

I'LL GO ON: PAUL AUSTER'S DIALOGUE WITH SAMUEL BECKETT

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In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Paul Auster corresponded with Samuel Beckett about an English–language anthology of French verse that he was editing. Although Beckett agreed to let Auster use his translations of several poets, he was less keen on the possibility of some of his own early poetry being included, ‘claiming that he had neither the energy nor the inclination to revisit those old works from the late thirties’. Auster offered to translate them himself, but upon reflection, Beckett declined, saying that ‘only he could do the translations — and he didn’t feel up to the task’. All this is outlined by Auster in his Editor’s Note to the Grove Press collected edition of Samuel Beckett’s works, in which, tellingly, Auster opines, ‘with any other poet, I might have insisted more strenuously, but Samuel Beckett was and is a special case.... No matter how deft or skilful my translations might have been, they never would have come out sounding like Beckett’ (*GCE* 1:vii).

In a way, this quote anticipates everything that will be discussed in this essay. Its concern is not translation, at least in the sense of literal, language–to–language translation; instead, the focus will be on the workings of literary influence, looking specifically at the creative relationship between these two authors, Beckett and Auster. Auster has said in one interview that, as a younger writer, ‘the influence of Beckett was so strong that I couldn’t see my way beyond it’ (‘Interview with Joseph Mallia’, *AH* 265). Despite Auster’s refusal to literally translate Beckett’s work because of this ‘special case’, his novels nevertheless enact a creative ‘translation’, or ‘mistranslation’, of the Beckettian canon. Harold Bloom’s seminal work, *The Anxiety of Influence*, offers a lens through which to examine the relationship between the two authors. Although initially this relationship can be viewed as that of the master and the apprentice, with the latter in thrall to the former, the dialogue between Beckett and Auster eventually develops into something quite different. Ultimately, as T. S. Eliot writes in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, ‘what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it’ (*The Sacred Wood* 50).

In her article ‘Beckett and Paul Auster: Fathers and Sons and the Creativity of Misreading’, Julie Campbell argues persuasively in favour

of Beckett's influence on Auster, taking Bloom's book as her central reference point in linking the two authors' works:

Because of the anxieties artists feel about their own belatedness, they will misread their precursors, Bloom claims, 'so as to clear imaginative space for themselves'. For him, for instance, a writer 'swerves away' from precursors or completes them 'to retain their terms but to mean them in another sense'. There are no readings for Bloom other than misreadings. (Campbell 300)

For Campbell, 'In his early prose fiction Auster is not only 'twisting' Beckett's work in a different direction but also filling in many of the gaps in Beckett's work, giving substance to what lacks substance' (302). Two of Bloom's 'revisionary ratios' are conflated here; '*clinamen*, or poetic misprision' and '*tessera*, or completion and antithesis' (14), and it will be useful to examine these ideas in the context of 'translation', as aspects of a process that involves the reimagining of a text in a different idiom.

Auster's views on the nature of translation are directly applicable to his own creative translations of Beckett's writing. In his Editor's Note to the aforementioned Grove collected, Auster argues that Beckett's renderings of his own work are never literal, word-by-word transcriptions. They are free, highly inventive adaptations of the original text — or, perhaps more accurately, 'repatriations' from one language to the other, from one culture to the other (*GCE* 1:vii). We might also read this as a description of Auster's creative output, as it relates to the work of his literary forebear. Despite refraining from translating Beckett's works, Auster's novels are nonetheless translations, 'repatriations', or as Bloom might have it, 'misreadings' of the Beckettian canon that looms large in the later author's field of view. From this standpoint, Auster's wider understanding of the nature of translation does much to illuminate his approach to creative writing. In an interview with Stephen Rodefer, Auster presents the notion of translation as a creative apprenticeship that 'allows you to work on the nuts and bolts of your craft, to learn how to live intimately with words, to see more clearly what you are actually doing' (*AH* 262):

