

Contemporary Fiction and Christianity is concerned more with fiction's representation of and relationship with Christianity than with an analysis of the materiality of the culture that has brought us to this point. In this regard, Tate's analysis falls somewhat short of dealing with the politics of these novels, in favour of teasing out their theological semiotics. Almost all of the works under examination here are either British or American. Allowing that Tate is legitimately dealing only with Anglophone fiction, there could possibly have been room for a discussion of Catholicism in contemporary Irish writing, for example, or the collision of Christianity with native cultures in other post-colonial societies (Salman Rushdie and Yann Martel get fleeting mentions only). Women writers, and their perspective on what is, after all, a patriarchal religion, are notably few. These criticisms aside, this is a timely, astute and objective work in an area that has many potential pitfalls. In spite of claims that religion has ceased to have epistemological relevance in Western culture, Tate has traced with admirable sensitivity and a calm perspective the strong influence that Christianity still maintains in the imagination of the contemporary novelist.

Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (eds) 2009. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 1, 1929–1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Onno Kusters
Utrecht University, the Netherlands

On 26 July 1936, Samuel Beckett wrote to Thomas McGreevy: "I do not feel like spending the rest of my life writing books that no one will read. It is not as though I wanted to write them" (363). Seldom has the author expressed his now famous adage about artistic expression in a more personal way. ("The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express", in "Tal Coat", *Disjecta*, p. 139) It is one of the great feats of this first volume of Beckett's letters: we see the artist as a young *man*, trying to find out what he wants to do (which is not necessarily writing; at one point he suggests that it would make more sense to become a commercial pilot – provided he's not "too old to take it up seriously, nor to stupid about machines to qualify"), without abstracting his quest into the profound one-liners that he worked so hard on to perfect in later years. We also get to know Beckett's literary likes and dislikes, for instance, in nicely disrespectful epistolary outbursts. "I have been reading wildly all over the place. Goethe's *Iphigenia* & then Racine to remove the taste" (324); D.H. Lawrence offers merely a "tedious kindling of damp" (217-18). But there is much more to relish in this beautifully produced tome.

This edition of the first volume of Samuel Beckett's *Letters*, covering the years 1929-1940, has been hailed all-round as a major achievement, and a treasure for scholars and non-academic lovers of Beckett's writing alike. "The editorial work behind this project has been immense in scale. Every book that Beckett mentions, every painting, every piece of music is tracked down and accounted for. His movements are traced from week to week. [...] When he writes in a foreign language, we are given both the original and an English translation (save for some French verse that is left untranslated – a puzzling editorial decision)" (J.M. Coetzee). Seamus Heaney's "most bracing read" of 2009 was also the collection, "a portrait of the Dubliner as a young European with a hard gemlike gift for language, learning and mockery." Gabriel Josipovici, finally, argues that what needs to be done now is "the other three volumes

to appear as quickly as possible and then for CUP to issue a selection of the most interesting letters, with absolutely minimum annotation, in a one-volume paperback. Because, be in no doubt about it, if *Godot* and *Molloy* lit up the dreary landscape of writing in the immediate post-war era, these letters are set to do same for the new century". More reviews can be viewed on Cambridge UP's website.

The scale of the project is nicely illustrated by the Contents page, which offers, apart from the letters themselves (669 pages, including extensive notes) the following entries: a List of illustrations; a General introduction; the French translator's preface (with a most interesting passage on the adequate translation of the French swearwords); the German translator's preface; Editorial procedures; Acknowledgements; Permissions; a List of abbreviations; an Introduction to Volume I; an Appendix; Profiles; a Bibliography of works cited; an Index of recipients⁵ and, finally, a General Index. In all, this edition, winner of the Choice Outstanding Academic Title 2009, is a major event in the history of publishing ego-documents. Beckett's stipulation that only passages from letters "having bearing on my work" could be published will have caused problems, but as the author himself assured editor Martha Fehsenfeld, "I am relieved at the thought of its being in such devoted and capable hands as yours" (xiv). The stipulation itself provided grounds for discussion, as we can easily image, and a vivid account of the difficulties arising from the various interpretations of it are part of the General introduction. And so is an account of "Locating and transcribing the letters", of "The principles of selection (which were "formed and tested, then re-formed, re-tested, and re-applied", xxi); of the languages Beckett wrote in; the editorial principles; the forms of annotation; a justification of the four volumes and, how Beckettian, an account of the Lacunae.

