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This article originally appeared in *LRB* Vol. 31 No. 15 dated 6 August 2009



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## Who to Be Colm Tóibín

- *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-40* edited by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge, 782 pp., £30.00, February, ISBN 978 0 521 86793 1

In his essay on the painter Jack Yeats, which he sent to Beckett in 1938, Thomas McGreevy wrote: 'During the 20-odd years preceding 1916, Jack Yeats filled a need that had become immediate in Ireland for the first time in 300 years, the need of the people to feel that their own life was being expressed in art.' [\*] Beckett was in Paris when he read the essay. He wrote to McGreevy to say that he did 'not think there is a syllable that needs touching' in the first 18 pages, and that the rest, 'though I do not find it quite as self-evident as the beginning, holds together perfectly'. But then he said that 'the political and social analyses are rather on the long side.' He admitted his own

chronic inability to understand . . . a phrase like 'the Irish people', or to imagine that it ever gave a fart in its corduroys for any form of art whatsoever, whether before the Union or after, or that it was ever capable of any thought or act other than the rudimentary thoughts and acts belted into it by the priests and by the demagogues in service of the priests, or that it will ever care, if it ever knows, any more than the Bog of Allen will ever care or know, that there was once a painter in Ireland called Jack Butler Yeats.

Like McGreevy, Beckett was fascinated by Jack Yeats; in these letters Yeats the painter is almost alone among living Irish figures of the previous generation whom Beckett mentions with constant respect. In 1930, McGreevy wrote of Beckett to Jack

Yeats:

My last year's colleague . . . is still in Dublin for a little while. He's a nice fellow the nephew of Cissie Sinclair [who had been a painter] . . . It would be a charity to ask him round one afternoon and show him a few pictures and drop all the conversational bombs you have handy without pretending anything. But the luck will be all on his side, he says very little, especially at first, and you might find him not interesting, so don't do it unless you feel like doing nothing one day. Joyce does like him however, and I'm genuinely fond of him tho' he's maddeningly young.

After the visit, McGreevy wrote to Yeats again: 'Beckett wrote me about his visit to you. I'm glad you liked him. He was completely staggered by the pictures and though he has met many people through me he dismissed them all in his letter in the remark "and to think I owe meeting Jack Yeats and Joyce to you!"' In February 1935, Yeats, alert to Beckett's solitary habits, wrote to McGreevy: 'I tried to get Beckett on the phone one day but he was away. I wanted to arrange a day for him to come here – when there wouldn't be other visitors as he doesn't so much like having them about.' Three months later, Beckett wrote to McGreevy from Dublin:

Yesterday afternoon I had Jack Yeats all to myself . . . from 3 to past 6, and saw some quite new pictures. He seems to be having a freer period. The one in the Academy – 'Low Tide' – bought by Meredith for the Municipal is overwhelming . . . In the end we went out, down to Charlemont House [the Municipal Gallery] to find out about Sunday opening, & then to Jury's for a drink. He parted as usual with an offer to buy me a Herald. I hope to see him again before I leave, but do not expect ever to have him like that again.

Early the following year Beckett saw the picture *Morning* in Yeats's studio; he wanted to buy it, despite his general lack of funds. 'It's a long time since I saw a picture I wanted so much,' he wrote to McGreevy. In May 1936 he told McGreevy that Yeats had 'brought up the subject of the picture . . . I since borrowed £10 which he accepted as a first instalment, the remaining £20 to follow God knows when, & have now got the picture. Mother & Frank [Beckett's brother] can't resist it much . . . It is nice to have Morning on one's wall that is always morning, and a setting out without the coming home.' Later both men wrote separately to McGreevy to say that they had bumped into one another at a donkey show in Dublin where Beckett had taken his mother, who was, he reported, 'the picture of misery'. Yeats was making sketches for a painting.

In the early part of his essay on Yeats, which was finally published in 1945, McGreevy

touched on something that was crucial to Beckett in his twenties and thirties as he sought to get Ireland out of his system, or tried to find a way of including it in the work he would do without any reference to its mythology, its history, the amusing oddness of its people or the so-called lilt of its language. ‘Jack Yeats’s people,’ McGreevy wrote,

are frequently depicted in the pursuit of pleasure, at the circus or music-hall, at race meetings, or simply in conversation with each other. Yet often the expression on their faces suggests restraint, thoughtfulness, an inner discipline. Outwardly they so obviously belong to a more primitive state of society than has ever been depicted without condescension in Western European painting that their attitude to existence, their human significance, may easily be overlooked . . . the figures in his pictures are not elegant – their clothes bag about their lean bodies; they are not sensual – their faces are ascetic, thin and careworn; and their expression is thoughtful – they are bemused as much as amused.

