The Colony Survives the Night

“Only an Englishman!” she says.

He's not quite sure what she means, but the fact that she has managed to successfully pick him out from among the fifty or so passengers still spilling from the bus and into the shrill Grahamstown light suggests that she might well be right.

Let's sketch the scene, then: it's about 7am on a chilly August morning in 2008, and he finds himself suddenly set down upon a dust-bedevilled street in a town that, as far back as 1812, marked the eastern frontier of British influence in the Cape Colony. He has spent the past twelve hours on the overnight coach service along the south coast from Cape Town; he has barely slept, is ill dressed in shorts and t-shirt, and with his bleary attention scattered upon the luggage that surrounds his feet, he does indeed carry a certain spectre of antediluvian Englishness about him.

Two more things, though: one, he's not wearing any shoes, having taken them off for the sake of comfort on the bus; and, two, apart from the woman's own, his is the only face among the crowd one would likely describe as white. He chooses to believe that it was the shoelessness that gave him away....

Anyhow, the woman here to greet him is named Sue, let's say. Sue and her husband – let's call him John – are to be his hosts for the next two months here in the Eastern Cape. They are descended from Scottish settlers, she informs him; he is again not sure quite what hue this lends the comment about his supposed Englishness. Welcoming? Oppositional? Collusive? Conspiratorial? Whatever, one thing is clear: given that he will be staying in a cottage at the back of their gated property while he carries out some archival work at the National English Literary Museum, he is glad to be met with this slightly distancing candour, whatever its basis.

To be precise, then, he is to spend most of his time at the museum sifting through thousands of documents pertaining to JM Coetzee, South Africa's most recent recipient of the Nobel Prize for

Literature; he has somehow managed to convince himself – not to mention the University of London's Central Research Fund – that from among the museum's countless cabinets of letters, lecture notes, articles, reviews, and so on, he will be able to reconstruct the story of Coetzee's lifelong interest in mathematics.

“Mathematics?” Sue remarks. “Oh, how interesting....”

“I hope so,” he replies, familiarly knowing, rueful.

You see, this is by no means the first time someone has referred to his work as 'interesting'. Judging by the contorted facial expressions that invariably accompany the word, though, he is beginning to wonder if he missed a memo somewhere, if the world has decided to use the word 'interesting' as a polite, conventional indicator that the speaker wishes the conversation to end as abruptly as possible, never to be mentioned again.

In fact, it's more than that: he has come to accept that professing an interest in mathematics among literary scholars is something like revealing oneself as a member of some perverse sexual cult – in their desperation not to appear disapproving or prudish, but simultaneously fearful of the disapproval of any other prudes that might be in the room, the literary scholar tends to quaintly lower the eyes, to mumble loose whispers about a vaguely erotic, or, in this case, mathematical, past, and to hope dearly that the conversation soon shifts to matters less taboo. So, well, like that, but with graphs and equations instead of harnesses and whips.

Anyway. As it turns out, the summer of 2008 is a strangely apt time to be doing what he is doing. Only a year later, Coetzee would publish *Summertime*, his third and ostensibly final volume of fictionalised autobiography. In this work of self-deprecatory personal myth-making, Coetzee structures a collage of dialogues and narratives around the efforts of a youngish British academic to reconstruct a period from the life of a now deceased 'John Coetzee'. The ironies mount. Having looked into Coetzee's letters and diaries, this academic has decided that such archival materials “*cannot be trusted*”:

> *not as a factual record – not because he was a liar but because he was a fictioneer. In his letters he is making up a fiction of himself for his correspondents; in his diaries he is doing much the same for his own eyes, or perhaps for posterity.*

