PROBING A CULTURALLY UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIP: THE UNEXPECTEDLY TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECTS OF UNROMANTIC LOVE IN J. M. COETZEE'S *THE POLE*

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Abstract

Although *The Pole* is not set in a traditionally (post)colonial context, navigating as it does between Spain and Poland, J. M. Coetzee's latest novella emerges as a subtle yet efficient vehicle for cultural critique, one that engages in intercultural negotiations and, more specifically, addresses the imbalanced relationship between representatives of 'dominant' and 'non-dominant' European nations. Next to examining these issues that shed light on Coetzee's political agenda, this essay looks, more generally, at the ways in which the author reassesses the cultural (i.e. musical and literary) legacies of Romanticism with a view to questioning the Western ideal of romantic love as a cultural construct. I also explore how he embraces romance and appropriates some of its narrative codes in order to open up intertextual dialogue with a European classic of that literature, namely Dante Alighieri's first work *La Vita Nuova*. Finally, I rely on the notion of "flat affect," which Lauren Berlant has defined as a mode of "underperformed emotion" (2015, 193), to try and show how Coetzee's self-reflexive strategy of revision allows him to contest the archetypality of the romantic narrative and, ultimately, to push back the limits of the genre.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, *The Pole,* Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova,* Cultural Asymmetries, Legacies of Romanticism, Romantic Narratives.

UNA RELACIÓN MARCADA POR LA DESIGUALDAD CULTURAL A EXAMEN: LOS EFECTOS INESPERADAMENTE TRANSFORMADORES DEL AMOR NO ROMÁNTICO EN *THE POLE* DE J. M. COETZEE

Resumen

Aunque *The Pole* no se sitúa en un contexto (pos)colonial tradicional, al desarrollarse entre España y Polonia, la última novela corta de J. M. Coetzee funciona como vehículo sutil pero eficaz de crítica cultural, que aborda la relación desequilibrada entre representantes de naciones europeas 'dominantes' y 'no dominantes'. Además de examinar estos aspectos que revelan la agenda política de Coetzee, en este ensayo analizo cómo el autor reevalúa los legados culturales (musicales y literarios) del Romanticismo para cuestionar el ideal occidental del amor romántico. También exploro cómo Coetzee abraza el género romántico y se apropia de algunos de sus códigos narrativos para entablar un diálogo intertextual con *La Vita Nuova* de Dante Alighieri. Finalmente, recurro ala noción de "afecto plano" definida por Lauren Berlant como una forma de "emoción subdesempeñada" (2015, 193), para mostrar cómo la estrategia autorreflexiva de revisión de Coetzee le permite cuestionar la arquetipalidad de la narrativa romántica y, en última instancia, ampliar los límites del género.

Palabras clave: J. M. Coetzee, *The Pole (El polaco),* Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova,* asimetrías culturales, legados del romanticismo, narrativas románticas.

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1. INTRODUCTION

J. M. Coetzee's *The Pole* (2023) is a contemporary romance of sorts, bringing together Witold Walczykiewicz, a renowned 72-year-old Polish pianist, and Beatriz, a Spanish patron of the arts in her late forties whose Concert Circle stages classical recitals in Barcelona. In this text, however, the 2003 Nobel Prize laureate goes beyond depicting the difficulties inherent in a love story involving an age gap and deploying across geographical borders, one in which the protagonists are forced to communicate in a language –English– that is not the mother tongue of either. Indeed, Coetzee's latest novella also takes on a political dimension inasmuch as it probes the complexities of a culturally unequal relationship: the fact that Beatriz is, at first, reluctant to return Witold's affections may simply stem from her own (hardly interrogated) incuriosity about Poland, a country that seems as "stuck in the past" as her all-too-unmodern suitor, who is repeatedly portrayed as "a man from another era" (71; see also 72, 90) and constantly reduced to his nationality –from the title onwards, he is consistently referred to as 'the Pole'– as a result of his supposedly unpronounceable surname.

As Coetzee lays bare Beatriz's unacknowledged assumptions of cultural superiority, he also arguably seeks to challenge the Western R/romantic ideal, i.e. what is predominantly conceived of and valued as R/romantic in twenty-first-century societies: when spelt with a capital letter, the term will refer to nineteenth-century Romanticism as an aesthetic-historical tradition, whose cultural and affective legacies are still pervasive today, though in potentially altered forms; when used below, a lower-case letter will precisely represent our contemporary, looser understanding of the word, which takes its cue from, as much as it may distort or simplify, such legacies. In practice, we will see that while Beatriz accuses Witold, even after his death, of having "had the whole creaking edifice of romantic love behind [him]" (Coetzee 2023, 145), she is the one who is disappointed by the utterly unromantic, "at-a-distance renderings" (46) of this unconventional interpreter of Chopin, who strove to offer a "revisionary" yet "historically authentic" (5) reading of his fellow countryman's music. In the same way as she regards him as "too old in spirit for music ... that belongs to more ardent souls" (38), she deplores that he lacks the words, in English just as in any language, to seduce her in accordance with the usual conventions of R/romantic love. Predictably, such "theatrics" (140) are equally absent from Witold's postmortem literary legacy, which consists in a collection of 84 poems in Polish, insofar as this "book of Beatrice, put together by an obscure follower of Dante" (103), confirms that the Italian master's disciple was a man who "lack[ed] the art that quickens the word" (138). Yet, the Spanish translation of these poems will enable Beatriz to understand how unexpectedly powerful a trace Witold, as "*[a] spectre from the past*" (55, italics in original), left in her.

Although *The Pole* is not set in a traditionally (post)colonial context, navigating as it does between Spain and Poland, the novella emerges as a subtle yet efficient vehicle for cultural critique, one that engages in intercultural negotiations and, more specifically, addresses the imbalanced relationship between representatives of 'dominant' and 'non-dominant' European nations. Next to examining these issues

that shed light on Coetzee's political agenda, this essay looks, more generally, at the ways in which the author reassesses the cultural (i.e. musical and literary) legacies of Romanticism with a view to questioning the Western ideal of romantic love as a cultural construct. I also explore how he embraces romance and appropriates some of its narrative codes in order to open up intertextual dialogue with a European classic of that literature, namely Dante Alighieri's first work *La Vita Nuova*. Finally, I rely on the notion of "flat affect," which Lauren Berlant has defined as a mode of "underperformed emotion" (2015, 193), to try and show how Coetzee's self-reflexive strategy of revision allows him to contest the archetypality of the romantic narrative and, ultimately, to push back the limits of the genre.