In other words, Yeats was attempting to move beyond what McGreevy called ‘mere stereotyped inventions’. There was a melancholy and a mystery at the heart of all the movement and gaiety he depicted. He painted Irish light using colours and textures that belonged to his dreams as much as to the actual landscape or to the palette or systems of previous painters. Nothing in his paintings was idealised simply because it was Irish. He could easily, especially in the years when Beckett knew him, have been a German painter. There was a mixture in him of someone rigorous, watchful and solitary and someone fascinated by swirl, swift movement and pure excitement; his canvases were filled with theatricality and crowds, and also by reverie, by solitary figures lost in bare, windswept places, by tramps and loafers and by the high, haunted, visionary sky. Yeats personally was elusive and reticent, despite his sociability; it was said that he seldom discussed with anyone, or even generally mentioned, anything of emotional importance to him. He had other things to talk about. And this might have been useful to Beckett. Yeats also wrote experimental plays and novels, and it was he who found Beckett a publisher in London for his first novel, *Murphy*, after it had been rejected by several firms.

Like Yeats and his brother the poet, and the playwrights Shaw, Synge and O’Casey, Beckett was a Dublin Protestant. The fact that he played no part in the development of the Abbey Theatre, and did not write about Ireland directly or suffer from patriotism or indulge in nationalism, and seemed in ways deracinated, a citizen of nowhere, does not mean that Ireland, its light and its landscape, and to some extent its so-called heritage, did not form him, or have a deep effect on him. His Protestantism shows up in some lovely moments, however, such as when he bathes

at the Forty Foot in Dublin in 1936 and sees a Father McGrath, 'red all over with ingrown semen & exposure'. The footnote remarks drily: 'It is not known to which Father McGrath SB refers.' Beckett's South Dublin Unionist background emerges also in some wonderful moments, such as an attack on the police force of the Free State: 'There is no animal I loathe more profoundly than a Civic Guard, a symbol of Ireland with his official Gaelic loutish complacency & pot-walloping Schreinlichkeit.' Beckett's problem, besides his knowledge of compound German words, was that, as a literary artist, he knew that what his predecessors in Ireland had done with the island's hidden or invented personality would be of no use to him. What Jack Yeats had done had a greater influence on him than the work of any Irish writer. In 1937, he wrote to his aunt Cissie Sinclair, a kindred spirit, about Yeats's work as though he was writing about the work he himself would begin creating a decade later:

Watteau put in busts and urns, I suppose to suggest the *inorganism* of the organic – all his people are mineral in the end, without possibility of being added to or taken from, pure inorganic juxtapositions – but Jack Yeats does not even need to do that. The way he puts down a man's head & a woman's head side by side, or face to face, is terrifying, two irreducible singlenesses & the impassable immensity between. I suppose that is what gives the stillness to his pictures, as though the convention were suddenly suspended, the convention & performance of love & hate, joy & pain, giving & being given, taking & being taken. A kind of petrified insight into one's ultimate hard irreducible inorganic singleness. All handled with the dispassionate acceptance that is beyond tragedy.

In the years after Beckett met Yeats he set about finding further sources of inspiration not in literary texts or traditions but in the study of European paintings. In the decade when most of these letters were written, he was looking at paintings and writing about them with an astonishing intensity and sense of discovery.

In his interest in art, and his efforts to write a poetry filled with radiant or fragmented statement, the language unadorned, personal, sometimes obscure and strangely beautiful, he found a soulmate in Thomas McGreevy. McGreevy, born in Tarbert, County Kerry in 1893 and so 13 years older than Beckett, was an art critic and a poet. His poem 'Exile' began:

I knew if you had died that I should grieve  
Yet I found my heart wishing you were dead.

This found echoes in an untitled poem by Beckett, written first in French:

I would like my love to die  
and the rain to be falling on the graveyard

and on me walking the streets  
mourning the first and last to love me.

McGreevy had fought in the First World War, seeing active service at Ypres and the Somme, where he was wounded twice. By the time he met Beckett, he already knew Joyce and his circle in Paris and had met Eliot in London. Besides his short book on Jack Yeats and some poems, a few of them masterpieces of their kind, he wrote books on Eliot and Richard Aldington for the same series as Beckett's book on Proust, the publication of which he arranged. He later wrote a monograph on Poussin and was director of the National Gallery of Ireland from 1950 to 1963.

