Corresponding with Beckett

A London Beckett Seminar conference - Institute of English Studies
School of Advanced Study - University of London – 1 & 2 June 2018

Title: “Corresponding with Beckett in French”

Author: Jean-Michel GOUVARD, Professor of French Literature at the University Bordeaux-Montaigne, France.

1.

Corresponding with Beckett
A London Beckett Seminar Conference
Institute of English Studies - School of Advanced Study - University of London
1 & 2 June 2018

“Corresponding with Beckett in French”
by
Jean-Michel GOUVARD

jean-michel.gouvard@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr
The Letters of Samuel Beckett, edited between 2009 (twenty o nine) and 2016 (twenty sixteen) by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck, at the Cambridge University Press…
The Ediths Gallimard, 2014-2018

…have been translated in French by André Topia, for the first two books, and Gérard Kahn, for the two last ones, and published by the Editions Gallimard, from May 2014 (twenty fourteen) to last April, the 26th (twenty sixth), date of publication of the fourth and last book. The name of the French publisher was a surprise, because, as you know,…
…all Beckett’s works have been published in France by the Editions de Minuit, the most notorious avant-garde publisher, at least from the fifties to the seventies.

In this paper, I’ll show that such a choice is not without consequences on the reception of the letters, and on the image it gives, in France, of Samuel Beckett.

But, first, I’ll try to understand why Irène Lindon, the current thinking head of the Editions de Minuit, hasn’t published the letters of Samuel Beckett, although she’s the sole legatee of the Beckett estate, for the French market.
Her official answer is well-known. It has been published in May 2014 (twenty fourteen) by Marianne, a left wing and also a little bit populist magazine, at the end of a review of the second book of letters,…
…which has been published at that time under the French title *Les Années Godot* / “The Godot years”, the reference to *Godot* being a commercial strategy to catch readers’ interest – and to trigger a buying impulse.
7.

Alain Dreyfus, the book reviewer, founded “étrange”, weird – as we did –, that the Editions de Minuit haven’t published the letters, and he asked Irène Lindon why. In answer, she sent a “communiqué”, in which she said:


Irène Lindon, Marianne, 16 mai 2014

https://www.marianne.net/culture/la-corrrespondance-inedite-de-beckett-philes-belles-lettres
"In 1968, Samuel Beckett wrote to Jérôme Lindon: ‘I’m counting on you, as my literary legatee, to oppose any publication of my letters, in whatever form it takes.’ [...] In 1989, after the death of Samuel Beckett, Jérôme Lindon argued with the editors of the Cambridge University Press, to enforce Beckett’s final will. His efforts were pointless: in April 2001, after the death of Jérôme Lindon, the publisher no longer took account of Samuel Beckett’s final will and Jérôme Lindon’s work. That’s why the Editions de Minuit have not published the letters of Samuel Beckett.”

Irène Lindon, Marianne, 16 mai 2014 (translation mine)

"In 1968 (nineteen sixty eight), Samuel Beckett wrote to Jérôme Lindon: ‘I’m counting on you, as my literary legatee, to oppose any publication of my letters, in whatever form it takes.’ [...] In 1989 (nineteen eighty nine), after the death of Samuel Beckett, Jérôme Lindon argued with the editors of the Cambridge University Press, to enforce Beckett’s final will. His efforts were pointless: in April 2001 (two thousand one), after the death of Jérôme Lindon, the publisher no longer took account of Samuel Beckett’s final will and Jérôme Lindon’s work. That’s why the Editions de Minuit haven’t published the letters of Samuel Beckett.”

For Irène Lindon, it’s clear: the bad ones are on the other side of the Channel, or on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, hiding behind the indisputable reputation of the Cambridge University Press.

But, in fact, things are not so simple.
First, the memory of Irène Lindon seems to be somewhat selective. Indeed, as the “General introduction” of the letters explained it, in February 1985 (nineteen eighty five), a long time after 1968 (nineteen sixty eight), “Beckett appointed his long-life time friend and American publisher Barney Rosset as General Editor of the letters, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld as Editor, and he confirmed Lois More Overbeck as Associate Editor” (p. xiii).