2. *THE POLE*'S PUBLICATION HISTORY: QUESTIONING THE GLOBAL DOMINANCE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The peculiarities of *The Pole*'s publication history are relevant insofar as they touch upon a theme that features centrally in J. M. Coetzee's œuvre and in this text in particular: that of power relationships and cultural asymmetries, both across the world's hemispheres and in the Global North. Coetzee's novella was first published in the fall of 2022 by the Argentinian press El Hilo de Ariadna, in a Spanish translation titled *El polaco*; it did not come out in English (the language it was originally written in) until the following year, as a stand-alone novel in the United States and, in the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, together with five appended stories penned over the previous two decades (four of which, namely "As a Woman Grows Older," "The Old Woman and the Cats," "The Glass Abattoir" and "Hope," centre on the recurring character of Elizabeth Costello while the fifth, "The Dog," first appeared in 2018 in the Spanish-language version of *Seven Moral Tales* (*Siete Cuentos Morales*) under the title "El Perro." This was Coetzee's third book in a row to have been initially published in the Southern Hemisphere– a strategy that has been seen as "a conscious and political choice" (Fox-Martens 2023). Indeed, the symbolic importance of "publishing in the South before the North" (Coetzee qtd. in Harbour 2022) has been stressed by Coetzee himself, providing him with "a way of challenging [the] entitlement" (Fox-Martens 2023) of English on the global scene. In *Speaking in Tongues*, a recently published dialogue between Coetzee and his Argentinian translator, Mariana Dimópulos, the authors extensively discuss their desire to destabilise what they identify as "a network of linguistic dominance" (2025, xii) –one that tends to hierarchise world languages– through their own "unusual" project, whose goal was "to make *El polaco* the 'original' text, in the sense that all further translations would proceed from the Spanish text, not the English" (xvi). Although this plan was eventually "thwarted by pressures from within the publishing industry" (xvi), it "had a political dimension too, arising from [their] growing concern about the global spread of the English language, including concern about the imbalance in the trade in translations worldwide: far more books are translated each year *out of* English than are translated *into* English" (xvii, italics in original).

Crucially, the project of unsettling the status of English as a donor language in order to place Coetzee's English text and its Spanish translation on an equal footing –or even to make the latter a new original "intended to carry no marks of a secondary status" (29)– is closely interrelated with the "unusually bodiless and unlocated" (60) English in which *The Pole* is written. One of the reasons why Coetzee's language in this book "lacks the solidity (semantic but sonic too) that characterizes most high-quality English" is that "by the time [he] began to compose it, [he] had reached a point in [his] life where [he] was seriously concerned about the English language as a global political force"; in the writer's own words: [i]t was my intention that no translation—no "good" translation—of the book should be inferior to the English, and thus that the notion of an "original" version of *The Pole*/*El polaco* could be brought into question (61). To some extent, the peculiarly disembodied quality of Coetzee's English in *The Pole* also ties in with the mode of "underperformed emotion" (2015, 193) Berlant has defined as "flat affect" –I will return in more detail below to the ways in which Coetzee uses such underperformative language to renew the conventions of the romantic narrative (see Section 8).

However, while publishing in Spanish first has allowed him to question the global dominance of English, his seemingly uncritical approach to Spanish –another major hegemonic language since early colonial days– has been pointed out as "a missed opportunity for reckoning with a significant linguistic conflict": although *The Pole* is mostly set in Barcelona, neither Catalonia's "specific political context" nor "the Catalan linguistic dilemma" (Fox-Martens 2023) are explicitly acknowledged. Yet, beyond this apparent non-recognition of the hegemony of Spanish over minor European languages, it can be argued that the imbalances between 'unequal' European cultures are subtly addressed in the narrative, through Coetzee's portrayal of Beatriz and Witold's relationship, and particularly through the former's biased perception of Poland (see Section 4).

3. J. M. COETZEE AND POLISHNESS

In "From the Heart of the Country to the European Core: J. M. Coetzee and *los polacos*," Robert Kusek convincingly investigates what another commentator has broadly termed a "politics of Polishness" (Wilson 2023) and thoroughly analyses the writer's "decades-long, multifaceted, and, essentially, transnational dialogue with Poland and its cultural production" as "an attempt to seek one's rightful ancestry: literary and cultural, as well as genetic" (Kusek 2023, 267). As Coetzee was drafting *Summertime* (2009), the final volume of his "*autre*-biographical trilogy" (267) *Scenes from Provincial Life* while "researching his family's genealogy" (269), he discovered that he had Polish roots and that "his great-grandfather (hitherto referred to as Balthazar du Biel) was not a German but a Pole: one Balcer Dubiel born in 1844 in the village of Czarnylas in the Prussia-annexed territory of Poland" and "recognized as the first writer in the family" (271) –hence Coetzee's ostensible identification with this ancestor. In Coetzee's compelling conversation with Dimópulos, where his family's linguistic background is addressed at some length, he explicitly refers to his

maternal great-grandfather: "[o]n my mother's side I am descended from a Pole who left Europe in the 1880s" (2025, 19). He further explains that this man "[b]orn in Prussian-ruled Silesia" (19) first "Germanized himself by changing his name," before heading for the United States, then on to South Africa, and describes this aspect of his personal history as a case in which, "for the sake of social advancement, a mother tongue—first Polish, then German—was abandoned in favour of a father language, first German, then English" (20). By the same token, his father's forebears were led to Anglicize themselves over time:

> [o]n my father's side I am descended from people who migrated from the Netherlands to the southern tip of Africa in the seventeenth century. During the Napoleonic Wars this little Dutch colony was taken over by the British, and its inhabitants became subjects of the British Crown. My ancestors accommodated themselves to their new masters, conducting their public life in English while continuing to speak Dutch at home—Dutch which, in its heavily creolized form, would become known as Afrikaans. Again we have a story of a mother tongue—Dutch—being abandoned in favour of a more powerful father tongue, English. (20)

Subsequent parts of this complex historical backdrop also illustrate the "intensely political" (22) dimension of the language of schooling in particular, which caused the young Coetzee to turn into a "child who masters the English language but is not a member of the Anglo culture" (23) from which he has become estranged:

> [i]n my case, to both the maternal and the paternal sides of my family, English—the master tongue—seemed to be the way to the future, and an English-language education the best way of ensuring that a child would prosper. ...Yet, [b]y the time I arrived on the scene in the 1940s, the reactionary Afrikaner nationalist movement was on the point of taking over political power. The current that had borne so many Afrikaans speakers into anglophony began to be reversed; and a cohort of children like myself was left stranded, at home neither among the Afrikaner-nationalist majority nor among the suddenly powerless Anglo minority. (22-23)

Coetzee further clarifies how, although he later became an "'English' writer" (24) in South Africa, "retrospective doubts" started to "creep in ... about [his] adoption of the English language" (xiii) and how these doubts gradually affected the nature of his own language:

> I began to question my position in the system, as an assimilated foreigner whose very mastery of the master language seemed to confirm that it was only natural that English should rule the world. I had always felt foreign in Anglo culture, felt like an imposter. ... The language of my books began to take on a more abstract quality. I had lost interest in sounding like a native—that is, a native English speaker. What was going on? I told myself I was feeling my way towards a rootless language, a language divorced from any sociocultural home. (25-26)

Arguably, this process culminates in the "null linguistic state" of *The Pole*, a book that its author "deliberately starved ... of what [he] think[s] of as native

nutriments" in order "to emphasize [his] personal rupture with [the English language]" (61), thereby also feeding into a sense of affective "flatness," or emotional underperformance, which –somewhat paradoxically, perhaps –contributes to refreshing the romantic genre (see Section 8).

Coetzee's "preoccupation with Polish literature and culture" nevertheless predates his genealogical discovery: as Kusek proceeds to explain, it is "part of a larger strategy of seeking new alliances and partnerships across the north-south/east-west divide" by "building an alternative 'affective community'" (2023, 267) as well as "initiating and sustaining the conversation with [a] minor culture and literature" (271). Coetzee's "lifelong concern with the life and work of Zbigniew Herbert" (273) is discussed at length, along with his interest in other Polish writers such as Stanisław Barańczak, Andrzej Konwicki, Jerzy Kosiński, Czesław Miłosz, Andrzej Munk, Bruno Schulz, Wisława Szymborska, Aleksander Wat (see 272), Witold Gombrovicz or the linguist Anna Wierzbicka, whose book *Imprisoned English* (2013) is, "in hindsight, ... considered instrumental in Coetzee's growing alienation from English and decision to publish his latest works in Spanish translation" (273). In this context, *The Pole* –in which the name of yet another Polish writer, Cyprian Norwid, also appears (see Coetzee 2023, 126)– is read not only as Coetzee's "latest addition to his long-standing dialogue with Poland" but also as both "the most profound, complex, and extensive means of addressing [his] concern with Polish cultural heritage to this day" (Kusek 2023, 279) and "an act of self-identification with his ... Polishness" (285). More particularly, Kusek views the figure of Witold as "a commixture of selves," i.e. "a 'mask' that stands for (or hides) a number of other Poles" (namely Gombrowicz, Chopin and Herbert), and as "an avatar of Coetzee himself" (285) –I will go back to his male protagonist's elective affinity with Frédéric (born Fryderyk Franciszek) Chopin in *The Pole*.

4. AN IMBALANCED RELATIONSHIP: CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC ASYMMETRIES IN *THE POLE*

Inasmuch as Kusek primarily lays emphasis on the value Coetzee ascribes to his (real and imaginary) Polish lineage, he only tangentially engages with the ways in which western European nations perceive eastern ones. Interestingly, Coetzee once described Poland as a central-eastern "country with an *embattled* Western culture" (1991, 19, italics added), one that might be disregarded by more centrally positioned European nations. Although the Spanish language is not directly destabilised in *The Pole* (see Section 2), Spain's potential yet unacknowledged complex of cultural superiority over Poland is –often comically– exemplified on several occasions through the character of Beatriz, on whom the third-person narrative is focalised (except in the sixth and final part, where she addresses the late Witold in the second person). Indeed, the ironic remarks with which the narrator mimics Beatriz's thoughts and bits of conversation ironically demonstrate, at best, her lack of knowledge about Poland and, at worst, the extent of her deep-seated (though unwitting) cultural prejudices. To her, Poland is a country of "difficult" (Coetzee 2023, 16; see also 35) names,

whose language she lumps together with Russian, overlooking the fact that speaking Russian to Poles might be "insult[ing]" (95) due to a history of oppression imposed on Poland by the Russian Empire (see Kusek 2023, 270). When Witold invites her to accompany him to Brazil, her reaction –"this is not how a man goes about luring a woman into going off to Brazil with him. Perhaps it works in Poland, but not here" (Coetzee 2023, 35)– denotes a culturally condescending take on Polish lovers as backward and uncouth; she indulges in cultural clichés about "authentic Polish food (what might that be? blood sausages, boiled potatoes, sauerkraut?)" (105); and most of all, without examining her own cultural incuriosity (see 71) any further, she blames Poland for its seemingly hopeless lack of modernity, dismissing it as a county that is as "stuck in the past" as Witold himself is "a man from another era" (71).

Beatriz and Witold's relationship is also a linguistically asymmetrical one. As previously indicated, English is neither's native tongue but their respective command of that language –the only one they have in common– is, in fact, quite different: while Beatriz, who "comes from a cultivated family" (117), is "fluent in the language" "after her two years at Mount Holyoke," Witold only speaks it "after a fashion" (15), so much so that "[i]t is sometimes hard to know what the man means, with his incomplete English. Is he saying something profound or is he simply hitting the wrong words, like a monkey sitting in front of a typewriter?" (59). Witold himself concedes to Beatriz that he is "not clever like [her] in the English language" (62). Even when the linguistic barrier seems to have been overcome through intercourse (upon their third meeting, in her husband's Mallorcan family house), the narrator bitingly observes that they offer "[a] comical spectacle, the two of them, making their love in English, a tongue whose erotic reaches are closed to them" (83) despite Beatriz's greater proficiency. In any case, such linguistic asymmetries –in addition to the cultural ones– preclude them from achieving "*the equality of loving feeling and commitment*" (Weisser 2013, 6, italics in original, qtd. in Teo 2021, 457) that constitutes a "modern expectation" regarding romantic love, which –as opposed to a premodern ideal involving no "expectation of reciprocity"– has been defined, since the late twentieth century, as "a journey of growth [...] through which men and women become equal" (Teo 2021, 479; see also Kamblé, Murphy Selinger, & Teo 2021, 3).