McGreevy flits in and out of the lives of various figures in these years. He was a friend of W.B. Yeats's wife, George, and of Joyce's wife, Nora; he corresponded with Wallace Stevens, who dedicated a poem to him. Richard Aldington called him 'a paradox of a man if ever there was one. He looked like a priest in civvies.' McGreevy chatted and gossiped a lot, knew a great deal about art and music and literature and was charming and cheerful. He disliked England, even though he retained a British passport and had no objection to actual English people. Like many before and after him, he was homosexual abroad but celibate in Ireland. (When he mentioned his sexual inclinations to a priest, he was told to kick himself every time he had such thoughts.) He was a dapper little fellow who wore a bow-tie; he managed to be Catholic and queer, patriotic and cosmopolitan all at the same time. When he lived in Paris, he often went for a walk during the day to 'make sure the world was where [he] had left it the evening before'. He lodged for a long time in London with Hester Travers Smith, the author of *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde*. In the years between Beckett's arrival in Paris in 1928, where he and McGreevy taught at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and the outbreak of the Second World War, the years in which the letters in this volume were written, McGreevy was Beckett's confidant and his closest friend.

Although Beckett was brought up in what was effectively suburban Dublin, the house was close enough to the mountains south of the city, and to the sea and the bare Wicklow mountains even further south, to make this landscape one of abiding importance to Beckett, who, like his father, was a great walker. These early letters make clear that, despite his lack of interest in Ireland or Irishness, he loved the Irish landscape. In 1932 he wrote to McGreevy about a trip to the west of Ireland with his brother Frank, describing Galway as

a grand little magic grey town full of sensitive stone and bridges and water. We . . . spent a day walking on Achill right out over the Atlantic . . . Altogether it was an unforgettable trip and much too short, through bog and mountain scenery that

was somehow far more innocent and easy and obvious than the stealthy secret variety we have here. I would like to go back to Galway and spend a little time there.

Ten days later, he described the Wicklow mountains:

I walk immeasurably & unrestrainedly, hills and dales, all day, and back with a couple of pints from the Powerscourt Arms under my Montparnasse belt through the Homer dusk. Often very moving and it helps to swamp the usual palpitations. But I disagree with you about the gardenish landscape. The lowest mountains here terrify me far more than anything I saw in Connemara or Achill.

This habit of walking would fill one of Beckett's miraculous late pieces, *Company*, in which he described his narrator walking ('Sole sound in the silence your footfalls') but also his own father's setting out on a long day's walk as his mother was giving birth:

It being a public holiday your father left the house soon after his breakfast with a flask and a package of his favourite egg sandwiches for a tramp in the mountains. There was nothing unusual in this. But on that particular morning his love of walking and wild scenery was not the only mover. But he was moved also to take himself off and out of the way by his aversion to the pains and general unpleasantness of labour and delivery. Hence the sandwiches which he relished at noon looking out to sea from the lee of a great rock on the first summit scaled. You may imagine his thoughts before and after as he strode through the gorse and heather.

Beckett seems to have had an uncomplicated relationship with his father. In April 1933 he wrote to McGreevy: 'Lovely walk this morning with Father, who grows old with a very graceful philosophy. Comparing bees & butterflies to elephants & parrots & speaking of indentures with the leveller. Barging through hedges and over the walls with the help of my shoulder, blaspheming and stopping to rest under colour of admiring the view. I'll never have any one like him.' Two months later, when his father died, Beckett wrote to McGreevy: 'He was in his sixty first year, but how much younger he seemed and was. Joking and swearing at the doctors as long as he had breath. He lay in the bed with sweet pea all over his face, making great oaths that when he got better he would never do a stroke of work. He would drive to the top of Howth and lie in the bracken and fart . . . I can't write about him, I can only walk the fields and climb the ditches after him.'

