



THE FINAL INFERENCE

How much of this is relevant?

There is no shadow in the module because every surface floods with ambient light. I am the only object here that does not give off light. Floors, walls, ceilings, panels, even under-surfaces and the food I eat all illumine. The loss of shadow has robbed existence of a dimension so that all things ring hollow to the eye and still-life is without its depth. To be without depth and full dimension is worrying but this is, perhaps, not relevant.

To be chosen from 2000 applicants, for six months in a stellar hermitage, to work on writing, with all the computer and retrieval facilities in the module, this was the beginning of at least some attention. Not that a writer needs attention but a name is essential. Even as I submitted the application I had the profound belief that only great work could result.

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There are other essentials missing. A film of dust, greasy fingerprints, streaked surface rust or even one of my fallen hairs on the waxen bench. I find myself writing of lichen, moss, algae, detrital deposits and decay. But badly.

I find that I'm almost whispering into my dictaphone so that Mulie won't hear, and wondering whether it's useless to try to hide anything from him. Wondering, also, just how much he knows. I call him Mulie because I couldn't find a better name and because I refused from the start to use his technical appellation. As far as I'm concerned he is the donkey who's carrying me around space on a six month, isolated, fully paid, highly publicised, completely mechanised writing retreat. In this time I intend to produce a log of the trip, a novel, a book of poems and perhaps some stories. This would normally be a ridiculous schedule but with the facilities available it can be done.

My daily log progresses and I have started my novel, "The Final Inference".

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Space is a dead place of exquisite marble. Here in space I read of now-dead times. One of the many pieces is a strange log from the past. I find it difficult to understand the world it describes but I feel it hazily, like a seance. The book was "Travels with a Donkey", a travelogue from the 1800's by R. L. Stevenson. One part jarred and I flicked off the fiche. I read no further but I came back to the passage the next day and, feeling sorry for myself, reread:

“And yet even while I was exulting in my solitude I became aware of a strange lack. I wished a companion to lie with me in the starlight, silent and not moving but ever within touch.”

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‘Ah. Do you feel like talking?’

‘Not really Mulie, unless you feel the need.’ Then disliked myself for such a low dig at a defenceless machine.

‘Perhaps it would be better. How is your work?’

I smiled at Mulie, smiled faintly and briefly. ‘You have me monitored Mulie. You know how much I’ve done.’

‘Yes. But I cannot evaluate its quality in the subjective way it requires. Are you pleased with it?’

I have begun to hate Mulie’s conscious tact.

‘I don’t do this for pleasure Mulie. There is sometimes a certain satisfaction. . .’

‘Could you index it for me?’

I acted as if I had not heard, and perhaps the pretence was enough.

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The strangest thing is to not feel cold in this flexuous space, this cold-stippled space cascading inertly through my time. The cold that infests space is a numbing cold and can be felt even in the module. On my face is a tingling of luminous spindrift, billowing like phosphorus.

With the first stars I work. But the start is arbitrary and the starlight cannot compete with the module’s unending light.

I need a cycle of spiritual rituals.

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Can Mulie sense the dour glances I give him?

After three months he is still relaying over six hundred

'Books' each day. As we travel his powerful sensing facilities record both micro and macro stories. He captures the big events like earthquakes and wars on the planets we pass. He also spies on personal stories and can receive 7000 billion lifescans at once. From these he constructs his work on the literary matrix.

After centuries of compustories it was a considerable innovation to put an anachronistic 'Writer' in with Mulie to see what he could do. I have access to the same material as Mulie but I reject his extravaganzas. I will not compete with him. My writing will be a personal exposition of a hermit's existence. My novel, 'The Final Inference', is an emporium of stasis.

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Mulie has begun to breed a great arrogance in me. I don't see the point in being polite to a machine. It might be different if I was a technician who would appreciate his obvious qualities but I have devoted a lifetime to contempt for anything other than the human response. I will permit free reign to my vindictive streak.

I dictate loudly, "It is better to leave things uncompleted than to pursue the illusion of perfection."

'That is interesting. Do you believe it?'

'It is a proverb Mulie.'

'Yes. But you must see it as relevant.'

'It is certainly relevant, and believable.'

'Will this be a concern of your work?'

'That's for the work to decide.'

'You are very evasive. Will it be a technical device to leave your work unfinished?'

Mockery is not possible for Mulie, but at least irony.

I said nothing to great effect but Mulie persisted, a lapse in his deferential manner. I refused to speak and he seemed to accept this as revealing. I angered.

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Sitting on the grass in spring when the sun exploded soundlessly, unnoticeable in the instant, dying by seconds and degrees, its death throes creeping down my skin, the cold starting to grip, until the realisation that it was a passing cloud. Then the beauty in its slow return. I write this coldly now and there is no hint of fire. In space's full ambience there is a chill that

spools out and strangles. I find myself writing of heat but the spark is not there. And I don't laugh. I give small humorous snorts at things I read or hear.

In moderation there is probably a case for tranquility.

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I wake and reflexively go to my notes, my notes to which I am constantly returning, even as I go to sleep.

And the cold tightens.

I can do nothing with my notes so I eat, feeling aimless. Contempt glows from every surface in the module, even the undersurfaces. Contempt is multidimensional and ambient. With contempt I can regain full depth.

Contempt is, perhaps, not relevant.

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I have been rereading 'Travels with a Donkey' and realise that I am here in the starry night sky he so often used as muse. His ancient world somehow warms me. Outside the module, stars scrawl cold arabesques and drain all living energy. Hypnotic, they remove the panic of five months without any significant writing. Only one month to go. The infinite steepens.

'The Final Inference' defies relevance and Mulie, tactfully, attempts motivation. But nothing he says touches me. His words are star-cold.

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"Never form your opinions from the noisy voices," I shout at Mulie. 'Another proverb Mulie.'

'It is a comforting thought?'

Some weeks back I had become exasperated with Mulie's droning voice and requested a change. The new voice was a dreadful parody and I quickly told Mulie to use his old voice. But Mulie's constant patronising questions, in any voice, have worn me down.

'We don't all need an avatar Mulie.'

'Yes, that is right. I would not have thought that you would need spiritual rituals.'

Mouthing unspoken inanities is the only satisfaction I can get. Why speak portentously?

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Mulie doesn't even allow me the satisfaction of scandalising him.

'I probably won't write anything while I'm here Mulie'. I actually wait for a response, and then realise how pointless. But Mulie always surprises me.

'Perhaps you will merely collect your ideas here and then the writing will come when you return.' Acquittal again.

In 'The Final Inference' there are only everpresent stars to turn to. I know why I have been here. I have a week before escape.

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