5. REASSESSING THE CULTURAL LEGACIES OF ROMANTICISM

5.1. Rehistoricising Chopin: towards a more informed understanding of Romantic music

Since Witold unambiguously declares that he is "a musician" (Coetzee 2023, 18), "not a poet" (32), Beatriz "is prepared to entertain the idea that what the man cannot express in his bare-bones English, he will be able to express through [an] art" (37-38) he deems "most important" (18), namely music. Once again, she will be disappointed. When she finally listens to the CD –his recording of the Chopin Nocturnes (24)– he had sent her after the Barcelona recital, she remains quite

insensitive to the "dry, ... matter-of-fact" (38) renderings by this "noted interpreter of Poland's national composer" (119). As "a real Pole" (14), he is indeed expected to have made his fellow countryman's music his own like no other performer, as if mere nationality was the one key to unravelling "*the mystery of Chopin that foreigners will never understand*" (23, italics in original). In this respect, Jasmine Liu (2023) has aptly commented on Beatriz's "frequent reference to nationalities as shorthand for typecasting others" (including Witold, the titular 'Pole', and Chopin) as being "part of her no-nonsense constitution." Later, Beatriz is similarly unmoved by an audio file of Chopin's B minor sonata, recorded "for [her] alone" (Coetzee 2023, 53) in the hope that the music would speak to her: "In English I cannot say what is in my heart, therefore I say it in music. Please listen, I pray to you" (49). In Beatriz's opinion, Witold is "too old in spirit for music ... that belongs to more ardent soul" (38), even though she paradoxically "doubts" that there is room in her life for "real, impetuous ardour" (39). Arguably, her insensitivity to Witold's Chopin, as opposed to that of more intense interpreters like the non-fictional Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau, deemed "*a better interpreter*" (23; italics in original), thus results from unexamined R/romantic expectations, which allows Coetzee to question what is predominantly conceived of as R/romantic in twenty-first-century Western societies. [1]

In the aforementioned 1991 lecture, a rejoinder to T. S. Eliot's homonymous essay, Coetzee answers the titular question –"what is a classic?"– as follows: the classic is that which "defines itself by surviving," i.e. "what survives the worst of barbarism, surviving because generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and therefore hold on to it at all costs," whereas "criticism is that which is duty-bound to interrogate the classic" (19). In this text, Coetzee, most of whose work is "in dialogue" (Fox-Martens 2023) with that of (mostly Western) canonical artists, be they literary or musical, relates an epiphanic moment when, as a teenager in South Africa, he heard Johann Sebastian Bach (a recording of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, played on the harpsichord) for the first time in 1955 and wonders, in two alternative readings (the one 'transendental-poetic', the other 'sociocultural'), whether his response to Bach partook of "some inherent quality in the music" (Coetzee 1991, 18) –as if "the spirit of Bach was speaking to [him] across the ages" (10)– or of "a symbolic election on [his] part of European high culture as a way out of a social and historical dead end" (18). The gist of his answer is that "[h]istorical understanding is understanding of the past as a shaping force upon the present" (15). In other words, our understanding and performance of a classic (Bach, in the event) is hardly ever pure or absolute but is, most of the time, "historically conditioned in ways invisible to us" (14). In the case Coetzee's lecture is concerned with, "the notion of the classic as the timeless is undermined by a fully historical account of Bach-reception" (15-16): at the end of the composer's lifetime, he was "a man of yesterday" who had "no presence in society,"

[1] R/romantic spelt, as indicated above, with both a capital letter as a reference to the nineteenth-century artistic movement and a lower-case letter that represents our contemporary, looser use of the term.

i.e. was "not only not canonical" but "not public" (13); it is not until his 'rediscovery' and rehabilitation by Felix Mendelssohn that he "was promoted as a classic" and, in the wake of the early "Romantic swing against rationalism" (13), "became part of the construction of Germany and even the so-called Germanic race" (14).

To some extent, Coetzee's reflection on Bach also applies to Chopin and ties in with ongoing debates about the ideal balance between historical practice and contemporary sensibility. Indeed, our understanding and performance of Chopin has changed significantly over time. A study of performance traditions suggests an evolution from Chopin's intimate salon style to more flamboyant Romantic interpretations, especially with *rubato*, before a modern return to greater restraint and historical accuracy. Ironically, then, although Chopin (1810-1849) is part of the so-called 'Generation of 1810', which includes other early Romantics like Mendelssohn (1809-1847), Robert Schumann (1810-1856) or Franz Liszt (1811-1886), his own style of playing was antithetical to what we understand, today, as the defining features of Romanticism. It nevertheless appears that this allegedly 'Romantic', i.e. robust, "hard" and "percussive," playing style –a possible "reaction against the branding of the Franco-Polish master as a delicate, dreamy, 'feminine' spirit" (Coetzee 2023, 5)– is entirely at odds with Chopin's "subtle tonal shadings and nuances so admired by his contemporaries" (Ho Sze-Hwei 2012, 54). In this regard, it should be remembered that Chopin composed some of his pieces (like the Preludes) "on an upright Pleyel piano," which is "not cross-strung and hence less resonant" (77) than grand pianos such as modern Steinways. Since "tonal balance and subtleties" (54) could not be adequately captured by recording technology (which did not exist during Chopin's lifetime), "[d]ecades of performance may have unwittingly resulted in a 'standard' reading of a piece" (65), though one that was not in keeping with Chopin's historical interpretation. Yet, as Grace Ho Sze-Hwei argues in her thesis entitled "Changing Chopin: Posthumous Variants and Performance Approaches," it is by "trying to maintain a certain level of restraint characteristic of the composer that we come closer to the sound world or practices familiar to him" (2). Unlike many modern pianists, who still break with Chopin's original aesthetics, Witold is said to have "led the way for a new generation of Chopin interpreters in his native land," with a "revisionary" (Coetzee 2023, 5), i.e. "controversial" (3) but "historically authentic" reading of the composer "as soft-toned and Italianate" (5). As Tom LeClair has rightly noted, Witold's "recordings have achieved some notice by *minimizing*" what is generally perceived as "the Romantic qualities of his fellow Pole" (2023, italics added): "his Chopin is not at all Romantic but on the contrary somewhat austere, Chopin as inheritor of Bach" (Coetzee 2023, 3). When Beatriz, in her first postmortem letter to Witold (reproduced in the text's sixth section), keeps blaming the latter for his allegedly "tight little readings" that contrast with "the real Chopin interpreters'" (140), she is, then, the one whose Romantic expectations and, by extension, conception of Romanticism are narrow and historically inaccurate.