Beckett's father's late interest in not doing a stroke of work made its way with many complications and much guilt to his son. Lassitude is one of his great subjects in

these letters. In August 1930, as he worked on his book on Proust, he wrote: 'I can't do the *fucking* thing. I don't know whether to start at the end or the beginning.' In December, the book finished, he wrote to the editor in London to say that he had added nothing. 'I can't do anything here – neither read nor think nor write. So I am posting it back to you within the next day or two with practically no changes made. I must apologise for the absurdity of the entire proceeding. I expected more generous rifts in the paralysis.' The following month he wrote to McGreevy: 'You know I can't write at all. The simplest sentence is a torture.' The following year he wrote to McGreevy again from London: 'If I could work up some pretext for writing a poem, short-story, or anything at all, I would be all right. I suppose I am all right. But I get frightened sometimes at the idea that the itch to write is cured. I suppose it's the fornicating place & its fornicating weather.' Two weeks later, nothing had changed: 'I don't believe I could put a dozen words together on any subject whatsoever.' A year later, back in Ireland, there was still no change. 'I find it more and more difficult to write and I think I write worse and worse in consequence.' In 1934 he wrote to his cousin: 'I can't do any work, no more than a man can pick his snout and thread a needle at the same time. So I've nearly given up trying.' As late as 1939 he was writing to McGreevy: 'I drowse through the days & do nothing. I try now & then to get started, but it comes to nothing. If it is to be like that, let it be like that.'

In 1936 Beckett wrote from Hamburg to Mary Manning in further despair: 'My next work shall be on rice paper wound about a spool, with a perforated line every six inches and on sale in Boots. The length of each chapter will be carefully calculated to suit with the average free motion. And with every copy a free sample of some laxative to promote sales. The Beckett Bowel Books, Jesus in farto.' (He referred to his Proust book as 'my Proust turd'.) His interest in the toilet might have been awakened by what he described to Arland Ussher early in 1936 as 'a sebaceous cyst in my anus which happily a fart swept away before it became operable'.

His problem in these years was very simple and not easy to solve: it was how to live, what to do, and who to be. He was clever, well-educated, he spoke French and Italian fluently; his German was very good. But his first book of stories had not sold and he could not find a publisher for his novel. He had no idea how he would earn a living, and he was also deeply unhappy. He was not always the saintly figure, full of shy politeness and withdrawn courtesy, that he subsequently became. His loathing for the poet Austin Clarke emerges freely in these letters. He openly satirised him in his novel *Murphy* as Austin Ticklepenny and attacked his work in an essay for the *Bookman* in 1934. Nor was he known for his personal courtesy in the years before he left Dublin. When one night the playwright Denis Johnston asked him for a lift to Foxrock, where they both lived, Beckett replied simply: 'No.'

His famous despair is not always on display here, though there are hints of it. In a letter to his cousin in 1934, he wrote about the coming of spring:

The strange, gentle pleasures I feel at the approach of spring are impossible of expression, and if that is a sentence inviting ridicule, so much the worse for me. I have positively never watched it coming with so much impatience and so much relief. And I think of it as a victory over darkness, nightmares, sweats, panic and madness, and of the crocuses and daffodils as the promise of a life at least bearable, once enjoyed but in a past so remote that all trace, even remembrance of it, had been almost lost.

At times in these letters, it is easy to see him slowly and laboriously becoming the writer and the man he later was; at other times, it is clear that he could have become someone else. In 1933, he wrote to McGreevy about the possibility of a career in advertising ('It has been in my mind for a long time'). In 1936, when he was 30, he thought of training to be a commercial pilot ('I hope I am not too old to take it up seriously'). He also thought of training to be a film-maker and sent a letter to Eisenstein that same year asking to be admitted to the Moscow State School of Cinematography. He also applied to be a lecturer in Italian at the University of Cape Town. In the end, in a splendid ruse, he decided to be an art critic and convinced his mother that she should pay for a lengthy stay in Germany so that he could look at pictures.

His letters to McGreevy about paintings are serious and well-informed. He writes about paintings in these letters better than he writes about anything else, including his own life. There is a sense of his complex personality – on the one hand, his sternness of judgment, on the other, his ability to take pleasure in what he saw – in the way he goes into exacting detail about the paintings he was looking at, including work in the National Gallery of Ireland, which was around the corner from the office in Clare Street where the family quantity surveying business was run. In December 1931, he took in Perugino's *Pietà*, newly acquired by the gallery. 'It's buried behind a formidable barrage of shining glass, so that one is obliged to take cognisance of it progressively, square inch by square inch. It's all messed up by restorers,' he wrote, 'but the Xist and the women are lovely. A clean-shaven, potent Xist, and a passion of tears for the waste . . . Rottenly hung in rotten light behind this thick shop window . . . a lovely cheery Xist full of sperm, & the woman touching his thighs and mourning his jewels.' In his story 'Love and Lethe' in *More Pricks than Kicks*, Ruby Tough from Irishtown is likened to the Mary Magdalene in this picture: 'Those who are in the least curious to know what she looked like at the time in which we have chosen to cull her we venture to refer to the Magdalene in the Perugino *Pietà* in the National

