
Apparently these exchanges aren’t thrust out into the world by some vigilante hacker to demonstrate a moral vacuum at the heart of capitalism, but are actually ‘leaked’, as it were, by the authors themselves. For this oddity, a range of explanations present themselves. A theory I would have liked to confirm is that the book is an epistolary novel, in which the authors surrender their true identities to the demands of plot and comedy. Sadly not. True, Auster does at one point announce that he dreamt of having sex with his mother. And, discussing Auster’s objections to something in which Jonathan Franzen seems to deprecate the novel, Coetzee feels moved to tell Auster that irony is a possible move where novelists are involved. But one would be unlikely to confuse these amusements with anything in Wodehouse. Are Auster and Coetzee on the level when they reflect on what to do about Palestine and the Financial Crisis? Coetzee suggests that we deal with bad numbers by making up good ones, before going on to say that such proposals are clearly the ravings of an economic ignoramus. What he doesn’t add is that they also constitute the official policy of the Bank of England (‘Quantitative Easing’). Is this satire? Maybe, safe in Australia, he doesn’t know the awful facts.

But I doubt very much anyone will buy the book as a way of working out how to proceed with banking reform. Likewise Auster’s suggestion, which I feel sure we’ve heard before, that in order to secure peace in the Middle East the Jewish population of Israel might be granted the state of Wyoming. If these chaps are on the level, perhaps the level they are on is the field of wit. Or is it baseball?

Why is speculation about Sport the perennial fall-back topic of these discussions? Is this choice of topic something to do with the fact that both Men are Men? Possibly, but their exchanges in that line include much which as chat in the pub would be enlightening after a fashion, and starts to look a bit odd when actually written down. Auster: ‘if husband and wife do not figure out a way to become friends, the marriage has little chance’ (8). Same letter: ‘Can men and women be friends? I think so. As long as there is no physical attraction on either side’ (8). These remarks qualify as evidence of intelligible worries, or as illuminating humour, but are perhaps not the sort of coherent summation we might want in a thesis. So I hope no one buys this book to interrogate these chaps about their theory and performance of gender. The world being what it is, some will. But that these men obsess about Sport is vastly underdetermined by the mere fact of their maleness, and perhaps more convincingly explained by the fact that each is, in their letter-writing, a specialised kind of Sportsman. For often enough Sport is what they are having, in batting theory and anecdote to and fro. Sport then becomes a topic of this intellectual Sport because the Sportsmen are interested – but not indecently so – in what on earth they are up to, and whether there is any use in it. A question in the background: is this competitive display of literary acuity a culpable waste of time? No, is the answer we want to arrive at. So, as any intelligent letter might, each missive makes a claim for interest and erudition on the subject at hand, lobbing the ball over the net for the other chap to bat back. It isn’t clear whether they had from the start an eye on some umpire, Dear Reader, but the play is impressively clean; Sporting in the old sense. They don’t reply to an illuminating ramble with anything like ‘what tosh!’ or ‘you must be pulling my leg’. Instead they give, say, some competing view leavened with Plato. Coetzee: ‘our desire to be held in honor by our peers ... [is] a spur to excellence’ (11).

A book like this might constitute a defence of decency. A flaw is that one might prefer friendship to making friends. I mean, ‘making friends with Bill’ is sometimes describable as ‘trying to impress Bill’ or ‘trying to seduce Bill’ or one of these other trying and indecent phrases. So I found these letters more decent as it seemed the pair had got beyond any preliminary trying, and got on to a few points of likely interest for established chums in the same line of business. Finally, they started to say something about their lives as writers, and I became converted to the conversation roughly when Auster mentioned Tommaso Debenedetti. Debenedetti was last in the newspapers for a series of hoaxes in which, through impersonation of various individuals on Twitter, he got the media to treat as authoritative false claims about the death of the Pope, etc. An earlier stunt in this vein: fictive ‘interviews’ with American Authors, published in Italian newspapers as the real thing, and ascribing to the interviewees various silly views, possibly belonging to Debenedetti. How far this was satire or publicity for further fictions I don’t know, but it seems that Auster and Coetzee were both of them victims. (Maybe ‘serious’ interviewers were also victims). So, one use of the book under review is as an indirect response to Debenedettism, to coin a phenomenon. If policy positions on the financial crisis and Palestine are going to be speculatively and/or fraudulently attributed to our more prominent Novelists anyway, irrespective of whether they actually form settled opinions on these topics, well then, they might as well publish their own account of themselves. Coetzee:

We live in an era in which it is really only the law of libel that holds back would-be writers like Debenedetti from turning us ... into characters in their fictions, making us mouth sentiments and perform actions that might amuse, upset, repel, or even horrify us. If projects such as this flourish, then ultimately the pseudoselves that have been created for us, with their blessedly uncomplicated opinions, will come to reign in the public consciousness, while our ‘real’ selves and ‘true’ (and tiresomely tangled) opinions will be known only to a few friends. (143)

That ‘tiresomely tangled’ might be read as a term of praise cognate with ‘nuanced beyond the capacities of journalists’, but could alternatively suggest ‘disappointingly muddled’; Coetzee might be saying that those who fictionalise novelists into Sages are liars, because real people’s ideas about anything other than their special areas of competence are often pretty muddled – and authors are real people. That allegation would have a larger target than Debenedetti. Indeed, while not exactly Salingers, the pair make a sustained attack on the fascination readers have developed for the literary interview. Debenedetti is apparently the end point of a continuum of unreliability in these things, and it isn’t only the journalist that might be the trouble. Coetzee:

You ask whether I have had the experience of giving an interview and then being unable to remember what I had said. Not exactly. But I have often felt oppressive boredom as I listen to myself mouthing off in interviews. To my way of thinking, real talk only occurs when there is some kind of current running between the interlocutors. And such a current rarely runs during interviews. (110)

It’s a good point worth chewing, and a proof that the current of truth does sometimes run through these letters, for all the seductions of Sport.

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