One example from the introduction of the difficulties encountered must suffice here: the editors devote a whole paragraph to the quality of the letters and the legibility of Beckett's handwriting. "One manuscript specialist proffered what was for the editors the less-than-encouraging opinion that Beckett had the worst handwriting of any twentieth-century author. The letters themselves provide ironic commentary: 'Don't suppose you can read this but can't face the machine [his typewriter]'" (xii).

Among the recipients of the letters are the Russian director Sergei Eisenstein (whom the young Beckett asks "to be considered for admission to the Moscow State School of Cinematography", 317), the Dutch painter and life-long friend of Beckett Bram van Velde, and of course Axel Kaun, recipient of the "German letter" published in *Disjecta* (1983). The letter famously sets out to explain the author's attitude to language and writing, or more in particular, to the English language and writing in it, telling Kaun that "[i]t 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" (519). For James Joyce's work Beckett comes up with the nicely profitable term "apotheosis of the word", and for his own project the "very desirable literature of the non-word" (520).⁶

⁵ One of the few minor errors there: the third letter to Joyce in the collection appears on p. 675, not 673 (in a footnote to his review, Coetzee lists two similarly minor errors – the lack of faults detected by reviewers is indicative of the impressive quality of the edition).

⁶ Another editorial error here: Kaun's letter is indexed as p. 683; the German original starts, in fact, on p. 512.

At least two other recipients must be mentioned here: the Irish poet Thomas McGreevy and James Joyce. Introduced to McGreevy by his former professor at Trinity College Dublin, Thomas Rudmose-Brown, Beckett took over from McGreevy as Lecteur d'Anglais at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris in November 1928. It was to prove a turning point in Beckett's career. McGreevy introduced Beckett to Joyce, Joyce suggested a topic for his young compatriot's contribution to *Our Exagmination*, the early one-volume exegesis of *Work in Progress*, and the rest is history. The largest number of letters in this volume is to McGreevy, whom, when artistically constipated, so to speak, Beckett inundates with plastic references to the body as the source and target of all art. As the editors explain in the introduction to the volume, "[i]f art hits, and must hit, the body, this is because it must emerge from the body to begin with, if it is to be necessary" (xciv). An astounding range of bodily-linguistic items crop up in a great number of letters to McGreevy: Beckett's poems are blessed as "a double-yoked orgasm in months of aspermetic nights & days" (87); Jacob Bronowski, editor of *The European Caravan* is said to be using "three turds from my central lavatory. But alas not the twice round and pointed ones" (42-43). I read the letters and wept— with laughter, mostly, but also with a new sense of the importance of the physical, the bodily in the work of an artist who is often seen as the highest-falutin' of them all. As the editors rightly argue, "[t]he scatology may contain an undergraduate's jocularly, but that it is no mere joke, still less any mere trope, is clear even without recourse to Beckett's *oeuvre*" (xcv). Apart from this, we find brilliant, obstinate, at times icy writing to enjoy in many of the letters. When confronted by an unfavourable review of his poems by Michael Roberts, Beckett wrote to his friend the poet, editor and translator George Reavey: "Geheimrat Roberts is sublime. Would he care to appoint a time do you think for me to bend over. Poets' bottoms are so very much the same" (322).