5.2. Romantic literature and its limiting impact on our (and Beatriz's) conception of romantic love(rs)

Another important legacy of Romanticism is our contemporary understanding of romantic love. Romantic love, Hsu-Ming Teo submits, does "not exist independently of historically-specific societies": it "is not a specific, precise emotion" but "a bundle of ideas, values, and feelings, and a historically changeable set of cultural practices" (2021, 454). As Teo further contends, "[t]hat romantic love is socially and culturally constituted, and historically contingent" (454), also has major implications for the ways in which it is represented in fiction (and in romance novels especially). Some fictional texts have, in turn, proved particularly influential in (Western) literary history, as well as instrumental in the circulation of given, historically-situated romantic conceptions. For instance, through *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, who had herself been a novelist "influenced by the Romantic movement's emphasis on primal emotion and the extreme experience of passion and the sublime," arguably had a strong "influence on modern romance novels" (464) and the modern romantic ideal (in the West, at least): she has affected "our contemporary ideas of romantic love so that we now expect uninhibited feeling, intense passion, and the drama of strong emotion to define romance" (Weisser 4, qtd. in Teo 2021, 464-465). In the process, "Brontë's Rochester –morally flawed, emotionally unrestrained, compelling in his passion and redeemed by love at the end– " has become the "model" (466) for contemporary romantic heroes. It can be posited that *Wuthering Heights* – another classic of Romantic literature composed by Charlotte Brontë's sister Emily and published in 1847 as well– has further entangled Romanticism with a specific take on romantic love, since it has strengthened the idea according to which the intensity of affect in relationships could even verge on violence, though without deliberately seeking to aestheticise the latter: while Heathcliff's brutality brings him closer to the figure of the romantic anti-hero, he has come to epitomise a dark yet archetypally romantic ideal in contemporary public consciousness (see Betzer 2026). In an essay analysing Coetzee's relationship with the women of the canon, Gillian Dooley remarks that none of the great female authors of history has found her "way into any of his critical writings" (2019, 116). Emily Brontë is one of the few female writers mentioned in his creative body of work, where he has nonetheless often engaged –controversially so at times– with the white woman experience and prioritised female characters or narrators (see Kossew & Harvey 2019, 3).[2] In his

[2] Coetzee has sometimes "been the target of a feminist critique for his representation of women" (Attridge 2019, 39), female narrators especially: scholars like Benita Parry have accused him of "discursive aggression" (1996, 50, qtd Attridge 2019, 39), since "imitating women's writing" potentially amounts to "ironically replicating the male power he is critiquing" (Kossew & Harvey 2019, 6), while "[o]ther critics [...] have seen his deployment of women narrators as representing voices marginalised by patriarchy and a lack of authority (even though this positionality is troubled by their white privilege) that broadly supports a feminist perspective (Kossew, 1993; Probyn-Rapsey, 2002; Wright, 2008)" (7). Derek Attridge underlines that Coetzee's "adoption of female voices and subjectivities" relates "to

"*autre*-biographical text *Youth*, the second volume of the above-mentioned trilogy (see Section 3), Brontë is portrayed by Coetzee's narrator, John, as one of the only "[w]omen" endowed with "the sacred fire" (Coetzee 2002, 66, qtd. in Dooley 2019, 116). Despite this apparent respect for Emily Brontë's inner, art-inducing flame, part of her literary legacy is qualified –along with that of other female Victorian writers (i.e. Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot)– in *Elizabeth Costello*. In response to an interviewer who raises "the whole issue of male authors who give voice to female characters 'in the name of their liberation' but in fact only use them to further a male philosophy" (Attridge 2019, 42), the fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello (Coetzee's possible alter ego) objects that "*women* have created *male* stereotypes too, citing Heathcliff, Rochester, and Casaubon" (43, italics in original). As Derek Attridge points out in an article dedicated to Coetzee's female characters and the limits of the sympathetic imagination, "[t]o the extent that Costello can be regarded as expressing Coetzee's own views –and of course things are never that simple– it is possible to argue that ... he regards the creation of stereotypes as a failing exhibited by writers of both genders" (43). In *The Pole*, Coetzee arguably undertakes the project –however obliquely– of "reclaiming the Heathcliffs and Rochesters from romantic stereotyping too, to say nothing of poor old dusty Casaubon" (2004, 14) and, more broadly, of coming to grips with the limiting impact of Romantic literature on our (and Beatriz's) conception of romantic love(rs). Such a project suggests that, much as "the major Victorian novelists of either sex" seemed to "have had little perceptible influence on him" (Dooley 2019, 116),[3] the Romantic vision of some may have left a somewhat paradoxical trace in his latest work of fiction, where the forces underlying

the broader question of the ethical response to the other, summarised by Elizabeth Costello with the well-known formulation, 'the sympathetic imagination'" (2019, 40): to what extent is it ethical to "to inhabit the consciousness of the 'other'" (Kossew & Harvey 2019, 6), including that of women? Laura Wright also sees Coetzee's work as being concerned with "the ethics of voicing the so-called other" (2019, 24): in her view, it "is acutely aware of the limitations of embodiment" and "consistently critiques the notion that one can realistically portray anything, much less that which one is not" (2019, 35). Still, Coetzee's fiction attempts, in particular, to problematise the ambivalent "position of white womanhood" (21), one in which white women are "problematically situated as both white oppressors and subordinate patriarchal subjects" (23). Although the author's approach to such 'oppression' is less frontally political in *The Pole* than it may be in narratives set in more obviously (post)colonial contexts (see Introduction), relational asymmetries resulting from Beatriz's position of cultural and linguistic dominance are unambiguously addressed (see Section 4).