Working on translations removes the pressure of composition.... You learn how to feel more comfortable with yourself in the act of writing, and that

is probably the most crucial thing for a young person. You submit yourself to someone else's work — someone who is necessarily more accomplished than you are — and you begin to read more profoundly and intelligently than you ever have before. (262)

Although this description pertains to translation, it could equally apply to the agon of influence; does the young person read more profoundly, or misread more profoundly? Bloom suggests that 'the strong misreading comes first; there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work' (Bloom xxiii). The pressure of composition is removed only through the process of working through the anxiety that follows this misreading. In Auster's novels, we can see him submitting to Beckett's work and yet simultaneously deviating from it, reading and misreading his predecessor and translating his ideas into his own idiom — yet all the while introducing alterations and shifts in what Bloom would define as an attempt 'to clear imaginative space' (5). Campbell cites as evidence Beckett and Auster's shared but defamiliarised situations, the echoed but altered moods, the latter's atmospheric resonance with the former: comparing, for instance, the 'claustrophobic confinement of *Malone Dies*' with Quinn's self-incarceration in a darkening room in *City of Glass* (Campbell 302), or the thematic bleakness of *Waiting for Godot* with that of Auster's *The Music of Chance* (304). She emphasises, though, Auster's attempts to incorporate these borrowings into an individual and unique stylistic voice: 'avoiding imitation, Auster reconfigures Beckett's style to invigorate his own' (303).

Campbell uses Auster's novel *The Music of Chance* as an example of this stylistic 'swerve' and 'completion', arguing that Beckett's abstractions have been 'brought down to earth, filled out, and to some extent made explicable' by the later author (304). Although a link is made by Campbell between Auster's novel and *Waiting for Godot*, especially in reference to their shared themes of punishment and redemption, I believe that another Beckett work resonates even more strongly throughout. In *Watt*, Beckett's novel of permutation written during the Second World War, the eponymous protagonist arrives at the house of Mr. Knott, in whose employment he is retained for a spell, and then leaves, to vanish at the end of the book, seemingly into thin air, as the train for which he was waiting is said to have admitted not a single passenger, and yet he is nowhere to be found (*GCE* 1:370). In Auster's *The Music of Chance*, two men arrive at the home of two idiosyncratic lottery-winners for a poker game, lose their money and their car, and are

forced to enter into their hosts' employment to repay their debts. By the end of the novel, Nashe and Pozzi (for those are their names) have similarly evaporated into thin air, although in much more violent circumstances. Pozzi is beaten almost to death and removed to hospital, never to return, and Nashe is shown accelerating his beloved red Saab 900 into an oncoming headlight at the novel's conclusion. Although the reader is not told what happens — or perhaps precisely because we are not told — the uncertain ending unravels Nashe from the plane of the possible, from the stream of existence, just as surely as Beckett's train erases Watt when it does not admit him and he disappears from view.

Auster's novel, then, certainly does betray similarities to that of Beckett, yet its *clinamen* and *tessera* manifest themselves clearly. For Beckett, the absurdity of Watt's experiences in the house of Knott is neither explained nor harnessed to an emotional or intellectual response; it is merely absurd, and Watt's disappearance is as simultaneously — and paradoxically — illogical and hyper-logical as the novel's exhaustion of possibility. Watt drifts through his period of employment in a permanently bemused state, until he is replaced and must leave. For Auster, however, the absurdity of Pozzi and Nashe's situation carries with it the constant, barely veiled threat of violence. An example of this distinction, unexplored by Campbell, can be found in the shared motif of the fence, focalised by both authors and thrust to the forefront of the narrative, albeit to very different effects. In part III of *Watt*, the narrator — named Sam, a teasing glimpse of the author-figure that Auster appropriates and develops into his extended cameo in *City of Glass* — relates his meetings with Watt through a 'high barbed wire fence, greatly in need of repair, of new wire, of fresh barbs' (*GCE* 1:295). The narrator's pavilion and Watt's each have their own garden and their own fences, which run next to each other, 'now converging, now diverging' (298). These fences have holes, however, that enable the two men to walk side by side in the gap between the two, although neither intrudes through the hole in the other man's gate, 'for my garden was my garden, and Watt's garden was Watt's garden, we had no common garden any more' (302). Even as the fences divide the two gardens, the shared space between allows for communication through these boundaries, enabling the sharing of Watt's story. The boundaries remain, yet the concept of 'fence' has been abstracted into nothing, easily crossed, rarefied into thin air.

