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EPISTOLOGRAPHY IN WRITERS' LIVES. AN INTERVIEW WITH J.M. COETZEE

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Professor J.M. Coetzee is a writer and Nobel Prize winner (2003). He is twice winner of the prestigious Booker Prize, in 1983 for *The Life and Times of Michael K* and in 1999 for *Disgrace*. He has published fifteen novels, two autobiographical works and an autofiction entitled *Summertime* (2009). He has authored numerous essays on literature and culture. Four of his novels have been adapted for screen (*In the Heart of the Country, Disgrace, Waiting for the Barbarians,* and the trilogy of the *Jesus* novels). Coetzee also wrote libretti to *Slow Man* and *Elizabeth Costello*. *Slow Man,* with the music by Nicholas Lens, premiered in Poznań in July 2012. In 2023, the writer was elected member of the Poznań Chapter of the Agder Academy of Sciences and Letters.

J.M. Coetzee was born in South Africa and has Dutch Afrikaaner, English and Polish roots. His father's family initially immigrated to South Africa from the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, while his great-grandfather, Balthasar Dubiel (Dubyl) on his mother's side, came from Czarnylas, near Poznań. Coetzee has sojourned in Poland on numerous occasions. In 2012 he visited the village, the cemetery and the school that his great-grandfather had attended. The writer is proud of his Polish (Greater Poland) origins; in his articles and essays he frequently shows his admiration for Polish writers, among others Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert and Adam Mickiewicz. In 2024 he co-edited a selection of the poems of Herbert, in translation, for Penguin Books. During his long and illustrious academic career, he has been professor of English at the University of Cape Town (South Africa) and is now associated with the University of Adelaide (Australia). He has also been a visiting professor at several American universities, including University of Texas at Austin, Harvard University, Stanford University, and the University of Chicago. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, now houses the collection of his manuscripts.

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As a professor of English, J.M. Coetzee approached the political situation in South Africa as one of the manifestations of a wider historical context, based on colonial, neo-colonial and postcolonial interdependencies. His novella *Lives of Animals* (1999), which later appeared as a chapter in the novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), presents the writer's staunch support of animal rights. *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), while offering seemingly realistic, albeit somewhat disjoined narrations, demonstrate Coetzee's innovative approach to the process of fiction writing. The writer became an Australian citizen in 2006, and three *Jesus* novels reflect his involvement and opposition to Australia's anti-immigrant policies. His most recent work *The Pole and Other Stories* (2023), first published in Argentina in Spanish translation, so as to show the primacy of the South over the North, offers a story of a pianist, Wiktor Walczykiewicz, and the account of his unrequited love for his Spanish musical patron, Beatriz. In many ways, the novel, aside from the stories published in the same volume, bring to light the writer's preoccupation with aging and desire. The letters, written in Polish, left by the pianist upon his death to the object of his yearning – Beatriz, who has them translated into Spanish – mark the onset of her *vita nuova* as she begins to compose the responses to their late author. The form of a letter was previously used in *The Age of Iron* (1990), in which Mrs. Curren, a retired Classics professor, is writing to her daughter, who emigrated to the United States in protest against apartheid. The letters of Antoine Fauchery, a photographer documenting and Australia's early history are one of the intertexts of *Slow Man*.[2] By way of "distant discussion", epistolography was also used by the author in two non-fiction works. *Here and Now. Letters: 2008-2011* (Paul Auster & J.M. Coetzee) published in 2013[3] and *The Good Story. Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (2015). The former would be the focus here as the correspondence refers to "the self-reflexive consciousness" ever present in the writer's work.[4]

LS: Instead of an introduction, or a preface, the book is equipped with a note on the back cover revealing that the writers knew each other's work but did not meet until February 2008. It was after that meeting that Auster received a letter suggesting the correspondence which "God willing, strike sparks off each other". What was the first encounter with Auster's works like? Was

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2 Antoine Fauchery. 1965 [1857]. *Letters from a Miner in Australia*. Translated from the French by A.R. Chisholm. Melbourne: Georgian House.

3 I will be using the 2022 edition. Auster, Paul and J.M. Coetzee. 2022 [2013]. *Here and now: Letters 2008–2011*. Faber & Faber.

4 The quoted expression comes from David Attwell (1992: 3), see Atwell, David (ed). 1992. *Doubling the point. J.M. Coetzee essays and interviews.* Harvard University Press.

there anything that drew you to his work? Do you remember the in-person meeting with Paul Auster? What would be your most vivid memory concerning Auster?
JMC: I first read Paul Auster back in the 1990s, when I was living in South Africa. He struck me as more European than American in his sensibility and in the kind of fiction he was writing. I believe this first impression was correct, though as I grew to know Paul better I began to realize how deeply rooted he was in American experience.

