

*On Coetzee's Tjuringa:
Exploring the Unthinkable Landscape of Afterlife*

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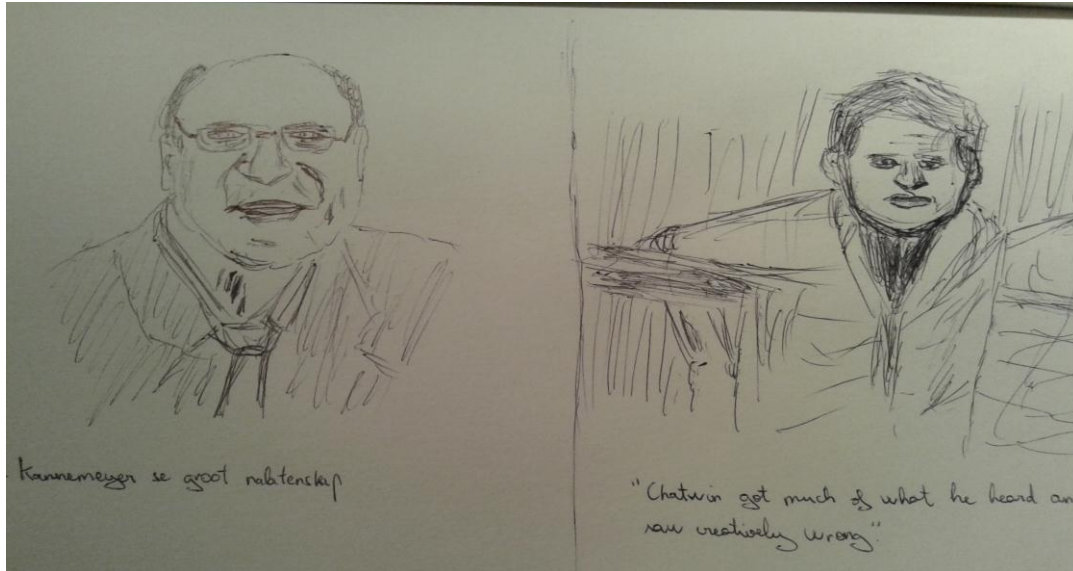
A Laia

He is in his mid-seventies. He is fully conscious of his weakness. He might not be around in ten years' time. So he (the other *he* that means *I*) wants to know everything about him, he wants to possess him before it gets too late. But he soon discovers a complete change in his thinking: expecting not to be as free as to possess him, he wants to have something that belongs to him. In the end, he has to accept reluctantly that he has nothing, nor even shares the colonial language.

He reads *The Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin. Why is it that he reads that elegant and nostalgic book? He discovers what a *tjuringa* is. It is a magical stone. It is also a sign of what was in store for him as a response to his request. Why he has been left floundering in *tjuringas* remains a mystery to him. Is this aboriginal stone what Eliot called a "correlative object?" Or could it be understood as a recipient of ancient spirits, and therefore a real sign of what a classic is? Because he, lecturing on Eliot, called a "classic" that which resists time and theory, a natural object, something that (or someone who) is still alive, he adds. As years go by he becomes used to thinking in metaphors and comparisons; he gets used to not thinking, just involved in the fetishism of a few books. He can't think *directly* on anything: he needs words, dialogues and others, he needs bodies and landscapes, and what he calls a discursive mind. *Tjuringa* may mean "that which is hidden, or secret," along with Strehlow and Chatwin. Though the latter was harshly criticized for believing in a handful of rituals, and then writing about the aboriginal sacred without authority, Australia has been seen by many people as a reserve for the world's oldest living culture. How can a culture be reduced to some rituals and how can a culture be possessed by their gurus? That is what happens in dreams, where infinitely slowly powder-fine dust transforms into the spectacle of reality.

All he knows about his man is in his Nobel lecture. He talked about the necessity of silence among young people: "If they want to prey upon the older they must remain forever in silence." It's been a long time since he lectured on boyhood and ethics; he

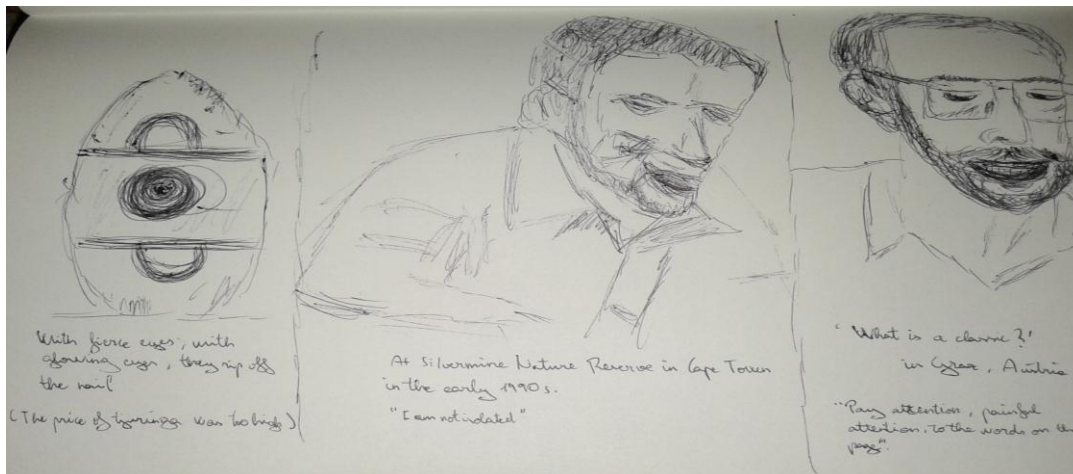
hopes Adelaide has changed his mind. And so it seems, since he has accepted old Kannemeyer as a biographer, accepting his request from Stellenbosch via e-mail. He looks at him as some people stare at perfection, but Kannemeyer is an old retired professor, and does not have the freshness of idealism, so he is able to represent things in its recurrent desolation.