In *The Music of Chance*, however, the fence that surrounds the meadow in which Pozzi and Nashe are working is sinister and impassable, 'crowned by a menacing tangle of barbed wire', and

demarcating the outside world from the debtor's prison in which the two men find themselves:

They did their best to laugh it off, saying that rich people always lived behind fences, but that did not erase the memory of what they had seen. The barrier had been erected to keep things out, but now that it was there, what was to prevent it from keeping things in as well? *All sorts of threatening possibilities were buried in that question.* (115; emphasis added)

When Pozzi escapes through a hole under the fence, he turns up the following morning, lying outside the house that he and Nashe had shared, beaten almost to death. Later, when Pozzi has been removed to the hospital by the foreman who has been overseeing their work, Nashe decides to escape himself through the hole that Pozzi had crawled through the previous night. His plan comes to nothing, though, for

the hole had been filled in, the shovel was gone, and what with the leaves and twigs scattered around him, it was almost impossible to know that a hole had ever been there.

Nashe gripped the fence with all ten fingers and squeezed as hard as he could. He held on like that for close to a minute, and then, opening his hands again, he brought them to his face and began to sob. (159)

It would be too neat, perhaps, to equate Auster's filling in of this gap with Campbell's description of the author as 'filling in many of the gaps in Beckett's work, giving substance to what lacks substance' (Campbell 302), but it is readily apparent that the abstracted situation in *Watt* has been 'brought down to earth, filled out, and to some extent made explicable' (Campbell 304). Auster's re-imagining of Beckett's work restores the physical that is somewhat absent in *Watt* — a novel that is arguably more concerned with the infinite permutability of ideas than the limits that define the body and its extension throughout physical space — reinvesting the concept of the boundary with its attendant implications of transgression and consequence. The *tessera* and *clinamen* evident in the later writer's work both point backwards to the nagging influence of the predecessor and also forwards, towards a potentially original creative viewpoint.

Following on from this, however, it is Bloom's final revisionary ratio that I believe ultimately comes to define the dialogue between Auster and Beckett. In her article, Campbell extols the potential benefits of 'reading Beckett "through" Auster' in order to open up new avenues of interpretation (Campbell 308); however, little attention is paid to the concept of *apophrades*, the name Bloom gives to 'the return of the dead', the situation in which the poet, in his own final phase,

holds his poem so open again to the precursor's work
that at first we might believe the wheel has come full
circle, and that we are back in the later poet's flooded
apprenticeship. (Bloom 15–16)

In his recent novel *Travels in the Scriptorium*, it appears initially as if Auster has finally succumbed to the sheer weight of Beckett's influence upon him. While previous works refer back to Beckett, appropriating ideas and conceits, techniques and motifs, *Travels in the Scriptorium* reads like an appropriation of the entirety of Beckett, a capitulation to literary influence, almost like a guilty pleasure. It reads, to some extent, like the work Auster has been wanting to write all along, the work in which he holds his hands up and accepts his anxiety of influence, a torrent of grateful release.