[3] In "Art and the Female in *Youth*: Between Joyce and Beckett," Paul Stewart contends that Coetzee's male narrator, John, is "certainly conditioned by Romantic conceptions of accessing the sublime" (2019, 77). In particular, the conception based on the transfiguration into art of life-experiences involving the figure of the female is shown to derive from "the aesthetics of English Romanticism" (84), more specifically from the male Romantic author Percy Bysshe Shelley. It can then be argued that while *The Pole* is comparably "informed by the weight of the male [and pre-Romantic, in this case] literary tradition and its figuration of the female" (Stewart 2019, 85), through its playful intertextual dialogue with Dante's work and his famous heroine Beatrice (see Sections 6 & 7), it *also* investigates the textual production of 'man', not least that of stereotypical male heroes by Romantic women writers.

the (potentially violent) legacy of a Western literary tradition –Romanticism– are subtly denounced rather than celebrated.

In *The Pole*, Beatriz appears –though unconsciously– to have inherited this Romantic paradigm, which reductively tends to equate love with emotional excess. She, who once had an "insatiable" (and reciprocal) passion for a husband to whom she has remained "faithful" even if they have "grown apart" (Coetzee 2023, 11), is consequently baffled by the "aridity" (3; see also 75 and 84) of Witold, for whom love is "not the province of extreme emotions" (Teo 2021, 468). By contrast, and although the narrator points out that such an idea is probably as "outdated" as it is "sentimental," Beatriz expects "[t]o be transported, to be lost in transports" (Coetzee 2023, 14), through music and love alike –but Witold sees her, above all, as "a symbol of peace" (31; see also 32, 33, 37, 40, 41, 42, 68, 69, 80). In this sense, Witold seems to descend from a "medieval and Petrarchan," i.e. pre-Romantic "tradition of the male lover" (Teo 2021, 463), one that involves "the male idealisation of the female figure" (López 2019, 167) and need not imply any hope of reciprocity: "[i]n the Middle Ages, there was little expectation that romantic love would be requited" (457), even though it could be.[4] For example, when Beatriz asks him why he thinks his "musical hero" (Coetzee 2023, 20) lives on, he answers, along similar lines, that it is "[b]ecause he tells us about ourselves. About our desires. [...] Which are sometimes desires for that which we cannot have. That which is beyond us" (22). Like the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), who "loved [his near-homonymous muse Beatrice] all his life" although she "never gave him one word" (31), Witold assures Beatriz that he would be satisfied with what others may regard as very little:

> An ordinary life side by side –that is what I want. For always. The next life too, if there is another life. But if not, okay, I accept. If you say no, not for the rest of life, just for this week– okay, I accept that too. For just a day even. For just a minute. A minute is enough. What is time? Time is nothing. We have our memory. In memory there is no time. I will hold you in my memory. And you, maybe you will remember me too. (63)

[4] Hsu-Ming Teo hints at an "ideology of romantic love ... called *fin' amors*," which grew in medieval France –but may also have "Hispano-Arabic roots"– "in response to the sexually repressive dictates emerging from the Catholic Gregorian reforms that began in the middle of the eleventh century" (2021, 455). In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, "the troubadours employed at various French courts ... and the aristocratic elite they served developed an alternative, sacred vision of love that mastered and purified sexual desire": "true love" was "conceptualized ... as a sacred, pure plane of love that was spiritual in its effect" (Teo 2021, 455; see also 467). Building on these ideas and on cultural historian William M. Reddy's insights, Eric Murphy Selinger and Laura Vivanco further maintain that the tradition of *fin' amors* (or *fin 'amor*) had both major literary consequences in twelfth-century France, where it "was not simply concurrent with the rise of the heroic romance as a literary genre ... but a crucial factor contributing to the popularity of this genre," and an "afterlife ... in modern romantic love culture" (2021, 489) since "the twelfth century's positive vision of sexual partnerships," which "was something entirely new in Western literature," has been "constantly with us ever since" (Reddy 41, qtd Murphy Selinger & Vivanco 2021, 489).

Beatriz is also troubled by "the question of physical appearance" (135), to which "modern lovers recognize the romantic attraction" (Teo 2021, 463) that is supposed to spark mutual passion. Here, she is clearly put off by the "cadaverous" (Coetzee 2023, 20), "ugly old male body" which is all that Witold "could bring to the table of love" (135). When "[s]he thinks of how it would be to share a bed with that huge bony frame, [she] shivers with distaste" (42) –a physical, age-related "reluctance on her part" (86) that will persist throughout her relationship with Witold, preventing her (during his lifetime, at least) from fully opening up to him, or to forms of love hitherto unknown to her.

Several textual cues nevertheless enable the reader to hypothesise that Beatriz's insensitivity to Witold's non-Romantic modes of expression (be they linguistic, musical or even physical) may make her, temporarily, deaf to potentially deeper desires, as well as to brands of love that would exceed her narrowly R/romantic conception. Like many contemporary heroines, on the perspectives, emotions, needs and experiences of whom romance novels have tended to focus (see Kamblé, Murphy Selinger, & Teo 2021, 1, 2; Teo 2021, 462), Beatriz may not properly "understand what love is" and may thus "fail to recognize or interpret [her] own feelings correctly" (Teo 2021, 469). It may also be the case that Beatriz is actively, though quite confusedly, resisting her own idealisation by Witold –a status that makes her unconfortable. Intriguingly, "the prevalence of the idealisation of women as muses and saviours" (Kossew & Harvey 2019, 2) in Coetzee's work can be traced back to Western literary traditions (e.g. medieval courtly texts like Dante's or the chivalric romances that Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, one of Coetzee's recurring intertexts, parodies –see López 2019, 166 and 176) that predate Romanticism, to which they offer alternative models. As much as Beatriz's romantic expectations are literarily mediated, i.e. shaped by Romanticism and its logic of passionate excess (rather than visibly conditioned by Romantic readings), she is also a literarily determined figure for Witold, a Dante-inspired figment of this quixotic character's imagination. In any case, despite her conviction that she is "deeply" –though exclusively– "curious ... [a]bout herself" (Coetzee 2023, 27), she often appears as "a mystery to herself" (LeClair 2023) and/or a living paradox to the reader. For instance, the question of "why her mind keeps going back to the Pole" is like a puzzle no existing science seems able to solve: "[i]t is a matter of missing things, and for missing things there seems to be, as yet, no ology. Mysterology? Mysterics?" (Coetzee 2023, 45). The fact nonetheless remains that Beatriz is somehow "compelled by whatever inarticulate magnetism now attracts them" (Eberlee 2023), and the reader is often brought to observe this unfathomable compulsion, which causes a frequent gap between her rational thinking and subsequent actions that clearly conflict with previous intentions or decisions but may reflect deeper, perhaps unconscious, desires. On a couple of occasions, the third-person narrator's account suggests that she is a highly unreliable character, so much so that *The Pole* has been described as "a cascade of unreliability told through Beatriz's point of view" (LeClair 2023). To give but a few examples: although she turns down Witold's invitation to join him in Girona for a second encounter because she is "too busy" (Coetzee 2023, 25), she ends up meeting him there shortly afterwards. Likewise, while "she has no intention of sleeping with him