Gallery of Dublin, always bearing in mind that the hair of our heroine is black and not ginger.’ The following year he wrote: ‘I seem to spend a lot of time in the National Gallery, looking at the Poussin *Entombment* and coming stealthily down the stairs into the charming toy brightness of the German room to the Brueghels and the Masters of Tired Eyes and Silver Windows. The young woman of Rembrandt is splendid.’ In his story ‘Ding-Dong’, he described the face of the pedlar woman: ‘Yet like tormented faces that he had seen, like the face in the National Gallery in Merrion Square by the Master of Tired Eyes, it seemed to have come a long way and subtend an infinitely narrow angle of affliction, as eyes focus a star. The features were null, only luminous, impassive and secure, petrified in radiance.’

His letters from Germany, too, are filled with the names of paintings and a sense of his fierce concentration on the task in hand. Sometimes, the descriptions and lists go on for pages, and they are followed in this edition by detailed and informative footnotes, which locate each painting and take each remark Beckett made about the paintings with all due seriousness. Although he wrote mainly from Germany about paintings he saw and his own melancholy, he didn’t ignore what was happening around him. From Hamburg he wrote to Mary Manning in 1936: ‘All the lavatory men say Heil Hitler. The best pictures are in the cellar.’ Soon afterwards, he wrote to McGreevy: ‘I have met a lot of friendly people here, mostly painters . . . They are all more or less suppressed, i.e. cannot exhibit publicly and dare sell only with precaution. The group was broken up in 1933, their library confiscated.’ In January 1937 he noted that Thomas Mann’s citizenship had been rescinded. The following month he wrote about an art historian he had met. ‘He was removed from his post in the Real Gymnasium here at the Gallery in 1933, like all the others of his kidney.’ While this might seem like nonchalance, it should be placed beside Beckett’s general refusal to write letters filled with news of the day and his subsequent determination to stay in France once war broke out and become involved in the Resistance.

It is hard not to underline the passages where Beckett took pleasure in the image of the *Pietà*, in pictures of the tearful mother and her headstrong son who was lying finally in her lap, hers at last. Beckett was the sort of young man who was made to break his poor mother’s heart. Home from Paris and then London and then Germany and feeling very sorry for himself, he must have been an awful nuisance lounging around the house, or in bed with hangovers – he was drinking a lot – or other unnameable complaints. His mother was neurotic enough in any case, and sad, often depressed, after the death of her husband. Beckett’s brother Frank, who was as solid as his father, took over the family business, but he was now on the point of getting married. For Beckett’s mother, her wayward son became the focus of her worry.

There is an interesting letter written from London in 1935 to McGreevy which deals with Beckett's reason for undergoing psychoanalysis in London. He went three times a week. 'For years,' he wrote,

I was unhappy, consciously & deliberately ever since I left school & went into TCD, so that I isolated myself more & more, undertook less & less & lent myself to a crescendo of disparagement of others & myself . . . 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 . . . It was with a specific fear & a specific complaint that I went to Geoffrey [Thompson, a shrink], then to Bion [Wilfred, also a shrink] to learn that the 'specific fear & complaint' was the least important symptom of a diseased condition that began in a time which I could not remember, in my 'pre-history'.

In other words, it was all about his mother.

In October 1937, when his mother had left him alone (with a cook, of course) in the family house, he wrote a letter marvelling

at the pleasantness of Cooldrinagh without her. And I could not wish her anything better than to feel the same when I am away. But I don't wish her anything at all, neither good nor ill. I am what her savage loving has made me, and it is good that one of us should accept that finally . . . I simply don't want to see her or write to her or hear from her . . . Which I suppose all boils down to saying what a bad son I am. Then Amen. It is a title for me of as little honour as infamy. Like describing a tree as a bad shadow.

In Paris in January the following year, when he was recovering from being stabbed in a serious assault, he wrote to McGreevy about a visit by his mother and brother. 'Hope you met Mother & Frank in London. He was relieved to be getting back, and she sorry. I felt great gusts of affection & esteem & compassion for her when she was over. What a relationship!' In May, when he heard that she had burned her hands badly, he wrote: 'Of course she kept it from me. I feel sorry for her often to the point of tears. That is the part that was not analysed away, I suppose.' The following month he wrote: 'As you can imagine I am not anxious to go to Ireland, but as long as mother lives I shall go every year.'