Paul and his wife Siri Hustvedt visited Australia in 2008 at the invitation of various literary festivals, including Adelaide Writers' Week. He and Siri and my wife and I spent time together and got along well. Since Paul found the trip from the United States to Australia too physically taxing to ever be repeated, we arranged to meet again on intermediate ground, in Europe. In fact, the four of us had a number of such reunions in the years that followed, in France and the United States.

LS: The "sparks" are certainly there but the exchanges seem to be based on the idea that the personal can only become the public if or when it airs more general concerns and is, therefore, framed within the confines of the cultural, political, literary discourses but seldom personal experiences, though I was rather touched when you described an event confessing that you didn't do too well during the reading (which, by the way, I doubt very much). What I am trying to say here is that aspects of your individual lives are revealed inasmuch as these revelations contribute to broader discussions of literature and politics. Was that the assumption concerning the content of the letters? In the process of the exchange, did you and Paul Auster decide on the topics of your conversations or were you inspired by what was happening around you and you played along with each other's interests?
JMC: Implicit in the plan to exchange letters at more or less monthly intervals was the understanding that at least some of the topics we would take up would be dictated by the course of world events as they unfolded around us. The financial crisis of 2008–2009 will serve as an example of such an event. We were well aware, even before we embarked on the correspondence, that we were no longer young; above all, we wanted not to sound like two old men complaining about the decline of civility on all sides, looking back nostalgically to the good old days.

LS: You obviously do readings from your fiction; were you ever asked to present fragments of the letters in public?
JMC: Paul and I gave a public reading from the book of letters at a festival in Buenos Aires in 2014. Paul had a huge following in Latin America, and the hall was packed with fans of his.

LS: The exchange was limited to three years; the time frame covers the global crisis until the beginnings of the revolutions in the Middle East. Was the structure so well-defined from the beginning? How did you decide on what was going to be the final exchange?
JMC: Our plan was a very loose one: we would continue to exchange these semi-public letters until we ran out of steam and/or we felt we had a publishable book on our hands.

LS: Your letters mention an unnamed woman, who penns you long letters about her life in the hope of inspiring your fiction (or memoirs?),[5] writing to an author persona she quite obviously conjured in her mind. Don't we all do that when reading fiction and nonfiction alike, hearing the author's voice in our heads? Since you met Auster after reading some of his work, did you create an image of the writer, and how did that image compare with reality? In other words, was there (perhaps over time) a difference between Paul Auster the writer and Paul Auster your friend? If the letters were written with publication in mind, did you have their intended recipient in mind as you wrote them?
JMC: I have never been so naïve as to believe that the figure of the author that you conjure up as you read the work of fiction will correspond to the real-life author whose hand you shake. My mind was entirely open on the day I met Paul in 2008. I was gratified to find how direct and down-to-earth and friendly he was, but if he had turned out to be grumpy and haughty I would not have been surprised.

LS: Looking at the names on the cover, the reader is made aware that the exchanges are not going to be by "beer buddies", the refinement of the writing, the preoccupation with the then contemporary world of the global economic crisis and towards the end of the correspondence, the Arab Spring, give us insights into the concerns of men of letters into the travels, readings, presentations and meetings. For each reader, the key message would probably be different. Did you (I am almost tempted to write the Texan expression "you all") as two distinguished writers, as the Nobel prize winner, feel the pressure to convey serious "strong opinions"? I am asking this question considering the incident of an enraged reader who accused you of antisemitism because in *Slow Man* Marijana, one of the main characters, expresses a negative opinion about a Jew (Auster & Coetzee 2022: 96–100).

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5 This topic is presented by Colm Tóibín's (2011: 14–28) short story "Silence" (from *The Empty Family*), beginning with a brief entry from Henry James' notebook which tells the story, a possible "subject" for James, recounted by Lady G. (Lady Augusta Gregory). James apparently never used the material, but Tóibín imagines the dinner and Lady Gregory's musings about her affair with Wilfrid Scawen Blunt.

While her indictment is easily dismissible, because you as the author do not have to answer for your characters, the "I" of any letter is supposedly its author's voice. Or is it?
JMC: The "I" whom the reader encounters is more or less complicated, as a concept, according to the genre. In a book of letters, the "I" is, I think, quite simple: he is the writer's public persona. My letters to Paul are not intimate, nor are his to me. In our public personas I don't believe we felt any actual pressure to exchange "strong opinions," but we certainly felt free to entertain opinions of all kinds and to see what developed in the exchange.