The novel itself is a metafictional revisiting of Auster's own literary career, in which the enigmatic Mr. Blank is visited in the small room that has become his home by a number of 'operatives' that he has sent on dangerous missions in the past. Mr. Blank turns out to be a writer, and the 'operatives' are characters from past novels — more specifically, from past novels by Auster himself. Even in this conceit, there are echoes of Beckett's *Trilogy* of novels, in which characters from previous works float in and out of the narrative to be acknowledged by the narrators. Moran, an operative figure himself, refigures Molloy's search for his mother's house through his own search for Molloy, mirroring his quarry's physical degeneration. Malone looks forward to his own demise, by which time 'it will be all over with the Murphys, Merciers, Molloys, Morans and Malones, unless it goes on beyond the grave' (*Malone Dies*, in *Trilogy* 237). *The Unnamable* voices a similar exasperation, lamenting that 'all these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone' (*Trilogy* 305). Auster's own protagonist is similarly haunted by these ghosts of the past: 'his mind is elsewhere, adrift in the past as he wanders among the phantom beings that clutter his

head' (*TS* 2); the echoes of Beckett — who is, of course, another spectral figure in the background of the novel — show us that these phantom beings emanate from outside Auster's work, as well as from within.

Travels in the Scriptorium is suffused with Beckettian images which, like Mr. Blank's snapshots of his 'operatives', litter the novel's otherwise bare setting. The initial image, that of an old man sitting on the edge of a narrow bed, 'head down, staring at the floor' (*TS* 1), instantly recalls the central image of Beckett's TV piece 'Eh Joe', with Joe seated on a bed in an 'intent pose' (*CDW* 361). Shortly afterwards, in an echo of the recurrent Beckettian image of the rocking-chair — so prominently featured in 'Rockaby', *Film* and *Murphy* — Auster's protagonist, Mr. Blank, lowers himself into a chair with 'an invisible spring mechanism that allows him to rock back and forth at will' (*TS* 3). We learn that this 'rocking back and forth has a soothing effect on him' (3), and we might go so far as to suggest that this 'soothing effect' has something to do with the satisfaction of repurposing the image of the master.

Such Beckettian overtones occur throughout the text. The numerous and grotesquely detailed, almost childish scatological descriptions of Mr. Blank's bowel and bladder movements, for instance, resonate with the eponymous Krapp and his 'iron stool' (*Krapp's Last Tape*, in *CDW* 222), as well as with Molloy's anal fixation. While the latter suggests that 'we underestimate this little hole, it seems to me, we call it the arse-hole and affect to despise it. But is it not the true portal of our being?' (*Molloy*, in *Trilogy* 79) in Auster we are treated to a description of how

urine flows from [Blank's] penis, first one stool and then a second stool slide from his anus, and so good does it feel to be relieving himself in this manner that he forgets the sorrow that took hold of him just moments before. He's been doing it ever since he was a little boy, and when it comes to pissing and shitting, he's as capable as any person in the world. (*TS* 17)

Just for good measure, the narrator adds, 'Not only that, but he's an expert at wiping his ass as well' (17) — which recalls the incident in which Molloy, asked for his papers by a policeman, exclaims

Ah my papers. Now the only papers I carry with me are bits of newspaper [identified earlier in the narrative as the *Times Literary Supplement*], to wipe myself, you understand, when I have a stool. Oh I don't say I wipe

myself every time I have a stool, no, but I like to be in a position to do so. (*Molloy* 21)

Having explained that, Molloy thrusts his (toilet) papers under the policeman's nose. Scatological humour at its finest— and as such, it is almost impossible for anyone who has read Beckett to read Auster's coprophilous passage as anything but a wry homage to the earthy humour of his literary precursor.

