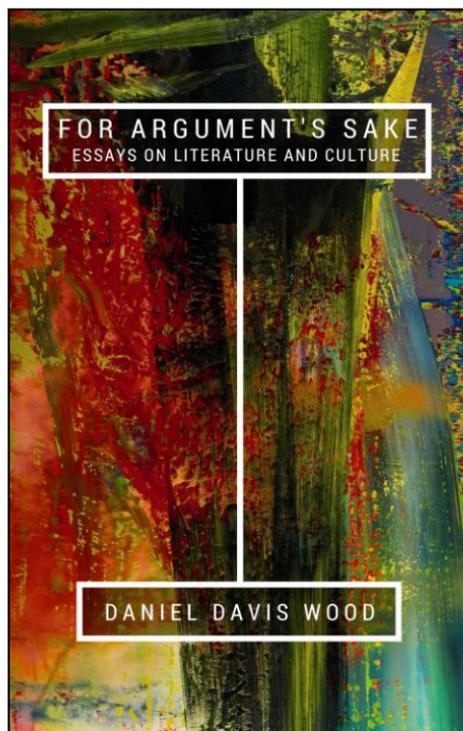


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 221-224.

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BELLOW'S 'ADVENTURES'

This note originally appeared online at *Infinite Patience* (4 November 2010).

AS WELL AS BEING A NOVELIST OF ALMOST PEERLESS TALENT, J.M. Coetzee is arguably one of our best contemporary literary critics. By and large, he is generous in his sentiments towards the activity of writing but unsparing in his assessment of the words that make it onto the printed page; and I find that he also has the rare ability to make me want to pick up and read or reread whatever book he is discussing even if he does not hold it in high esteem. So, as I slowly made my way through *Inner Workings*, Coetzee's most recent collection of literary criticism, I also felt impelled to return to some of the books already on my shelves, especially the great American works: Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, and, most recently, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*.

The point of Coetzee's essay on *Augie March*, however, is that the novel is far from "great." While the essay opens with a sense of reverence — "Among American novelists of the latter half of the twentieth century, Saul Bellow stands out as one of the giants, perhaps *the* giant" (207) — it doesn't take long for a to frost settle over the pleasantries:

By his own account, Bellow had a great time writing *Augie March*, and for the first few hundred pages his creative excitement is palpable and infectious. ... The book won its readers over with its variety, its restless energy, its impatience with the proprieties. Above all, it seemed to say a great *Yes!* to America. Now, in retrospect, that *Yes!* can be seen to have come at a price: the price of critical consciousness. (212)

For Coetzee, the excitement Bellow felt while writing *Augie March* led him to blurt out an onanistic mess of a book — unstructured, plodding, and intellectually self-congratulatory:

The book becomes steadily less engaging as it proceeds. The scene-by-scene method of composition, each scene commencing

ing with a tour de force of vivid scene-setting, begins to seem mechanical. The many pages devoted to Augie's spell in Mexico engaged in a harebrained scheme to train an eagle to catch iguanas add up to precious little, despite the compositional resources lavished on them. Augie's principal wartime escapade, torpedoed, trapped with a mad scientist in a lifeboat off the African coast, is simply comic-book stuff. (211)

The crux of Coetzee's criticism is this: "Once it becomes clear that its hero is to lead a charmed life, *Augie March* begins to pay for its lack of dramatic structure and indeed of intellectual organisation" (211). At what point exactly does it become clear that Augie March leads a charmed life? Coetzee doesn't quite specify. In my reading, though, the moment of clarity comes just after Augie resolves to procure an abortion for Mimi Villars and just before he actually procures it. With no money to pay for an abortion, he decides to return to his old habit of shoplifting valuable second-hand books. He is caught in the act by a bookstore security guard who turns out to be one of his boyhood acquaintances. Rather than arrest Augie and charge him for his crimes, his acquaintance lets him walk free but asks for a meeting outside the bookstore. The two men end up sharing a nostalgic conversation during which the other man reveals that he is unhappily married and raising a family he does not actually want. When he learns that Augie stole from the bookstore only as a means of acquiring money to pay for an abortion, he offers to give Augie the money so that others might avoid finding themselves burdened with unwanted children. How can Augie's life be anything but charmed? He sets out to acquire some money, he fails and falls into trouble, and then the man who rescues him from trouble drops the money straight into his lap.

But here's the thing. The title of Bellow's novel is *The Adventures of Augie March* and yet nothing about this sequence strikes me as particularly adventurous. On the contrary, the entire sequence strikes me as an exploration of destitution and desperation; and, as such, I think it indicates that the novel does not lack "intellectual organisation" despite Coetzee's assertions to the contrary. It is true that

much of *Augie March* is exaggeratedly adventurous, with the Mexican eagle-training scheme and the lifeboat episode being prime examples. But many other sequences are decidedly unadventurous because either pitiful, as in the case of the abortion, or else mundane, as in Augie's compulsive reading of the literary classics. So, as the novel brings these diverse exploits under the banner of 'adventures,' it essentially advances a protracted definition and redefinition of that one word: again and again it posits a variety of activities each of which might conceivably constitute an adventure, and, with each new activity implicitly labelled as an 'adventure,' it offers qualification after qualification on the definition of 'adventure' it advances. In a sense, the title itself is the lodestone of the novel's intellectual organisation, as the various narrative episodes revolve around that word and exert upon it a sort of oscillating centripetal force that twists it into a particular shape.

I don't mean for these remarks to represent a celebration of *The Adventures of Augie March*. On the whole, in fact, I share Coetzee's general ambivalence towards the novel. But *Augie March* does demonstrate a principle of intellectual organisation — and a simple one at that — which Coetzee seems to have overlooked. While an outstanding critic in many respects, this is perhaps one instance in which he let slip the generosity with which he usually approaches the subjects of his critical analyses.

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