Back here in the Grahamstown of 2008, and even without Coetzee's subsequent warning, he is all too aware of the risks associated with archival research. Indeed, it is not just the intrinsic fictionality of such materials that gives him pause: since the process of documenting a particular aspect of an archive necessarily involves the selection and orchestration of otherwise heterogenous and discrete materials, it inevitably imposes upon those materials selected for representation both a subjective, partial interpretative frame and a covertly autocratic narrative structure. And if one has come from England, of all places, to a colonial settler town in South Africa, of all places, the autocracy presiding over that narrative is even more heavily burdened with the weight of history. He's walking a tightrope here, and he knows it – not only does his work sometimes seem to him, at best, academically tenuous, but even its moral validity now seems open to question. He'll just have to do his best, he resolves, to make the most of the opportunity. He'll find what he finds, present it as nakedly as he can, and let the market forces of academia decide whether it was a worthwhile venture, or merely a folly borne from the comfortable superfluousness of the economic north.

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The very next morning, let's call it Monday, he makes his way down to the museum. He can't help but take in the nominative symbolism of each of the roads that charts his path to the archive: Charles Street, Henry Street, African Street, High Street. History and metonym so tightly intertwined here, he thinks: is it possible to encounter the materials ahead of him unaffected by such blatant reminders of colonialism? How not to visit a University named after Cecil Rhodes, moreover, without at least occasionally feeling like some kind of pathetic postscript to colonial

misadventure? He has no easy answers, and before he knows it he is deep in the bowels of the museum.

His main point of contact at NELM is a kindly, diligent woman by the name of Cecilia Blight. You truly could not make it up: Cecilia, derived from a latin phrase meaning 'the way for the blind'; and blight, meaning to spoil, harm, or destroy. He's reading too much into this, surely. Before he blunders blindly into the blight, though, he tries to evade such paralysing symbolism by grounding himself in the reliable objectivity of number, and thereby seeks to determine the scope of the task ahead. He asks Cecilia to produce a full inventory of those of the museum's holdings tagged in its electronic database with Coetzee's name. It turns out that the museum stocks more than 1200 relevant journal articles; he will of course have to pore through all of these in detail – scanning both on and between the lines for anything even vaguely mathematical – before he begins to look at the less orderly (and seemingly more vast) collection of unpublished archival materials. But, no, he thinks to himself, you are patently not the pioneer here: make the data work for you. So, using the database's in-built search engine, he filters the list of articles against a series of lexical strings: as many as 590 – nearly half – of the archived pieces contain within their 'subject description' one or other variation from the lexical string ‘writ*’ - writer, writing, written, and so on. Consequently, and working on the optimistic, heuristic principle that the ideal archive maintains a causal, deterministic relationship between its materials, its data, and even its metadata, he finds it reasonable to conclude that the academic discourse responding to Coetzee’s novels has considered the subjects of ‘writing’ and the ‘writer’ to be an important part of his literary enterprise, and so has dealt with them extensively. Similarly, that the string ‘colon*’ appeared no fewer than 429 times – over a third – indicates the degree of significance critics have accorded to issues relating to colonialism in Coetzee’s work. So far, so unsurprising. And while not tending towards ubiquity to quite the same extent, the strings ‘other*’ (177 matches), ‘language*’ (147), ‘ethic*’ (124) ‘power*’ (69), ‘censor*’ (59), and ‘desir*’ (32) each correspond to subjects that have evidently been deemed to merit relatively exhaustive critical responses.

In the context of his visit, however, one statistic stands out most of all: the string ‘math*’ does not register a single match. Despite the otherwise extensive interrogation of the most prominent fields of contestation operating beneath the surface of Coetzee's novels, then, the archive, such as it is represented in this bald, numerical form, considers his inheritance from mathematics not only to be trivial, but to be non-existent. Literally of zero significance.

Can it be possible that he is *this* wrong? That his venture is *this* misguided? No: he knows there's mathematics in the novels, has given lectures to that effect on a number of occasions, and met with no more scepticism from Coetzee specialists than he might have expected. So why do both the discourse, peopled by such smart literary people, and this archive, peopled by the apparently unbiased, well-intentioned archivists of Grahamstown, appear to be colluding in such a brazen whitewash? His work here, if only in this fleeting moment, seems suddenly more like a mission of honour, a crusade against the inert falsifications not only constructed by this archive, but by the whole literary establishment and its weird suppression of mathematics.