The same year, in March, he wrote to Martha Dow Fehsenfeld: “I can rely on you to edit my correspondence in the sense agreed on with Barney, i.e. its reduction to those passages only having bearing on my work” (p. xiv).

So, there might be other good reasons why the letters haven’t been published by the Editions de Minuit.

One is certainly an economic one.
Madrigall, the holding in the hand of Antoine Gallimard, which gathers Gallimard, Flammarion, Denoël, Le Mercure de France, Casterman and many others, has a annual revenue of 437 (four hundred thirty seven) million euro – to compare with the annual revenue of 3.6 million euro for the Editions de Minuit.

For Irène Lindon, it would have been a strong investment – and a true financial risk – to publish the four books of letters, because correspondence books are not money makers, and the most often it takes many years to sell a print.

However, for Gallimard, the risk is diluted: if a publication is a failure, it’s much more easy for the publisher to endure it.

But, of course, it was not possible for Irène Lindon to say such things in a “communiqué”.

Furthermore, the Editions de Minuit never advertise the books they publish, not only because advertising is expensive, but also, and perhaps
above all, because Jérôme Lindon thought it was a degrading process for literature.

On the contrary, Gallimard spend a lot of money in advertising and marketing, having thus a strong impact on the public.

11.

Moreover, in the case of Beckett’s correspondence, Gallimard decided to publish the letters not in a scholar collection, but, as I said in introduction, in the well-known and notorious “Collection blanche”. This collection is “the” place to be for a French writer – at least if his or her strong desire is to become a conspicuous main-stream writer, well-thinking, well-writing – and well-selling.

And, over the decades, under the label “Collection blanche”, Gallimard has published dozens of correspondences of French writers, from Zola to Yourcenar, from Breton to Sarraute, in such a way we might say there is, within the “Collection blanche”, a sub-collection, devoted to mails.
One of the major features of this sub-collection is to target more specifically letters between lovers, like these ones, Chateaubriand writing to Delphine de Custine, Proust to Reynaldo Hahn, Claudel to Rosalie Vetch, or, this year, Camus to Maria Casarès.
Some writers, willingly or not, became regular contributors to this quite specific editorial line, like Simone de Beauvoir, with her letters to her different lovers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques-Laurent Bost or Nelson Algren. And this kind of letter encounters such a success, that, sometimes, Gallimard provides to the public correspondences of people which are not writers,…. 
…like the love letters between our former President, François Mitterand, and Anne Pingeot, his long-time lover – among many others. A bestseller in France in 2016 (twenty sixteen).
It’s funny to see that Beckett, who was so willing to protect his private life, is in the end published in a collection of correspondences known above all, in France, because it gives to the public the opportunity to take a closer look at love affairs. But what I’d like to emphasize is that, above all, it was a commercial strategy to publish the letters of Samuel Beckett in this rather popular sub-collection devoted to correspondences, within the “Collection blanche”: the four books were de facto linked to a well-known cultural brand – and it can only help to catch the public interest, and to sell more copies than the Editions de Minuit could have done.
But that’s not all. Samuel Beckett is certainly one of the most important writers of the last century, and Antoine Gallimard, who’s in charge of the family business since 1988 (nineteen eighty eight), has always been highly willing to add Beckett’s name to his catalogue – especially since negotiations for a Pléiade edition, the most notorious and luxurious Gallimard collection, are in a dead end.

Indeed, in December 1989 (nineteen eighty nine), a few days before he died, Beckett had agreed to such an edition, as James Knowlson mentioned it in his biography: “For a while he was well enough to sit in a chair and talk briefly to Jérôme Lindon about a proposed Pléiade edition of his complete work, except for Eleutheria, which he still wanted withheld”.

But it never sees the light of the day, because Jérôme Lindon, and now his daughter Irène, finally refused to transfer the copyrights to Gallimard.
Antoine Gallimard complained about this to several journalists the last two decades, and on the La Pléiade website of the publisher, in answer to the question “will you publish the works of Samuel Beckett?”, the official response pinpoints clearly the culprit: “We’d like to, but until now we haven’t obtain the copyrights from the Editions de Minuit”.

