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Here and Now. Letters: 2008-2011. Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee. London: Faber and Faber/Harvill Seeker. p/bk 248 pp. ISBN 978-0-571-29927-0. Price £12.99.

The literary marketplace is no less susceptible to our obsession with celebrity than any other in the cultural sphere. Hence one approaches this volume of correspondence suspecting a carefully arranged marriage of convenience. Two famous authors, the American Paul Auster in New York City and the South African-born J. M. (John) Coetzee in Adelaide, Australia, decide to correspond over a three-year period. The letters are collected (selected?) and the result is a guaranteed publication with commercial appeal to authors and publisher alike. Auster is good at this: his third memoir, *Winter Journal*, appeared in 2012, while yet another memoir, *Report from the Interior*, appeared in late 2013. Coetzee has so far confined himself to fictionalized autobiography in his *Scenes from Provincial Life* series.

Perhaps then it is unsurprising that the letters begin rather stiffly and self-consciously discussing friendship. The correspondents loosen up by sharing their interest in international sports (always a strong selling point), by weighing the pain and pleasure of competition, and by pitting watching against participating in sports. Soon they move the friendship theme toward sex (another strong selling point) as in a discussion, for instance, of incest. Taboos clearly fascinate both men, as the subject crops up again in connection with rituals of food.

As the volume unfolds, we begin to know these writers better, a discovery not without its surprises. Coetzee often seems diffident and anxious for a writer of such accomplishment, especially in assessing himself as a "poor reporter […] on all of life" (212) and in his feeling of no longer being up to the task of doing "justice to a subject" (214). His respondent, however, belies an image many readers have of "Paul Austere" — a rather forbidding creator of cool and unusual texts — by revealing a more playful, irreverent, self-mocking side.

The correspondents feel obliged to touch on such international matters as the Palestinian question and the 2008 financial crash, but their views on art and language are more natural and more engaging. Befitting writers in their sixties (Auster) and seventies (Coetzee), they contemplate

the stages of artistic life: Auster is prompted to read Edward Said's *On Late Style.* Some artists, such as Tolstoy or Bach, bared their late work to essentials; others, as in James Joyce, expanded theirs to the complex and ornate. Going on to discuss the state of American poetry, Auster bemoans quantity over quality, observing that more is written now than ever before but less of any note. On reading fiction, they ponder Jonathan Franzen's possibly ironic assault on the genre as being largely a waste of time (Franzen). Coetzee declares that he would rather rake leaves than read run-of-the-mill novels, but then, which intelligent reader would not?

Prompted by Jacques Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other* (1986), Coetzee wonders what it means to have one's "own' language given the "removed or interrogative relation" of many writers "to the language they speak and write" (65). Auster, whose grandparents spoke Russian, Polish, and Yiddish and whose wife's family (he is married to the author Siri Hustvedt) spoke Norwegian at home, spiritedly defends American English (or Australian or South African, for example) as of equal stature to any entrenched idea of British English which the British no longer own any more than they own cricket or soccer.

Coetzee admits to struggling with the arbitrariness of the signifier, to which Auster responds by asserting the power of personal associations in language. Engaging with a sense of place, he reels off a set of street names in Brooklyn and Manhattan and argues, for instance, that "125th Street" can hardly be considered arbitrary when it conjures up so richly Harlem, the Apollo Theater, and Duke Ellington.

This being the twenty-first century, the volume as a whole invites us to redefine the concept of "letters". We note the presence of e-mail messages and fax transmissions. For these two correspondents, their communication of thoughts and ideas is paramount; the means less so, though Coetzee admits a preference for letters that still come in stamped envelopes. And he puts forward the intriguing idea that in a world of mobile phones, fiction that fails to integrate them into a plot risks being seen as "quaint" (220). For his part, Auster is not opposed to e-books, if they encourage reading, but not at the cost of eliminating traditional paper books. He justly laments the loss of so many bookstores, record stores, and comfortable movie theaters, and he still likes to use a typewriter. Both he and Coetzee are troubled by what Auster calls "the great carnival of stupidity that has become our

public life" (196), but these men seek not to retreat, J. D. Salinger-like, from the public eye. Rather, this volume shows them eagerly on view.

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