The three letters from Beckett to Joyce included in this volume are a bit of a disappointment. They offer information and express gratitude in polite phrases that fail to reveal much about the two men's personal relationship. The relatively muted nature of these epistles is, obviously, the result of Beckett's stipulation regarding personal letters. Apart from anything else, there was a great deal of tension between Joyce and Beckett in the early 1930s, not least because of Lucia Joyce's infatuation with the young writer, which, in the end, he failed to reciprocate. He was, he had to admit, mostly interested in her father. As we know, Lucia did become part of Beckett's life (he visited her in the mental asylum in Northampton in the 1950s), but also of his oeuvre: she is portrayed as the Syra-Cusa in Beckett's first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (written from 1932; published posthumously in 1992).⁷ Probably all of Beckett's letters to Lucia have been destroyed by the Joyce estate and those that will have been exchanged on the subject of Lucia between Beckett and Joyce will have been excluded from this collection on the grounds of Beckett's stipulation. Nonetheless, it feels that a significant part of the private life "only having bearing on my work" is missing here. Other than that, this is one of the greatest collections of letters from a writer I have had the honour to peruse.

References

Beckett, Samuel, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (Calder 1963).

⁷ "Not wishing too upset Joyce anymore than he had already done by rejecting Lucia, Beckett would presumably have tried to garb the character based on her in a modest, fairly opaque cloak of anonymity" (Knowlson 151).

The European English Messenger, 21.2 (2012)

Coetzee, J.M., "The Making of Samuel Beckett", *The New York Review of Books*, April 30, 2009.

Heaney, Seamus, in "Books of the Year 2009", *TLS*, November 25, 2009.

Josipovici, Gabriel, "Letters from Beckett", *TLS*, March 11, 2009. Knowlson, James, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (Bloomsbury 1996).

Jopi Nyman, 2009. *Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Elena Voj
Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania

It has become increasingly difficult to talk about post-colonial literature without the danger of swimming in apparently the same waters more than twice; beyond all the limitations that a certain theoretical framework imposes on the object (and the subject) of study, Jopi Nyman's work is the result of well-balanced critical discourse and much labour invested in a project supported by the Academy of Finland.

The focus of Nyman's interest rests on questions of diasporic identity, on mobility as the dynamics involved in the process of identity (re)construction, and other derivatives at hand when analysing contemporary literature with a post-colonial critical eye. A mobile study in itself, the book retraces the contours of both black British contemporary writing and ethnic American contemporary novels while at the same time clearly pinpointing varieties of diasporic instances on a virtual map of today's diasporic fiction. It is mobile not only because it shifts between thirteen different literary works that are relevant for the topic in discussion, but also because it does it with a care for textual, narrative subtleties.

Interestingly enough, Nyman reminds us, the original meaning of *diaspora* is that of "scattering", a process by which identity is not only deconstructed, but also reconstructed, or, to turn to Deleuze and Guattari, it plays a part in a larger process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Caught in the interplay between belonging and not belonging somewhere, identity searches for the frequently celebrated *Third Space of enunciation* that is so widely appealed to by Nyman in his address to Homi K. Bhabha's ground work. Besides the extensive use of compulsory metalinguistic tools whose inventory include notions such as *home, homeland, nation, community, exile or history*, the study becomes even more interesting for its more complex explorations around issues such as *globalized modernity* (which, in Nyman's reading, manages to successfully redefine cultures not only throughout their "international relations", but also through the "productive communicative processes" involved in the dynamics of cultural exchange and negotiation), *intercultural flows* (a rediscussion of Arjun Appadurai's *global flows* of people, money, machinery, images and ideas in their spatial metaphor transposition as imagined landscapes) or the more familiar *homing desire*.

The analysis of various authors dealing with the depiction of diasporic existence rests (to some extent) on a dichotomic logic of alternating exclusion or agreement. Nyman clearly and cleverly marks the difference between *diaspora* and *exile* (the first more characteristic of contemporary post-colonial fiction, whereas the second more appropriate for the European or American modernisms and their taste for a nostalgic and sometimes mythical reconstruction of home and homeland from the necessary yet sufficient geographic and aesthetic distance) or *exile* and *refugee* (the question of creativity holding an important part in the staging of the exile, while the refugee accepts its threefold liminality as physical, symbolic and spatial). If