And yet these echoes, these almost brazen appropriations, also comprise a show of strength, a display of some hard-won mastery over the master. Auster's early, tentative swervings and completions have become confident, unashamedly revisionary rewritings, not only of Beckett's work, but also of his own. The novel is both an agglomeration of all of Auster's work up to that point, and also a return to its origins. Bloom's definition of *apophrades* posits a revisiting of the later writer's 'flooded apprenticeship,' but the tables have now turned:

The poem is now *held* open to the precursor, where once it *was* open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work. (Bloom 15–16)

What we have, finally, is the work in which Beckett's influence upon Auster reaches its full maturity, yet it is also the point at which Auster shows his ability to control this influence. *Travels in the Scriptorium*, for all its metafictional posturing, is a bold and direct novel. It shamelessly flaunts its own artificiality, its own createdness, much as Beckett's own work enacts its own coming-into-being, calling into question the very nature of literary production itself. It is, above all, a novel convinced of its own logical framework, a work of supreme control and confidence. To quote Bloom again: 'It is as though the final phase of great modern poets existed neither for last affirmations of a lifetime's beliefs, nor as palinodes, but rather as the ultimate placing and reduction of ancestors' (147). *Travels in the Scriptorium* is certainly no palinode, although I would argue that it is an affirmation — a fairly comprehensive one, at that — of the beliefs and ideas that have been expressed throughout Auster's career. (Bloom does not necessarily discount this aspect of the writer's late career, of course — he merely states that it is not the reason for which this final phase exists.) Above

all, though, it is the work in which his literary antecedent, Beckett, is mastered at last.

One final example takes place at the end of the novel. Mr. Blank begins to read a second manuscript upon his desk, which turns out to be the very text that the reader is holding in their own hands, and thus loops the novel around to its beginning, creating a hermetic Möbius loop that twists upon itself infinitely. Although the ending was condemned by some critics ('a facile coda', wrote a reviewer for the *Times* on 7 October 2006), the ending is perhaps the most courageous aspect of the entire novel. With this circular ending, Auster rewrites the narratological looping of Beckett's *Molloy*, which is split into two parts that both end at their beginnings.¹ He does this straightforwardly, unapologetically, and with perfect internal logical consistency. The novel is a succinct summation of a career's worth of ideas, characters, and stylistic innovation, and it comes directly from Auster's anxiety of influence, his struggle with Beckett's 'tremendous hold' over him (AH 265).

Travels in the Scriptorum is, at its core, a novel about writing novels. In an interview, Auster explains that all of his books are really 'the same book', what he calls 'the story of my obsessions...the saga of the things that haunt me. Like it or not, all my books seem to revolve around the same set of questions, the same human dilemmas' (AH 285). Following this, *Travels in the Scriptorum* stands as Auster's final acceptance that this is, at its core, what all his novels are about, and indeed what Beckett's novels and novellas are also, at some level about — the process of writing, the act of literary creation, the art of expression. And it is with this novel, with this instance of *apophrades*, that Auster demonstrates his strength. As Bloom says, 'the mighty dead return, but they return in our colours, and speaking in our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own' (141). Auster's creative translations, deft and skilful as they are, do not 'come out sounding like Beckett' (GCE 1:vii); instead, Beckett is refigured, renewed and reinvigorated through the efforts of his predecessor, as if Auster himself were the architect of the former's work. The apprentice has joined the master as a partner, if not overthrown him as a usurper.

Beckett ends *The Unnamable*, the final novel of his *Trilogy*, with the famous words: 'you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on' (418). Auster's novels respond, 'I'll go on.' And on they go; and beyond, and before, and all through.

NOTES

Abbreviations

<i>AH</i>	Auster, <i>The Art of Hunger</i>
<i>GCE</i>	Beckett, <i>Grove Centenary Edition</i>
<i>TS</i>	Auster, <i>Travels in the Scriptorium</i>
<i>CDW</i>	Beckett, <i>Complete Dramatic Works</i>

¹ The first part of *Molloy* begins with the protagonist in his mother's room, unable to recall how he got there, and ends with him lying in a ditch, waiting for help to come. To have written the narrative, the unwritten coda implies, Molloy must have been rescued; thus the narrative loops. The second part begins: 'It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows' (92), and ends with the lines 'Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining' (176). This not only brings the end of the narrative back upon its own beginning, but also suggests that the narrator's reliability may have been suspect throughout.

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