

Samuel Beckett in Outer Space

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For one moment in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), the title characters provide a metaphor typifying the intertextual relationship between originals and imitations applicable far more widely than to their own comedic environment. Guildenstern comments: "Why don't you say something original! No wonder the whole thing is so stagnant! You don't take me up on anything—you just repeat it in a different order," and Rosencrantz responds: "I can't think of anything original. I'm only good in support."¹ More than one British novelist has been willing and content, in the last forty years, to "just repeat it in a different order," though the order is usually not the only thing undergoing a change. One thinks, for example, of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) launching a Nobel laureateship on an imitation of R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1859), or Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) retelling the story of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) from the viewpoint of Bertha Mason Rochester, or Brian Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound* (1973) fabulizing Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). To their company may now be added a counter-text to the fiction of Samuel Beckett.²

Samuel Beckett's works should be an imitator's, especially a parodist's, delight, because they are so distinctive in their depersonalized—one might say degeographized—settings, in their characters frozen virtually motionless in a jar, an urn, a trashcan, in their parabolic voice,³ and in their minimalist style, creating a prose document analogous to an Alberto Giacometti statue. Except for the early parodies such as Maura Cavanagh's "Waiting for God" (1958) and any number of cartoons in English papers and magazines, there have been relatively few—if any—"counterbooks."⁴ Recently, however, Brian Aldiss, the British science fiction novelist well known for his Helleconia trilogy, has published *Starswarm* (1985) whose nine chapters, each involving a visit to a planet within the Starswarm solar systems, offer a complex intertextuality not only between his novel and Beckett's characters and plots but also with several other writers.⁵ In many ways Aldiss's novel resembles David Lodge's *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965) with its chapter by chapter parodies of such writers as Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, James Joyce, and others. The fourth chapter, "Sector Diamond," for instance, recreates a "heart of darkness" on Kakakakaxo which Joseph Conrad would have recognized with no difficulty. Its topic of colonialism, its use of the words "eliminated" and "exterminated" in key discussions, and its Kurtzian Daddy Dangerfield quite emphatically echo and mime Conrad's novella of 1899-1900. Aldiss's tropical setting, thematic burden, and character types in this chapter lack only a Marlow.

The immediately succeeding chapter, "Sector Green," explores the "methods of mental contraception" on the planet Banya Bin, as a memory of Beckett's works. Hamm in his wheelchair, his parents ensconced in ashcans (Endgame), the motionless mime at the end of *Act Without Words I*, Winnie buried up to her neck in the second act of *Happy Days*, the chairbound women in *Rockaby*, the three urned characters in *Play*, the mouth in *Not I* not to mention Mahool in *The Unnamable*—these and other Beckett characters aspire to a condition of wordlessness and

silence. In brief, as John Spuring has said, “in the popular imagination Samuel Beckett conjures up tramps, dustbins and prolonged inactivity.”⁶

Memories of these characters swirl before the reader as he or she reads the opening description of Aldiss’s *Double A in Mudland*:

The way of telling time in Mudland was ingenious. Double A had a row of sticks stuck in the mud in the blackness before his eyes. With his great spongy hands that sometimes would have nothing to do with him, he gripped the sticks one by one, counting as he went.... And when later he came to think back to the moment when the take-over had occurred, he would know that had been the moment when it had been the present. (116)

As the narrative focuses more specifically on Double A, we are told:

Even sprawling in the mud with his legs amputated unfortunately represented a compromise. Double A had to admit there was nothing final in his degradation, since he had begun to—no, nobody could force him to use the term “enjoy the mud,” but on the other hand nobody could stop him using the term “ambivelling the tiny claws (clause?)” with the understanding that in certain contexts it might be interpreted as approximately synonymous with “enjoying the mud.” (117)

And when Double A speaks, he utters Shakespeare and muddle:

“Fathom five thy liar fathers, all his crones have made, Rifle, rifle, fiddle-faddle, hey,” and other such decompositions of a literary-religio-medico-philosophico-nature. (118)

With their character, their setting, and their concern for the passage of and the placement of time, Aldiss’s sentences are little removed from the tone and the topics of, say, *How It Is*,⁷ lacking only the distinctive monosyllabic style and the repetitions. Double A would have understood the voice of *How It Is* when it thinks “I’ll give it to another the voice said so the voice in me that was without quaqu on all sides hard to believe here in the dark the mud that only one life above from age to age eternally allowance made for preferences ah that’s it allowance made for needs” (72-73). For several reasons, most involving the considerable differences in their philosophical stance, world view, and assumptions about the possibilities of communication through literature, Aldiss chose not to replicate Beckett’s sentences and paragraphs, though in his *Barefoot in the Head* (1969), Aldiss showed that he could perform experiments with language not unworthy of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*.