LS: Your solution to the economic crisis brings to light Jorge Louis Borges' idea of exchanging one set of numbers with another, which judging by the popularity of cryptocurrency today, might not have been such a bad idea (Auster & Coetzee 2022: 18–21). To this effect, Auster's suggestion that a way out of the Israeli Palestinian conflict is the evacuation of the state of Israel and moving all the Jews to Wyoming, which could then thrive, is certainly not serious (Auster & Coetzee 2022: 148–151). These are not proposals to follow; nonetheless, you ("you all" again) point to the problems most of us watch safely on TV and are not really preoccupied with. I wonder how both you and Paul Auster would comment on the war in Ukraine and the president elect's promise to end the conflict in 24 hours. Can we afford today to not be anxious about such pronouncements? The opinions of the on-going atrocities in Israel and Palestine more than a decade earlier are still current today. I might be looking at your and Auster's words through my unambiguously Polish beliefs, inherited from Romanticism, that writers have a more acute awareness of reality. Would you agree with that? Or is it the demands of the genre, the letters themselves that generate the desire to comment on current issues?
JMC: I would treat with great reserve the notion that writers – writers of fiction, poets – have what you call "a more acute awareness of reality" than other people. Nonetheless, I accept that if you start with, and hold to, fixed ideas about who the good people are in the world and who the bad people are, you would be well advised to avoid a career in novel-writing.

I know, more or less, what Paul thought of Putin and of Trump, of the road that Russia was taking and the road that the United States was taking. I don't believe his ideas on the subject were more complex, or more enlightened, than the ideas of any other intelligent, well-informed person; and the same would be true of me.

LS: While maintaining a lighthearted and affable tone, neither of you ever fall into the trap of the inversion of the private and the public. Notwithstanding this, epistles, always assume a degree of intimacy with the

reader. That privilege, however, is sometimes marred by the lack of knowledge regarding actual references. In a letter from August 21, Auster addresses you as "Gramps", writing very movingly about the world fitting into a handbasket (Auster & Coetzee 2022: 182); your response tackles the word "basket" and "handcart" but not "Gramps" (Auster & Coetzee 2022: 183). Are there specific cultural practices for informal letter writing that one should be aware of? Was that a purposeful omission so as not to delve into yours or Auster's private family life? If so, how did you decide where is the limit of privacy that you would never cross? Harry Ransom Center stores several handwritten notes from Auster, warm and thoughtful, similar in tone to the rest of the material, yet they were not in the end included in the volume. Was it too much material and the selection, *nomen omen*, survival of the fittest? The process of choosing akin to the processes connected with writing autobiography and, in fact, aiding in self-fashioning of the interlocutors?

JMC: You refer to the American idiom "going to hell in a handbasket." To a foreigner like myself, the idiom has always seemed puzzling; and, as it turned out, Paul – who had a deep feeling for American speech – could not elucidate it for me.

As for the collection of letters, the two of us agreed on which should go into the book and which were too skimpy or too personal to qualify.

LS: You claim that you are thin-skinned concerning reviews but at the same time you never had the need to care about the reviewers' opinions. What bothered me, as a scholar, on behalf of the writers I read and admired, was mistaken notions and false expectations concerning the letters. In the review of *Here and Now*, Tim Adams wrote that "Paul Auster and JM Coetzee are clever fellows, but their elegant correspondence suffers from a lack of venom and indiscretion" (May 20, 2013).[6] By placing the stress on the prying intimate aspect of letters, Adams, whose writing is likewise polished and rather placid, ignobly dismisses the idea of polite letters, of writing in which the writers do not exhibit or dwell on points of contention; though not always in agreement, respect each other's views. Why would "banter" and "self-revelation" beside "self-deprecatory comedy" be so much better than the discussion of what interests the writers in sports, chess, and literature? No one would expect St. Paul, one of the most famous epistolographers, when addressing various early Christian communities, or any other writer in history, to disclose the sordid details of his private life, but Adams seems to

6 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/20/here-and-now-paul-auster-jm-coetzee-letters-review. I am grateful to Professor Mirosława Buchholtz for alerting me to that review.

be missing exchanging profanities and sexual innuendoes.[7] Do you think the reviewer's approach reflects a broader tendency, particularly among younger readers, to gravitate towards narratives that are scandalous, tragic, or decidedly comic? Were there perhaps any anecdotes that never made it into the final version of the publication?
JMC: I myself do not have much of a store of personal anecdotes. Paul had such a store but mercifully avoided parading them in public (the Charlton Heston story is an exception). The reviewer you quote writes that he would have liked more venom and indiscretion in the correspondence. Paul was neither venomous by nature nor fond of indiscretion, and I hope the same is true of me.

