on these readings of Beckett's letters. Alongside the English volumes of the letters, the French, German, and Italian translations are listed in the bibliography; of course, Beckett's own self-translation practice is so varied as to provide plenty of material for analysis. Having given numerous individual examples of his different translation practices, Mihálycsa is at pains to point out that Beckett's "attitude towards self-translation and his own bilingual corpus does not remain consistent" (chapter 3). Scholarship published since early versions of this book's chapters appeared as reviews of the individual volumes (mainly in *HJEAS*) supports this point. For instance, her position that the prose work *Company* (1980) was "written in English first and later translated into French" (chapter 4) is further nuanced by Georgina Nugent-Folan's detailed genetic analysis of the late prose work (*The Making of*), which shows that the bilingual genesis of this prose work was even more complex than a one-way move from English to French.

Are Beckett's letters literature? Mihálycsa shows us that they are, mainly by focusing on the insights they can give us into "the surprisingly consistent crystallizing process of Beckett's poetics" (chapter 1). But she goes further than this, suggesting that the letters can be read "as *avant-textes* to be read alongside the autograph work" (chapter 1). A key example are the letters Beckett wrote to art critic Georges Duthuit, beginning in the summer

of 1948, which, for Mihálycsa, “constitute the immediate *avant-texte* of the ‘Three Dialogues’ that Beckett starts writing in June [1949]” (chapter 2). This practice of the letters forming early examples of published work is perhaps clearest in Beckett’s poetry, some of which was sent along with letters to his correspondents. When it comes to Beckett’s theater, the letter as *avant-texte* has been examined in detail by Xander Ryan (“‘To Talk Alone’”). Mihálycsa further makes a strong case that the letters are “an outlet for formulations not decanted into his fiction, yet somehow lingering on the threshold of the literary” (chapter 1). All in all, it is hard to argue with Mihálycsa’s conclusion that “the author’s place among literature’s letterwrights is on a par with his status among the world’s novelists and playwrights” (chapter 2).

Mihálycsa opens the book by providing a well-worn Beckettian reminder that is still well worth heeding: “The danger is in the neatness of identifications” (qtd. in Introduction). So, is there a risk that “the surprisingly consistent crystallizing process of Beckett’s poetics” could be an example of coherence imposed in retrospect? Is there a risk of imposing a teleology when stating that “all Beckett’s aesthetic and life choices from his *Normalien* year onward seem directed, with a consistent internal logic, towards his moving to Paris, joining the Resistance, and shifting to writing in French” (chapter 1)? Of course, it is very hard not to impose some kind of narrative arc on these shards of cultural detritus, impossible not to read some kind of pattern into “the mess” of Beckett’s letters (the supposed randomness of which is what attracts many of us to the archive in the first place). Overall, Mihálycsa avoids the temptation to pigeonhole Beckett’s letters, and the greatest value of her book is in bringing new light to letters we may have thought already read. As the author herself argues, “it is in the nature of archival findings to complicate the work of theorizing and of exegesis” (Conclusions). No book I have recently read reminds me of this with more eloquence than “*A wretchedness to defend.*”

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