in Sóller" (53), she spends several nights with him in her husband's Mallorcan house after the latter's departure. Even though "[t]here is a moment on the second night when out of the past there re-emerges the delicious feeling of falling," combined with the impression that Witold succeeded in "drawing music out of her" (85), she comes to the conclusion that she gave herself to him out of "pity" rather than passion and that "[o]ne should not go to bed with a man whom one does not desire" (86), as a result of which she brutally breaks up with him. Described as a way of "sav[ing] herself ... from the stigma of the too easily attainable" (90), this break-up, too, aligns with an ideal of romantic (if not strictly Romantic) love that is "peculiar to Western society" (Teo 2021, 455), since "[t]he one fundamental idea about romantic love in European-derived cultures is that love –especially 'true love'– is different from, and superior to, lust or sexual desire even though it incorporates desire" (454). In this case, love is deemed unable to incorporate desire or to transcend "the physical appetites of the body" (454) –and discarded on this account. Most importantly, confirming an early prolepsis whereby the narrator warns the reader that "[i]t would take [her] a while to overcome [her] first, instinctive response ... and to see the Pole in his full selfhood" (Coetzee 2023, 13), Beatriz firmly holds on to her belief in "the powers of forgetting" –as opposed, again, to Witold's "trust in [those] of memory" (63)– and, as a consequence, completely underestimates the imprint he has left in her.

In the days that follow their Sóller encounter, she "look[s] into her heart" but "can find no dark residue: no regret, no sorrow, no longing—nothing to trouble the future" (89). Yet, after her return to Barcelona, she is still "in a state of mild shock," and "[i]t surprises her that what occurred in Mallorca can have an effect so long-lasting, like a bomb that explodes harmlessly but leaves one deafened" (91). Until she receives a call from Witold's daughter, Ewa Reichert, in October 2019 (i.e. four years after their relationship), she feels "[s]he does not miss him, not at all. He writes to her. She deletes his letters without reading them" (91): "[t]he truth is that by the time the daughter phoned her to announce his death she had all but forgotten him, or at least moved him into the no-longer-active bin" (132). Upon learning that Witold left something for her, to be retrieved in his apartment in the outskirts of Warsaw, she is still more than reluctant to revisit a past that risks obscuring her future and recognise that she was unhinged by that relationship:

> The future lies open before her and the Pole is trying to draw her back. From the grave he stretches out a claw to drag her into the past. Well, she does not have to submit. She can shrug off the claw. ... To the man in the grave she can say, *You have no power over me. You are dead. Being dead may be a new experience for you but you will get used to it. It is a not uncommon fate to find oneself dead and forgotten*. (96, italics in original)

In Witold's apartment, which she finds empty except for a piano, a plaster bust of Johann Sebastian Bach, photographs of Witold and herself, an urn containing his ashen remains and some boxes (100), a shift nevertheless occurs when she discovers Witold's postmortem literary legacy: she starts "warming to the Pole, now that she has his testament in her hands" (104) –a manuscript consisting in a collection of

"poems, in Polish, one to a page, typewritten and numbered I to LXXXIV" (102). Tellingly, during the solitary night she spends there, "she wakes briefly, sensing someone else in the apartment" (106), as if the "abode" was "still haunted ... by the ghost of its master" (124). This spectral presence appears to literalise a trace that has not been properly registered before, though one that will no longer leave Beatriz: back in Barcelona, where she is considering having the manuscript translated into Spanish, "the poems refuse to be forgotten"; instead, "[t]hey burn with a slow fire" (120) in the bottom drawer of her desk, like the discreet but stubborn reminders of a seemingly harmless yet deafening bomb (see *supra* and 91) whose explosion prevents the poems, as well as the whole episode, from receding into history.

6. OPENING UP INTERTEXTUAL DIALOGUE WITH A PRE-ROMANTIC CLASSIC OF EUROPEAN ROMANCE: *LA VITA NUOVA*, BY DANTE ALIGHIERI

During the lecture Coetzee delivered on 13 October 2025 at De Munt / La Monnaie (Brussels) on the occasion of his VUB (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)-awarded Honorary Doctorate, he made the following statement: "[t]he writer with the crude vocabulary that language provides to deal with our emotional life –joy, sorrow, love, hate, anger, fear– is easily eclipsed by the musician with an infinite tonal range at his fingertips to explore nuances of feeling" (Coetzee 2025). In *The Pole*, although Witold had explicitly warned Beatriz that he did "not have the words ..., in English ... or in any language" (Coetzee 2023, 61), he still goes so far as to "g[i]ve up music" (140), his primary medium with its infinitely varied emotional nuances, in order to adopt "an art that he was not master of" (136) and produce "a book of Beatrice" (103), in the name of his love for Beatriz but also –arguably– in (hopeless) response to the latter's unfulfilled romantic expectations, deriving from a limiting conception of love as excess inherited from Romanticism. While Beatriz is allegedly uninterested in the art of "[f]lirting" (7) and accuses Witold, after his death, of having "had the whole creaking edifice of romantic love behind [him]" (145), she is the one who, at the end of the narrative, admits that she "would have liked to be seduced" and regrets that Witold "never actually wooed [her]" (139). In brief, she is the one who expects "theatrics" (140) –a term that can be construed as referring to the intensity and depth of feeling which have come to typify the Romantic era, conveyed as they are, sometimes in simplistic or stereotyped forms, through narrowly Romantic music, namely that of what Beatriz calls "the real Chopin performers" (Coetzee 140), and, above all, language, especially the language of love bequeathed by Romantic literature.