In fact, like Robbe-Grillet or Echenoz, Beckett is a significant source of cash flow for the publisher, and the Lindons would cut a significant annual income for their activities if there was a Pléiade edition. They granted it for Duras and Simon for very specific reasons, but they can’t do the same for all the writers they have in their catalogue.
So, for Antoine Gallimard, the publication of the letters of Samuel Beckett in the well-known “Collection blanche”, and more specifically in the sub-collection of correspondences, was certainly a commercial strategy, but not only.

It was also a way to add Beckett to his Pantheon; a way to say to the French readership, “look, we’ve got him at last”; a way to begin to “gallimarize” him, if I may say – as a Pléiade edition would have done, if it had been possible to find an agreement about it.

But such a choice is not without consequences on the original editorial line of the letters, at the Cambridge University Press, like I will demonstrate it now.
Indeed, Gallimard is not the Cambridge University Press, and the “Collection blanche” is not a scholar collection.
However, the scholarly apparatus has been translated in French to a large extent, as you can see on this slide.
The prefaces of the two translators, George Craig and Viota Westbrook, are missing, but, of course, that’s because both of them have translated letters in English, for the English readership.
On the other hand, we have in the French edition, not really a “Preface”, but “some remarks”, some clarifications by André Topia, the translator of the first two books.
Translating faithfully the “General Introduction”, André Topia says, in French, that “the letters are presented as written, preserving Beckett’s habits and idiosyncrasies”. But what was certainly true for the original edition, isn’t meaningful for the French one.

Because of the spirit of the collection, and because of the target audience, the publisher decided to translate all the letters in French, the English and the German ones, and to remove all the originals. This choice deeply changes the reception of the letters.
As you all know, in the Cambridge edition, it is a fact that Beckett is polyglot, that he is playing with languages, jumping from one to another, because we have in front of us the original version and its translation – for example, here, on the slide, a letter to Philippe Soupault, written in French in August 1930 (nineteen thirty), followed by his translation in English by George Craig.
With the Gallimard edition, we haven’t the same feeling. For example, this letter to Putnam, written in English in September 1930 (nineteen thirty), appears in the Gallimard edition only in French,…
… and the only way to distinguish between a letter originally written in French, by Beckett, and an English one, translated in French by André Topia, is a bracketed sentence, at the head of the letter, “[Lettre écrite en français]”, like with this one, sent to Philippe Soupault in August 1930 (nineteen thirty).
So, when, on two facing pages, there are two letters sent to the same recipient, but one in English and the other one in French, as it happens for example with McGreevy, we have in the Gallimard edition, as illustrated on the slide, a letter with Beckett’s own French – here, on the left page –, and another one also in French, but translated by André Topia – here, on the right page. And, in such a case, although we know which one is by Beckett’s own hand, the editorial choice to remove the original letters and the layout lead to confuse one with the other.
And that’s quite unfortunate, because, as good is the translation by André Topia, we all know it’s not possible to translate faithfully a text. And, to show the difference between what we might call the Beckett French and the Topia French, I’ll focus on the translation of a letter to McGreevy, in August 1930 (nineteen thirty).
In this letter, Beckett writes some words about the translation of “Anna Livia Plurabelle” he is working on with his friend Alfred Péron. He says:

myself doing so much. ² Alfy is gone. I am going to write to him now that I cannot go on with the translation alone. I can’t do it. And then to that bastard Soupault that I will sign no contract. I sent him two copies of what we had already done, one for Joyce and one for Bifur if Joyce is not too disgusted by the chasm of feeling and technique between his hieroglyphics and our bastard French.³ But I will not go on alone. It can’t be done, and I am tired
With these sentences, we have two instances of “bastard” – a word Beckett enjoyed, as you know.

“That bastard Soupault” is translated by “ce salaud de Soupault”, and “our bastard French” by “notre français bâtard”.

But it could have been possible to say “ce bâtard de Soupault”, it’s also a colloquial insult, as offensive as “salaud” is.

Topia certainly chose “salaud” to avoid a repetition, because we usually think it’s better to do so, if we prefer to write “in the old style”, to speak as Winnie does in Happy days. Topia probably thought it was more elegant, if I may say, to write it like he did – but to be more elegant wasn’t Beckett’s choice.
Because of that, the reader loses not only the lexical repetition, but also the fact that “bastard” falls within a network of sexual connotations, which unfolds in the following lines, when, criticizing d’Annunzio, Beckett says: “I think it is all balls and mean nasty balls”, and explains such a comment just after, in a very crude way: “D’Annunzio seems to think that they are merely pausing between fucks. Horrible. He has a dirty, juicy, squelchy mind, bleeding and bursting, like his celebrated pomegranates.” My head was a torrent of ideas and phrases last night or.