Thus belit, he forgets about the published materials for a while, and decides to wade straight into the sea of papers he is primarily here to document: namely, Coetzee's notebooks from his early career as a university teacher. The first box pertains to a 1966 course in Critical Reading that Coetzee taught at the University of Texas at Austin while pursuing his Ph.D. on Samuel Beckett. The first few composition books turn up little of major relevance to his proposition, and mostly detail by-the-book classes on style, structure, and rhetoric. But, wait, what is this? His gaze hovers awhile upon a marginal comment scrawled over Coetzee's notes to the structuralist Simeon Potter's book, *Language and the Modern World.* Quote: “What does Potter mean by calling mathematics 'semantically tautologous'?” He reads on, pulse suddenly aflutter. Within moments he unearths a whole series of notes on the mathematical philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's attempts to recalibrate scientific thinking so that it might aspire to the same rigorous standards as its mathematical equivalent. Then, to round everything off, all within the same filing cabinet, and all on his first morning, something emerges that resonates so closely with his reading of Coetzee's most

recent novel that he begins to feel an almost vertiginous sense of vindication: Cassius Jackson Keyser's essay on 'The Humanity of Mathematics', Coetzee notes:

> *claims that, because of the importance of the bearings it has had on other branches of humanistic learning and because it gives us leads in our Quest for the Infinite, mathematics is the first of the humanities.*

Don't get ahead of yourself, he thinks; he recalls the truism of information theory such that the more data one has access to, the more one is likely to mistake noise for signal, to see patterns among the formless mess that, while appearing to confirm one's theories, in fact only correspond to the lower thresholds one places around one's biases. All the same, this is surely too good *not* to be true, isn't it?

As the days pass, and as his findings start to coalesce into a convincing narrative, he is beginning to conceive of himself more and more as finally in pursuit of vocation. Coetzee's teaching of poetry as statistical space; his readings of Borges on infinity and Musil on imaginary numbers; the repeated appearance of Zeno's paradoxes and Boltzmann's probabilistic account of thermodynamics; his angry, uncharacteristically sweary letter to the publisher of *In the Heart of the Country* upon the removal from its galley prints of its paragraphic numbering system. Each and all of these lends weight to the proposition he came here to prove: namely, that Coetzee's literary and academic development took place in a mental realm suffused with mathematics. This much, he can now say with confidence, seems inarguably true.

All the same, true or not, what is he doing here? Is it not all fundamentally and perhaps even tragically trivial? If so, and if this is indeed his vocation, can he allow himself to live a fundamentally and perhaps even tragically trivial life? Is hunting in margins for scrawled equations a worthwhile way to spend one's time? What do these conclusions even matter, in the grand scheme of things? He's in his late twenties: shouldn't he be doing something of value by now?

Whereas back in London he could probably satisfy that question with another question – If God is

dead, then what other kind of life is there than the trivial kind? - he doesn't need to look too far beyond his window here in Grahamstown to reveal a less comforting answer. Some geography, to illuminate: the National English Literary Museum sits at the western end of Beaufort Street, a stone's throw from the lush Botanical Gardens and not much further from NELM's parent institution, the grand and stately Rhodes University; follow Beaufort Street eastwards, though, and you'll begin to notice some less-than-trivial changes, brought to life by some all-too-vivid images. The barking security dogs of the west gradually become the skin-and-bone goats of the east; the west's colonial-era houses, with their bold-white electrified gates, become the east's corrugated rust-iron township dwellings; the underarm Macbooks of the Rhodes students become the head-top earthenware water vessels of the east. You get the picture; you couldn't fail to get it. Beaufort Street itself is a story so arrow-straight, so ossified, so true. Indeed, during his stay, the last of these dichotomies is suddenly and grossly verified by circumstance: the township – home, he is told, to 80% or so of Grahamstown's residents – is undergoing a prolonged water crisis. Burst mains, let's say, have left the majority of the Xhosa population without adequate access to clean water for a number of weeks now. With little being done to remedy the situation, the local paper tells us, the younger and stronger of the Xhosa men are making a killing.