LS: The initial letter to Auster opens with a letter on friendship, a topic which is one of the leitmotifs of the exchanges. "Friendship, it would seem, remains a bit of a riddle; we know it is important, but as to why people become friends and remain friends we can only guess" (Auster & Coetzee 2022: 1). One of the striking features of Auster's writing is his frequent "name dropping" concerning the world of film, and I am not talking about the Charlton Heston serendipity story, which can actually be read as a kind of self-conscious comedy that Adams misses entirely, but there are many instances of encounters with famous actors and directors (Auster & Coetzee 2022: 25–28). You never respond with similar accounts of meeting famous people, of which I am sure you know many. Was there any particular reason for that? And what did you think of Auster's "bragging"?
JMC: Paul directed two or three films himself and moved with ease in the world of film-making. I don't believe he was bragging when he referred to that world, but even if he was, it seems to me a forgivable failing.

LS: T.S. Eliot in his preface to Stanislaus Joyce *My Brother's Keeper* writes that the line between "harmless curiosity" and curiosity that is "vulgarly impertinent" can never be precisely drawn (qtd. in Joyce 2003: 1). While acknowledging that the reader's curiosity about the writer's life might be legitimate "for increasing our understanding and making possible a keener enjoyment or a more critical valuation," Eliot validates the founding principle of contemporary biography, that of lesser-known detail (qtd. in

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7 Pierre Abelard is an exception because he does talk about what befell him from Heloise's uncle. See *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. Translated by Betty Radice. 1974. London: Penguin Books. 57–106. Perhaps Adams is missing the kind of information one finds in John Cleland's *The memoirs of the woman of pleasure* (1748), which, after all is a long letter. Adams compares the reviewed volume with "the celebrated scabrous exchange between Michel Houellebecq and Bernard-Henri Lévy" published a year before, which I think, is a gross indiscretion showing the reviewer's preference for the scandalous aspects of letter writing.

Joyce 2003: 1). In that respect your exchange on incest in relation to Auster's novel *Invisible* (2009) and other literary texts in addition to Auster's comments on the interviews and readings surrounding its publication are invaluable (Auster & Coetzee 2022: 58–60, 61–62, 171–178). Would you agree that such minutiae matter in critical reading of literary texts? Or perhaps there is no need to investigate the writer's biography at all, and the reader's curiosity is partly rooted in the Western fascination with confession, in which, as you persuasively argue in "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoyevsky" (1985), transgression forms part of a confessional sequence that culminates in penitence and absolution (in Attwell 1992: 251)?
JMC: You mention incest, which – in an age in which most sexual taboos have been broken down – remains strongly tabooed. It may not be more difficult to explore and write about incest than about other intimate matters, but it is certainly more difficult to publish one's explorations. I think incest is a submerged theme in Paul's writing, handled extremely discreetly.

LS: Paul Auster mentions the Debenedetti hoax, of which he was himself a victim (Auster & Coetzee 2022: 143). The volume of your letters, published originally in 2013, was reissued in 2022, but the story of fabricated interviews seems strikingly relevant today, particularly in an age when fake news is increasingly associated with Russia's "hybrid war" against the West. How dangerous can such "revelations" as Debenedetti's be to the literary world? Auster seems genuinely shaken as he recounts the episode. Is all publicity really good publicity?
JMC: The question you raise is relevant not only to writers but to all persons who have a public presence. I don't know anyone who relished having lies told about them; but in our day and age there is little one can do about that.

LS: You decided to donate your notes and early versions of your works to Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Thinking about the boxes of papers, I have an image of an Irish writer Evelyn Conlon, who, when forced to go through her personal papers was very reluctant to "being confronted" with her own past. She advocates the right to keep her own secrets, claiming that "there will soon be an entirely new philosophical movement dedicated entirely to the Epistemology of Privacy" (Conlon 2023: 169). On the other hand, as you noticed about the edition of Beckett's *Letters 1929–1940*, mentioned in the *Letters*, it is impossible to comprehend Beckett's "shuttling between Dublin and Paris, Hamburg and London without understanding what was happening in his personal life" (Auster &

Coetzee 2022: 29).[8] Are you going to donate your personal correspondence to HRC? If so, do you have any misgivings about possible distortions and misrepresentations of your legacy? If not, is the lack of control on the future readings of your life and works carefree?
JMC: The Beckett Estate has excluded from the multi-volume edition of Beckett's letters all letters that are considered to be too personal. Whether the latter will ever be made public I do not know. I can understand why the decision to exclude such letters was made; but I find it difficult to reconcile the decision with Beckett's well-attested belief that once one is dead one is dead forever.

LS: If I was asked which is my favorite book of letters, I would definitely pinpoint *Here and Now. Letters: 2008–2011*. They are witty, informative and, after eleven years from the first edition, still strikingly current. What would be your choice?
JMC: Franz Kafka's letters to Felice Bauer.

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[8] This sentence appears in an e-mail to Siri Hustvedt (Auster & Coetzee 2022: 20).