And it peaks in the end with the description of the pomegranates, “an (obvious) image of sexuality”, as it is argued note 4, page 42 by the editors.

Knowing how such connotations are important in Beckett’s letters, but also in his work, it would have been better to preserve the more literal translation “bâtard” – because we haven’t the same effect with “salaud”, a word derived from “sale”, and whose etymological meaning is something like “filthy, soiled, grimy”. We used it by the past to refer to a tramp or a peasant.
Another example, always from the same letter. Speaking of D’Annunzio’s mind, Beckett says “he has a dirty juicy squelchy mind, bleeding and bursting”. The translation, “il a un esprit sale, juteux, qui patauge, et qui saigne et éclate”, is very far from the original, for several reasons.
he has a dirty juicy squelchy mind

First, we lose the alliteration with “i”, and the rythm of the sentence, which sounds like a blank verse, at least in the beginning, where we have some kind of alexandrine, with a regular weak-strong pattern.
Second, the sequence “esprit sale” is quite unusual in French, “sale esprit” being the common syntax for such an expression.

And, if “qui patauge” is a possible translation of “squelchy”, it changes an adjective, “squelchy”, for a relative, “qui patauge”, whose literal translation might be “which squelches”, and a better one “squelching”. It’s not bad, but it creates a sequence “qui patauge, et qui saigne et éclate”, which is a very heavy-handed one.

Instead of “qui patauge”, it could have been better to say something like “hésitant, flottant, fluctuant, incertain, indécis, irrésolu” – with a preference for the words ending with “an”.

“squelchy: hésitant, flottant, fluctuant, incertain, indécis, irrésolu”
And, last but not least, Topia says “et qui saigne et éclate comme ses célèbres grenades”.

First, he adds the conjunction “et” before “qui saigne et éclate”, “et qui saigne et éclate”, a conjunction we haven’t in the original, where we read “bleeding and bursting”, and not “and bleeding and bursting”.
Second, by erasing the coma between “bleeding and bursting” and “like his celebrated pomegranates”, he links “comme ses célèbres grenades” only with the last two verbs, “qui saigne et éclate”.
But, doing so, he makes a false sense, because “like his celebrated pomegranates” targets also “juicy” at least – and perhaps also “dirty”, because of the sexual connotations we perceive by metaphor.
In the end, something like “il a un sale esprit, jutant, flottant, saignant et éclatant, comme ses célèbres grenades” would have been a more faithful translation, at least because it tries to reflect the original rhythm; to produce an alliteration, with “an”; and, doing so, to express the acrimony or contempt the sentence suggests.
It could be possible to do the same kind of remarks about many other letters, but these examples are sufficient to demonstrate that, in the French edition, “the letters are not [always] presented as written”, and that the translation do not always “preserv[e] Beckett’s habits and idiosyncrasies”. But there is another consequence, by which I’ll conclude.

In France, as you may know, many scholars distinguish between what we call French literature and francophone literature. It means that if a writer is born in Morocco, Senegal, Haiti or the French Canada, and is writing in French, he isn’t really a French writer: he is a foreigner writing in French. Surprisingly, Samuel Beckett never suffered from such a prejudice. He is mentioned in our literary handbooks as one of the most important French playwrights of the 20th century; his works are part of the French literary program of our high-schools; and they appear in many examinations, from the bachelor’s degree to the prestigious “agrégation de lettres”, the highest teaching qualification in France.
So, if the French edition of the letters certainly offers a fascinating set of information about Beckett for people unable to read in English, it also contributes, for all the above reasons, to reinforce a quite specific if not national image of Beckett – not only a “gallimarized” Beckett, but also what I might call a French or a “francized” Beckett – a Beckett who is always speaking and writing in French, whatever kind of French it can be – a Beckett whose not only the “Irishness” but also the European culture is partly deleted – what is, if I’m not mistaking, the opposite of the purpose of the Cambridge edition.