But that's not where it ends, not by a long chalk. Also in the western part of town, raised watchfully above the bowl, is the 1820 Settlers Monument. The town has its history – he gets that – and he even understands how that might inspire a certain awkward pride. Nevertheless, what is he to make of his tour guide's claim that the cannon seated at the front of the monument is deliberately pointed across the town so as to direct attention to the location where, in 1819, a Xhosa uprising against the British was brutally suppressed, resulting in, by all accounts, a massacre? The same hillside is also home, it turns out, to an active and flourishing theatre. Sue and John have told him on a number of occasions that it's a shame that he missed a recent performance by an especially vibrant Xhosa dance troupe. Without a trace of irony, 'vibrant'. He has to watch himself here: is he importing his own hitherto little-tested anxieties into a context over which, in truth, his ethics transparently have

no jurisdiction. Maybe it's true that the residents of the township are happy with their lot, as his hosts repeatedly make no bones about telling him; and maybe it's true that those same hosts genuinely believe that their patronage of vibrant Xhosa theatre troupes absolves them of some responsibility for their membership of a minority living in such proximity to a majority with whom they share such stark socio-economic disparity. Well, maybe. But, all the same, everywhere he goes, he experiences a nagging sense that doublethink awaits him just around the corner.

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Back in the museum he is becoming increasingly aware how odd and peripheral a figure he must seem to the inexplicably busy archivists (just what are they doing all day? he wonders). In fact, it's not just him: little conversation takes place at all once the working day has begun, save for during the ritualistic communal tea breaks from which, after several invitations that that the work ethic of his first few days led him to refuse, he is now implicitly excused. In truth, he has begun to prefer the silence; it is helping him to cultivate just the kind of efficient solitude for which he imagines an academic ought to be prepared. If he forges on alone, deaf to the the cacophonous countervoices of the existing discourse, then the story he constructs about Coetzee's past can be as arrow-straight as Beaufort Street; it can lay its truth out flat, a road for others to walk down, to take their own turns away from should they choose. He can lay its fictionality bare, tell it like a tale, unspool the yarn.

Back at the cottage, a parallel solitude has begun to manifest itself in the inauguration of some undeniably curious habits. He has become extremely adept at throwing a rubber ball against a wall; he has developed a fascination for the local, tri-lingual commentaries that accompany televised boxing; and, most of all, he has begun to form a rudimentary understanding of the behaviour patterns of the colony of ants whose series of nests he has uncovered by the back steps. From the ants' movements, their collaborations, their conflicts, he feels oddly compelled to spin narratives, to cultivate causation, to construct histories. These are the drones, those the queens; these are the warriors, those the hunter-gatherers. A whole world in microcosm, unfurling backwards in time before his own authorial hand.

In this way time passes – silent days at the archive; silent nights at the cottage – until it is finally time to leave. Tomorrow he flies back to London, ready to begin teaching an undergraduate course on the history of English poetry. So many dead white men. But as the final evening draws to a close, he realises that he perhaps should have informed Sue and John about the ant infestation – the truth is, he has known about the insect poison stored under the sink for long enough, and, though it horrifies him to do it, it is suddenly clear to him that he has a duty to execute. Resilient though they are, the ants writhe valiantly until they writhe no more. Duty done, he sleeps.

Next morning, woken one last time by the rude barking of the guinea fowl outside, he lopes out to catch the rising sun. Before he can reach the door, though, he feels an itch on his bare foot: a lone ant crawls manically across it. He keeps on, reaches the back steps, the acrid tang of the poison still clinging to the air. What he sees there, against all expectation and accompanied by the most distasteful species of relief, seems inexplicable: the colony has survived the night.