

J.M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz. *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (Harvill Secker, 2105)

J.M. Coetzee has now published two books containing ‘exchanges’ – specifically this, intellectual exchanges, rather than ‘interviews’ where the questioner asks prompting questions of the famous author. The first is *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011* (2013), a correspondence with Paul Auster that began in July 2008. Now there is *The Good Story*, in which Coetzee and the English psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz discuss fictions and their place in psychotherapy and in the human psyche, and their relations with ‘reality’ or truth. There is an Authors’ Note at the beginning but little in the way of explanation of how these discussions came about or when they took place.

However, the note mentions an earlier ‘product’ of their ‘engagement’ and gives a reference to a 2010 article in *Salmagundi*, beguilingly titled ‘Nevertheless, my sympathies are with the Karamazovs’.¹ Curiosity as much as academic rigour led me to seek this article out, and I was rewarded with the kind of circumstantial detail I crave. The article is actually (or purports to be, but I think actually is) an email correspondence beginning in May 2008 and running for the remainder of that year. Arabella Kurtz’s initial email, sent out of the blue, asks Professor Coetzee if he would consider discussing with her (either in person in front of an audience, by videolink or email) ‘what can be learned from your work from a psychological point of view’.² Their initial negotiations are included, a feature missing from both books. The interesting possibility now arises, since the exchanges with Auster were suggested by Coetzee at some time after the meeting between them at Adelaide Writers’ Week in February 2008 and before his first published email on 14 July 2008, that the idea of carrying on such a correspondence with a view to publication might have been in a sense prompted by Kurtz’s approach to Coetzee in May 2008.

Be that as it may, *The Good Story* continues the exchange begun in the *Salmagundi* article. However, it seems that the dynamics between Kurtz and Coetzee have subtly changed. In the article there is a sense that Kurtz is deferring to the eminent writer and professor: ‘I would be interested to hear anything more you had to say about your rudimentary psychology of moods,’ she writes (67): the questioning goes in that direction, rather than the other. In *The Good Story*, the current seems as often as not to run the opposite way, and not only because Coetzee begins each chapter or section with an extended query, often ending with a petition such as ‘Help me to get beyond this point’ or ‘Am I wrong?’ Kurtz even expresses the occasional hint of impatience: ‘As a therapist trying to help people who are in distress, it is simply not relevant whether something is truth or fiction in the philosophical terms you set out. We have been over this ground before’ (136), she writes; and a little later, ‘If psychoanalysts do not accept fiction, fantasy and make-believe as an ordinary, healthy part of life, then I really do not know who does’ (146).

Their discussion could be summarised as an exploration of the interaction between truth and fiction, particularly in relation to the self. Towards the end of the book, Coetzee writes,

Your faith seems undimmed that we can learn to ‘be ourselves’. Would that it were so simple, I say to myself. To my mind, it will be enough if we can settle on fictions of ourselves which we

¹ J.M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, ‘Nevertheless, My Sympathies are with the Karamazovs’, *Salmagundi*, 166/167, Spring 2010, 39-72.

² Coetzee and Kurtz, ‘Nevertheless’, 39.

can inhabit more or less comfortably, fictions that interact sans friction with the fictions of those around us. (177)

But the operation of fictions in fiction is, in his opinion, a different matter:

It is hard, perhaps impossible, to make a novel that is recognisably a novel out of the life of someone who is from beginning to end comfortably sustained by fictions. We make a novel only by exposing those fictions. (191)

In the earlier exchange, he had expressed a similar idea slightly differently:

You suggest that the writer's responsibility is ultimately aesthetic. This may be so – I can treat this character as I please as long as it contributes to the making of a good novel – but to some, perhaps many, writers it also feels like a responsibility to the real, to constructing a world that is some kind of version of the real world and (more important) that makes the features of the real world more visible.³

There is much in these two sets of exchanges – there is depth rather than breadth. Coetzee readily admits they are repetitive, and not 'systematic and/or consistent'.⁴ The book is a handsome hardback, with a public prominence beyond the aspirations of a paper in an academic journal. Nevertheless, to me the most arresting statement is one that Coetzee makes in the article:

you refer to the invention of fictional characters. 'Invention' is not the world I would use. To me it is a matter of putting together a pattern of clichés (the already-written) and patiently waiting for the slip when the 'character' puts in his/her own word; and then allowing that original word to grow and grow; and ultimately erasing all the earlier clichés, which you no longer need.⁵

As a description of the creative process, this has a ring of authenticity because of its unexpectedness as much as anything. But it also seems deeply familiar, as anyone who writes would know: the clichés come easily, so let them come; but perhaps the mark of an accomplished writer is to defeat them, replace them, displace them with original thoughts and constructions and expressions.

One small point of irritation with *The Good Story*: a decision must have been taken at some stage that the gender-neutral singular would be best achieved by using the third person plural pronoun. Perhaps this has become so standard as to be unremarkable, but still constructions such as 'the teacher is a pretender who has not proved themselves yet puts themselves forward' is unappealing in the extreme (167). I find it hard to understand why a fastidious writer like Coetzee would willingly allow such clumsy prose to appear under his name.

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³ Coetzee and Kurtz, 'Nevertheless' 51.

⁴ Coetzee and Kurtz, 'Nevertheless' 72.

⁵ Coetzee and Kurtz, 'Nevertheless' 46-7.