Just as “I” has Pim, so Double A has Gasm in whom Double A recognizes a twin: “Gasm’s amputations were identical with Double A’s: to wit, the surgical removal under local anaesthetic, and with two aspirins, of that assemblage of ganglions, flesh, blood, bond, toenail, hair and knee-

cap referred to hereafter as legs” (119-20). In attempting to “B & C” Gasm, that is, to beat and to catechize, Double A commands Gasm to “name some of the other names you might have been called instead” to which Gasm responds, “I might have been called Plus or Slob or Droo or Harm or Finney or Cusp” (120). Together, though, they conclude that they are vertebrates rather than “pervertebrates” (121) and that after them will come “the deluge” (121). As they proceed to sing a narrator’s voice announces that, in time, “the uncertainties become almost infinite” (122). Suddenly, the text zooms from close-up to panorama and we see that Double A and Gasm are creatures, “human” creatures, on whom medical experiments have been performed so that a new type of military defender will be available to defend Banya Ban from the Flarans who have landed in the Western Ocean. Because the Flarans are “fish people,” the surgeons have attempted, by surgically removing limbs and implanting parts of the brain in the newly created “tail,” to insure security. After all, one surgeon remarks, “there are no ‘buts,’ only imperatives, in this equation” (126). In other words, in Aldiss’s counter-text, we see Godot, or the nameless presence off the stage in *Act Without Words I*, or the power behind the worlds of Pim, Bom, Bom, Kram, Krim, etc.

It would be a mistake to turn to such a passage as “between sessions sometimes *a sprat and a prawn*... they were good moments drivel and drivel no matter *a sprat and a prawn*” (61) and see in these few lines from *How It Is* the source of the piscatodal imagery and the character trapped in the mud, because Aldiss’s text establishes its intertextual ties on a more generalized perception of Beckett, not with any single play or novel. (*How It Is* does seem the “original” of a number of scenes, but Aldiss could easily have taken some ideas from such an unlikely place as BBC’s and PBS’s “At the Edge” sequence which featured mudpuppies tunneling holes, erecting territorial barriers, and fighting one another on tidal mudflats.)

Aldiss’s counter-text may not strike one as being “deucedly clever” as do the recreations of George MacDonald Fraser, but it does strike one as being “right.”⁸ To populate the planets careening through *Starswarm*, Aldiss had to look no further than to well known and highly praised writers in contemporary British and Irish fiction. Double A would, if he could, claim brotherhood with many of Beckett’s protagonists across the distance of light-years; but—would they recognize him in turn?

NOTES

1. (New York: Grove Press, 1967).
2. I use the term “counter-text” because given the cross-generic intertextualities, it is probably a bit more useful than Jorge Luis Borges’s “counter-book.” In “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” Borges writes: “A book which does not include its opposite or ‘counter-book’ is considered incomplete,” trans. Alastair Reid, *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1972), p.29.
3. One of the early and still useful discussions of voice in Beckett is A. J. Leaventhal, “The Beckett Hero,” most readily available in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 37-51.

4. The Cavanagh piece is item 1435 in Raymond Federman and John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett: His Works and His Critics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970). Two of the cartoons are reprinted in John Fletcher and John Spurling, *Beckett the Playwright* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 46 and 105.
5. *Starswarm* (New York: Baen, 1985); all subsequent quotations are from this text.
6. Fletcher and Spurling, p. 15.
7. *How It Is* (New York: Grove Press, 1964); all subsequent quotations are from this text.
8. For a discussion of other counter-texts, see my *Shadows of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp.79-130.