Beckett's mother disapproved of her in-laws, the Sinclairs, as much as she would have disapproved of the Joyces, had she heard much about them. Beckett, however, was closely involved with both families: they offered him a way out of his own family; they opened paths for him towards certain freedoms which he sought, though they created problems for him along the way. The Becketts had a lovely habit, over the

generations, of producing one or two really sensible members of the family, such as Beckett's father and his brother, who never put a foot astray, and then various complex figures, such as Beckett's aunt Cissie and Beckett himself and indeed his first cousin John Beckett, whose serious, intelligent and eccentrically minimalist style of conducting Bach cantatas in Dublin, and wonderfully laconic and informative introductions, were, for me, one of the very great pleasures of the city in the 1970s.

Cissie Sinclair was Beckett's father's only sister. She had studied art in Paris with Estella Solomons and Beatrice Elvery, later Lady Glenavy, both artists who regularly showed in the Dublin galleries. Cissie married Boss Sinclair, a Dublin antiques dealer and friend of the painter William Orpen; in the early 1920s the Sinclairs moved to Germany, where they dealt in contemporary German art, as well as antiques. Beckett often visited them there and became emotionally involved with their daughter, his first cousin Peggy, who died in 1933 of tuberculosis aged 22. Her ghost is all over his collection of stories *More Pricks than Kicks*, and there are stray references to her throughout his work. (And there are elements of Cissie's last years, when she was confined to a wheelchair and watched the world through a telescope, in Beckett's play *Endgame*.) When Hitler rose to power, making life for Jewish art dealers impossible, the Sinclairs returned to Dublin.

They were serious art collectors and interested in music and literature. Both Boss and his son Morris played the violin. Their priorities were rather different from the stolid, dull ones which dominated Beckett's own household. They were bohemians. They gave parties at which, as Anthony Cronin noted in his biography of Beckett, 'people sat on the floor and afterwards quite possibly slept on it.' No one among the Sinclairs minded Beckett staying in bed all morning and having no worldly ambitions and many vague and high-toned dreams.

Beckett could write to them easily about art and music. There is a marvellous letter from London in 1934 to Peggy's brother Morris, written in French (and translated here by George Craig), in which Beckett describes a concert he went to:

I have had to put up with a huge composition by [Bach], humorously entitled: *Suite for Orchestra*, conducted by the ignoble Furtwängler, who, it appears, has had the better part of his nudity covered with interwoven swastikas. He has the charming modesty of letting himself be led by his brass-players, who blow as only beer-drinkers can, while making with his left hand very daring gestures towards his first violins, who fortunately paid not the least attention to them, and swinging the soft fleshiness of his posterior as if he longed to go to the lavatory. Hardly had I recovered from this assault when he had the impertinence to launch into Schumann's Fourth Symphony, which is less like a symphony than like an

overture begun by Lehar, completed by Goering, and revised by Johnny Doyle (if not his dog).

A small rift with the family arose after Beckett published the story 'The Smeraldina's Billet Doux', in which he used a letter from Peggy Sinclair just a year after her death. In a letter to Morris, Beckett wrote: 'Glad to hear that Boss bears me no ill-will. But that I knew beforehand.' James Knowlson writes in his biography: 'His uncle seems to have understood better than his aunt the needs of fiction and not been too cross. As for Cissie, she was very upset at first. But she quickly forgave him, after he wrote a letter pleading with her to see him during his summer trip home. The reconciliation was so successful that, after meeting her during the summer, he could write to McGreevy that all was well "with only a minimum of constraint with Smeraldina's Ma"'. In her biography, Deirdre Bair wrote: 'Yet he seems to have had little remorse for deeds such as this, complaining only of the loss of visiting privileges, as if someone else, a complete stranger, had committed the transgression.'

A problem arises in this edition with the sources for this information. Beckett insisted that only letters 'having bearing on my work' needed to be published after his death. This has been interpreted generously by the editors. Edward Beckett, Beckett's nephew, who represents the estate, is cited in the introduction as 'a working partner in the preparation of this edition'. The editors acknowledge that 'he has responded generously where there was disagreement over what counts as "having bearing on the work"'. But they also make clear that while they followed a policy of including as much as possible, there were disagreements between them and the estate. 'To take one example,' they write, 'it is the editors' view that Beckett's frequent, at times almost obsessive, discussion of his health problems – his feet, his heart palpitations, his boils and cysts – is of direct relevance to the work; with this the Estate of Samuel Beckett has disagreed.' The editors make clear that while there are 'some ellipses' in the letters as published, they have 'tried to limit these'.