What he sees is a sad man. He sings a song of tragedy and loneliness. He adds a melody of madness and death to this song. Words and lyrics talk about a son who died in an automobile accident in the eighties. It was the time when his fiction reached the top: *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michel K* and *Foe*. After listening to Kannemeyer's song he begins to understand his mantra of silence. "With such a life, I can't believe he has not become mad." Are his songlines out of tune or are the many hazards conjuring against him? Or is it a problem of mimicry, of adaptability, producing a crash between body and mind? He can feel outrageous when he watches TV, but does this mean he is incompatible with the world he is living in? The answer is no. "I'd like to persuade human beings to behave like good guests."

He wrote *Slow Man* on bikers, accidents and photography. He included Marijana, an assistant from Croatia with a troubling son. His South Africa has little to do with this novelistic Australia, or so the critics say. He would like to have his idol's *tjuringa* on his own table, but if the truth be told, there are no *tjuringas*, only souls, characters, animals and places that, according to some critics, seem to have reached a vanishing point. No magical verses or melodies, only words.

This is what Australia has made of him: he encompasses a new hilarious rhythm; his formality seems to have acquired a rich blend of the Australian "no worries." Although he takes more and more interest in animal rights, he feels impatient with labels and shows suspicion when someone makes reason the measure of all conduct.



For a stranger like him, who knows nothing about Adelaide, Australia is the reverse of South Africa. He asks whether knowledge might pass through souls using *tjuringas*. As far as he knows it has more to do with territory than with transubstantiation. In the middle draft he is only a phantom. The image of the writer as a living being escapes him; critics say he also escapes star-struck Kannemeyer, but it is maybe that some people are absent from themselves in order to look for true songlines.

During a visit to Chicago, his bicycle skids and he breaks his collar-bone. In spite of his accident in 2002 (the year he fixes his residence in Adelaide) he laughs secretly at himself. He has become an elder, "the kind of notable who is taken out of storage and dusted off to say a few words at a cultural event and then put back in the cupboard." Has he become a "classic"? He writes twenty-five versions of *Slow Man*: he deserves to be a classic. Has he definitely achieved the *tjuringa* prize which is different from the Nobel Prize? He is confident, although this treasure is made of pain and knowledge. That is the reason why he sets up in Adelaide: he cannot live in big cities anymore. He has reached, after exhausting writing, the goal of happiness, if happiness means the position of not having to write papers. Wise men enjoy a journey around the town, a conversation with next-door neighbors, family meals, or a mere landscape experience, if mere landscape ever exists. And he concentrates on wisdom by becoming purer, lighter.

I began my dissertation in 2006. He wishes me success and then congratulates me on obtaining my Ph.D. in 2010. I send him a paper on Dostoevsky, Calderón and him. He says ironically he has never been in such distinguished company. Be that as it may, he knows me, and knowing me he knows the people I know too. Is this not a songline? Presumably there is no other way to represent the self than through our pursuit of intentions and manipulations. He insists on human complexity by confronting doubts and insights.

Drivers are aggressive. Bicycles are old-fashioned, rural, slow. What does it mean? The lesson of his prose may reveal this lucidity only if one learns of their own corruptibility and vacillation: it shows how to walk patiently through the infinite corridors of the self while one feels strangely at home.



“Shortly after my visit to Adelaide in 2009 I reached the age of seventy; not long afterwards, John Coetzee reached the same age,” writes Kannemeyer. “I would be satisfied to contemplate the future with the equanimity that is so finely expressed in his prose,” he adds. But Kannemeyer died on 25 December 2011, soon after making this statement. We are not attached to life but seeds of doubts open nurtured by hard questions from the future. To find the right answer is not his business, it has more to do with sharing the nomadism of memory to improve his chance of survival.

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Edgar Tello was born in Barcelona in 1981. He studied Philology at Autonomous University of Barcelona, and in 2010 he obtained his PhD from the University of Barcelona, after writing the dissertation *El Otro en la obra de J.M. Coetzee: la lectura inconsolable*, supervised by Dr. Kathleen Firth-Marsden. His present interests are perennial philosophy and transpersonal psychology.