

Youth

J.M.Coetzee

April 2-5, 2009

The protagonist of this novel comes to the conclusion that even if he is clever, he is not as clever as his mother no doubt thinks he is, nor more to the point as clever as he once thought himself to be. What has humbled him? Mathematics. He is a student of mathematics at a university in Cape Town South Africa. To his chagrin he realizes that he is not as able to keep up as effortlessly as he used to do at school. He is humiliated by being overtaken by students who obviously do not have his talent but who work harder. He himself does not work hard, what is the point of being good at mathematics if you have to work at it? He does not say that, but the sympathetic reader can not only read the thoughts that are printed on the page, but also those that are merely thought. Thought by whom? A fictitious character? But is the character fictitious after all? The book is billed as a novel, but one strongly suspects it is straight autobiography, straighter in fact than most autobiographies. Why this disingenuousness? To avoid charges of inaccuracies? It is standard practice even in straight reporting to doctor facts a little, change names, chronologies, just to make things come out smoother and more readable and avoid causing unnecessary offense. Why insisting that it is a novel? Even if minor facts are not correct, but one suspects, as noted above, that even the minor facts are faithfully reproduced, the major facts surely are, such as the nature of his misery, his mixture of timidity and arrogance (as if one could not exist without the other), his dreams of his future. Those certainly have been felt by the author, not simply something he made up to present a pathetic character as an exemplar to avoid.

John Michael Coetzee was once a student of mathematics and English, just as his protagonist. He dreamed about becoming a poet. Pound and Eliot are his heroes. Does he like them? Does he really want to become like them? He is fascinated by the idea of being an artist, of having a deep core, and having lots of women attracted by that very deep core. In fact falling in love, or rather having a woman falling in love with him, discovering through an unprepossessing exterior, the deepness of his core. If that would happen he surely would bloom as an artist as a poet. His life would be as exciting and satisfying as that of Picasso. Or at least approach it. He is indeed approached by women, in the beginning by a nurse several years older than him. She is obviously a bit unhinged and sex with her is deeply dissatisfying to him, and by implication to her as well he reflects, causing him to doubt his prowess as a lover. This is not the kind of love that sparks the desire of a true artist. Sex is what flames a poet, makes him create, even somebody as pure and dry as Henry James ascribes to such a theory. Surely sex is a sign of authenticity, true artistic authenticity. He has other brief affairs, and even the older nurse carries on with him perfunctorily after she has moved out enraged by what he had written in his diary about her. But none is satisfying. He comes to the conclusion that he cannot stay in South Africa. It is too provincial, and besides he does not approve of the politics. The massacre at Sharpeville has just taken place, and there is also labour unrest. The regime

is doomed, and he wonders why the Soviet-union, which so commendably denounces the regime does not actively intervene. No there is no future for him in South Africa, if you want to become a real artist you should either go to London, Paris or Vienna. For practical reasons Paris and Vienna are out of bonds. He is fascinated by French but he has a very hard time learning the language, in spite of all the Latin which has been forced down his throat all those years. He finds that because of his Afrikaner background, he picks up German naturally, yet both Paris and Vienna are beyond him, so London it will be.

And we find him in London trying to get his bearings, trying to get a job. He shows a certain initiative in turning down opportunities which do not mesh with his ultimate plans, living in London proper being essential in his ambition. Nevertheless he gets sucked into being a programmer for IBM. He is not particularly good at it, much to his surprise. He had expected it to be more mathematical, a matter of encoding logic and set theory, instead it is very business oriented catering to the needs of clients. IBM is a big international company, it expects loyalty from its employees and conversely offers to take care of them binding them closer. The protagonist manages to stay somewhat apart, not getting too involved, not taking advantage of their housing and getting caught in mortgage commitments, but instead renting a small flat. But he has to adhere to dress-codes and he is expected to work beyond office hours. In fact there is little time an energy left beyond his deadening work. He has more affairs, perfunctory such, the most successful being the continuation of one he started back in Cape Town, a woman with artistic aspirations taking the initiative and conducting it entirely on her own terms. He wallows in quiet misery, nothing really goes his way. He studies Ford Madox Ford, on the recommendation of Pound, but the more he reads of him, the less impressed he is. The major work is one thing, the minor quite another. His studies are not entirely unstructured, he is in fact getting an absentee degree from Cape Town. But what about his dream? He finds that his capacity for writing poetry is being atrophied, he feels less and less inspiration. Is the work killing him? He resigns from IBM and this causes a furor. Why? Has he betrayed trust? What reasons can he adduce? The only thing he can think of is lack of friendship. He never befriended anyone during his work. He wanted to become an artist, and of course there were no fellow artists at IBM. The latter he does of course not say. Maybe one reason for the displeasure of the IBM is that programmers are high in demand, computers just about getting off the ground, with a dearth of people with the right training and frame of mind. He has no problem landing another job as a programmer. This one is more exciting, it gets him in touch with mathematicians at Cambridge. He is struck by their brilliance, and the problems involved engage him as those at IBM failed to do, never mind that much of it could be defense related.

The book ends in mid-note. We do not know what eventually would happen to the protagonist. Would he be stuck in some job, his artistic career stillborn before it had even time to be delivered? We know that the author himself eventually was vindicated. Became a writer, won prizes, prestigious prizes, and eventually even the Nobel Prize¹. Such success throws a certain light on his youthful misery. It makes it appear sentimental not bitter. Was his fictional protagonist as successful? If so you read about his travails differently

¹ It is reported that when the secretary of the Swedish Academy called him up, he responded as if it had been a matter of a dental appointment.

than if he had been doomed to the failure he so abjectly had predicted. But is there any real difference between the author and his protagonist, or should the book be an attempt to show him naked of success, of what he could have become had the future not been as indulgent? For every genius there are scores of others equally talented who never made it, be it because of bad luck, disastrous decisions, failure to extend themselves that extra inch. And what holds for a genius, more than holds for a writer. Many are called, few are chosen. Coetzee was lucky.

The book is thin, written with a light touch spared down to a minimum, and thus easily engaging.

April 8, 2009 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se