Calling Cissie Sinclair, whom Beckett dearly loved, 'Smeraldina's Ma', just a year after the death of her daughter Peggy, the model for Smeraldina, in a letter to McGreevy may not improve Beckett's status among right-thinking people. But for the rest of us, who are interested in his work, it is not merely of prurient interest, though it is that as well. It is of importance how Beckett dealt with people in his family who objected to real people being used as models for characters. In the case of Beckett, whose relationship with the world of 'real people' would become increasingly strained as he produced his masterpieces after the war, this early use of his dead cousin, and his own seeming nonchalant response when problems arose, has 'bearing on the work', whether his estate likes it or not.

Bair, in her footnotes, cites 'the papers of Thomas McGreevy' for her information on the strain between Beckett and the Sinclairs over the use of Peggy's letter. Knowlson cites two different letters to McGreevy written in August 1934, only one of which is included in this edition. The one here is printed with three ellipses, and there is no use of the term 'Smeraldina's Ma' to describe Cissie Sinclair. The first paragraph reads: 'My dear Tom, Your letter this morning. Somehow things at home seem to be simpler, I seem to have grown indifferent to the atmosphere of coffee-stall emotions [ . . . ] But people's feelings don't seem to matter, one is nice ad lib. to all & sundry, offender & offended, with a basso profundo of privacy that never deserts one. It is only now I begin to realise what the analysis has done for me.' The next paragraph also begins with '[ . . . ]', and another '[ . . . ]' appears at its end. The problem for the reader, in a book so filled with detailed and informative footnotes, is that in this case there is no footnote, no clue given as to who might be offender or the offended here.

In May 1937, after the death of Boss Sinclair, Beckett wrote to McGreevy: 'I suppose you have read about the action for libel that Harry [Boss Sinclair's twin brother] is taking against [Oliver St John] Gogarty. I am in it up to the neck. And gladly in so far as Boss wanted it done, having seen the offending passage some weeks before his death.' Gogarty had written an autobiography, *As I Was Going Down Sackville Street*, and included a passage about

an old usurer who had eyes like a pair of periwinkles on which somebody had been experimenting with a pin, and a nose like a shrunken tomato, one side of which swung independently of the other. The older he grew the more he pursued the immature, and enticed little girls into his office. This was bad enough, but he had grandsons, and these directed the steps of their youth to follow in grandfather's footsteps, with more zeal than discrimination.

There were also references to 'the twin grandchildren of the ancient Chicken Butcher' and to an antique dealer called Willie (William was Boss's original name). In his statement of claim, Harry Sinclair accepted that his grandfather had in fact enticed little girls into the back room of his premises and interfered with them sexually, but denied that he and his brother had followed in their grandfather's footsteps, as it were, in this matter. He insisted that he and his brother were easily identifiable and were clearly libelled.

Beckett came back from Paris to give evidence that he recognised the Sinclairs as the subject of Gogarty's libel. Earlier he had written to McGreevy: 'All kinds of dirt will be raked up & I suppose they will try & discredit me as author of the *Pricks*.' He was right. The barrister for the defence read out a passage from *More Pricks than Kicks*, which had been banned in Ireland, that referred to Jesus's 'interference in the affairs

of his boy-friend Lazarus'. He also made mention of *Whoroscope*, a book of poems, and forced Beckett to correct his deliberate mispronunciation of the name Proust and admit that he wasn't a Christian, a Jew or an atheist, alienating the jury as much by his French accent as by his lack of religion or his non-religion. In the summing up, the barrister referred to Beckett as 'a bawd and a blasphemer' and this was used the next day as a column subheading in the *Irish Times*. In his summing-up the judge said that he himself would not put much faith in the evidence of 'the witness Beckett'.

In his biography Knowlson writes: 'Although he rarely discussed the case in his correspondence with friends, his remarks about Ireland became more and more vituperative after his return to Paris.' It is easy to imagine his mother's view on the matter as she read about the trial daily in the *Irish Times*. Beckett did not stay with her when he returned to give evidence. When the trial was over, he went to see his brother, who advised him to go back to Paris without seeing her. Beckett did so. His mother, in retaliation, never spoke to the Sinclairs again.

Although Beckett wrote many letters – 15,000 have been found and transcribed by the editors, and there may be more – he was not a great letter-writer. We are lucky that he put his real energies into his work. And yet there are passages and entire letters in this volume which throw significant light on the development of his thinking about language and prose, as much as about art and music. The most interesting is his letter to Axel Kaun from Dublin, written in 1937 in German:

It is indeed getting more and more difficult, even pointless, for me to write in formal English. And more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. Grammar and style! To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentleman. A mask . . . Of course, for the time being, one makes do with little. At first, it can only be a matter of somehow inventing a method of verbally demonstrating this scornful attitude vis-à-vis the word. In this dissonance of instrument and usage perhaps one will already be able to sense a whispering of the end-music or of the silence underlying all.

He went on to say: 'In my opinion, the most recent work of Joyce had nothing at all to do with such a programme.' In these years, however, what Joyce was doing continued to fascinate him; he was nourished by his association and friendship with Joyce and his reading of Joyce's work. Despite his admiration for Shem, as he often calls him in these letters, and indeed his affection for him, the relationship was not simple, not least perhaps because of the class difference between them as Irishmen.

Just before Christmas 1937 he wrote to McGreevy about working on the proofs of *Finnegans Wake*: 'Joyce paid me 250 fr. for about 15 hrs work on his proofs. That is needless to say only for your ear. He then supplemented it with an old overcoat and 5 ties! I did not refuse. It is so much simpler to be hurt than to hurt.' It is hard to know what Joyce was thinking of. And the idea that a notorious scrounger of Irish Catholic origin, great writer or not, was offering acts of charity to Beckett in Paris would not have brought cheer to May Beckett in her large, posh house in Foxrock.

Beckett was invited to dine with the Joyces on Christmas night 1937. Joyce wanted a collection of critical essays on his work in progress to appear in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and asked Beckett to do one of them. Beckett wrote to McGreevy: 'I have done nothing more with the NRF article and feel like dropping it. Certainly there will be no question of prolegomena or epilegomena when the work [*Finnegans Wake*] comes out in book form. And if that means a break, then let there be a break. At least this time it won't be about their daughter, who by the way as far as I can learn gets deeper & deeper into the misery & less & less likely ever to emerge.' Soon, however, he was writing in a different mood about Joyce. On 5 January 1938: 'He was sublime last night, deprecating with the utmost conviction his lack of talent. I don't feel the danger of the association any more. He is just a very lovable human being.' After the stabbing, he wrote to McGreevy from hospital: 'The Joyces have been extraordinarily kind, bringing me round everything from a heating lamp to a custard pudding.' When he arrived home, he found 'an immense bunch of Parma violets from Joyces'.

There is very little about Beckett's relationship with Lucia Joyce, James Joyce's daughter, in these letters, although the short biography of Lucia at the back of the book is helpful. ('Lucia Joyce, who is widely considered to be the model for the Syra-Cusa in SB's *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, became increasingly infatuated with SB, but in May 1930 SB made it clear that he did not reciprocate her interest. This caused a temporary falling-out with the Joyces.') When Beckett and Lucia met in London in 1935, Beckett wrote to McGreevy: 'The Lucia ember flared up & fizzled out. But more of that viva voce.' In early 1938 Beckett reported that Joyce was very worried about Lucia; the footnote informs us that she was 'in treatment for mental illness'. In April 1939 he wrote: 'I see the Joyces now & then. I go every week to Ivry to visit Lucia, who I think gets slowly worse. She sees nobody but her father & myself.'

This edition of letters has been annotated with knowledge and care, using vast research. It will, for the most part, please admirers of Beckett's art and satisfy those who respect his wishes that only letters which have bearing on his work should appear. There is no spilling the beans, or mad gossip; it was not his style. There is no

detailed account of what it was like to be a witness in the Gogarty libel action. Nor is there much fanfare when Beckett meets Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, with whom he was to live for almost half a century and with whom he would spend the war years in France, the years immediately after this first volume of letters. In April 1939 Beckett wrote to McGreevy with his typical dry, stoical wisdom: ‘There is a French girl also whom I am fond of, dispassionately, and who is very good to me. The hand will not be overbid. As we both know that it will come to an end there is no knowing how long it may last.’

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\* McGreevy was McGreevy until 1943; then he became MacGreevy.

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**Colm Tóibín**’s novels include *The South*, *The Master* and, most recently, *Brooklyn*.