With this "book of Beatrice, put together by an obscure follower of Dante" (103), Coetzee engages in conversation with Dante Alighieri's *La Vita Nuova*, which forms part of *The Pole*'s intertextual framework and with which it features similarities, as well as differences. *La Vita Nuova*, a 43-chapter autobiographical account in which Dante celebrates –in old Italian– his "lifelong love" (Wilson 2023) Beatrice, is comprised of rhymed poems (such as sonnets, ballads, canzoni, etc.) that are interspersed with prose passages. As a matter of fact, Dante's poetry and prose

hark back to different time-periods in the poet's life. While most of the poems were composed during Beatrice's short lifetime, the book as a whole was penned after her 1290 death (most probably in 1291 or 1292, and by all means before 1300), which involved not only adding, in retrospect, some explanatory prose, but also reworking (even eliminating in certain cases –see Durand Fardel 1898, 137), *a posteriori* (see 17, 118, 123, 140), a number of poems.[5] In *The Pole*, Witold's poems in Polish are comparably interpolated with "extra-poetic" (Coetzee 2023, 144) "handwritten bits" (131). Although the reader is provided with little information in this regard –except that in the second-last poem, Witold asks "'[his] Beatrice'," in English, to "'save [him]'" (144), it can be assumed that the entire text, unlike Dante's, was composed from memory, i.e. after Beatriz's symbolic death or complete disappearance from Witold's life. As Jennifer Wilson (2023) recalls, *La Vita Nuova* is "a classic text of courtly love," in which "Dante describes how, in keeping with that tradition, he masks the fact that Beatrice is the object of his love by addressing [directly, i.e. in the second person] other women, called "'screen ladies.'" In Witold's text, it is, funnily, Dante's Beatrice who acts as a 'screen lady', thus obscuring the fact that Beatriz is, in truth, the object of his love: as Poem 2 suggests, "secretly it was the farther one he was devouring" (Coetzee 2023, 146). The variation in spelling (Beatrice / Beatriz) is so subtle that its fools another 'screen lady', namely the translator of Witold's manuscript into Spanish, into informing Beatriz that the character of "Beatrice ... is not [her]. That is the girlfriend of the poet Dante" (116). The screen as trope, applied to translation, might be read as Coetzee's way of drawing the reader's attention to the potential limitations of translational practice and the existence of linguistic "subtleties ... that no translation can ever transmit" (131), all the more so since, in this case, Clara Weisz Urizza –a woman "who speaks rapid Castilian with an Italian accent"– is not a professional "literary translator" (112) but "normally ... translate[s] legal documents" (113).

The main similarity between Dante's and Witold's texts is, however, that both are, at the same time, "a record of love" and an act of "mourning" (132). Firstly, although Beatriz initially feared that Witold might choose to narrativise their relationship into "a story ... about a cruel Spanish mistress who left a scar on his heart that will take a long time to heal" (90) –a scenario that is hardly compatible with her vanity, eager as she is to preserve her self-image and respectability, the poems, far from being "an act of revenge" (132), eventually make clear that Witold, just like Dante perhaps, "wanted not merely to *say* that he loved her" (120, italics in original), let alone by relying on "the flattering lies men tell the women they want to sleep with" (139), "but to prove it—prove it by performing for her sake a lengthy and inherently meaningless task" (120). Secondly, as is the case, too, in many Romantic (i.e. mid- to late nineteenth-century) narratives, the protagonists are parted by death

[5] This is attested by Dante's use of certain figures of speech, such as prolepses in Chapters XIV and XXIII, which seem to foreshadow Beatrice's death at a time when the poet could have had no real foreboding of her tragically precocious passing (see 49, 68, 122).

(see Teo 2021, 465), even if Dante's and Witold's texts respectively respond to a real death and a symbolic one. It is worth noting that Dante's poetry is typical of the so-called *dolce stil nuovo*: in this type of poetry, melancholy often casts a shadow on love, which then feels haunted by death (see Durand Fardel 1898, 128). In *The Pole*, the reader is presented with the likely hypothesis that "through his poems, [Witold] aspires to speak to [Beatriz] from beyond the grave": "like a mother who refuses to give up a dead child" (Coetzee 2023, 120), Witold –just as his medieval alter ego– has "nurse[d] his loss" and striven to make it "bearable" by "invoking, creating, calling into being a *new* Beatriz" (133, italics in original). The phrase *vita nuova* can, therefore, be understood in at least three distinct ways. In an attempt to come to terms with their grief after the brutal disappearance of their beloved, both Witold and Dante started a new life, just as their gracious ladies entered a second life (in a hypothetical afterworld, in the case of Beatrice); these beloved but lost ladies were then written into existence, as Dante explicitly mentions in Chapter XXXII and as Witold's Poem 20 spells out: "Always there is a new time / a new life / *una vita nuova*" (142; italics in original).

7. THE UNEXPECTEDLY TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECTS OF WITOLD'S UNROMANTIC LOVE ON BEATRIZ

By the end of the narrative, the translation (or mistranslation) of Witold's full poetic testament leads Beatriz to conclude that he was "not a great poet" (140). Although "he published a book of verse" in the 1960s –"a *publikacja ulotna*," i.e. "a fleeting ... or fugitive publication" (130, italics in original), he did not consider himself, as Beatriz was informed from the outset, "inspired" or "clever with words" (81). Finally, Beatriz comes to realise that despite a physical likeness to the Italian master (see 104), his Polish disciple "may not be Dante" (143) –as Witold had also previously warned her (see 81)– but that his poems still "mean a great deal to [her]" (143). While she may be disappointed that Witold was "a man who lack[ed] the art that quickens the word" (137), not least because "[n]o one is going to want to read about [his] love for [her]," she also claims that she "never asked to be written about" [140] by anyone. Even so, she is finally able to recognise that she "was fond of [him]" (144) and move beyond his "bad poetry" (136) to accept him as he was. In the concluding pages of *The Pole*, the previous depiction of Witold as "*[a] spectre from the past*" (55, italics in original) thus gains its full significance, in the sense that it comes to refer not only to Witold as "a relic of history" (90) –in his own words: "I am the old generation. I am history. I should be in a museum, in a glass cabinet" (72)– but also to the fact that he rises from both his grave and Beatriz's past, not just as a ghost-like presence but as the provider of a concrete literary legacy, to transform her present and hopefully broaden, through writing, her Romantic, and rather cramped, conception of love. In this sense, Witold's seemingly obsolete, resolutely un-Romantic approach to love leaves an unexpectedly yet deeply transformative trace

on his beloved; and even if his death precludes the kind of happy ending or HEA[6] that is conventionally expected in romance novels, including contemporary ones, *The Pole* still ends quite optimistically, with Beatriz thanking Witold, calling him her "prince" (147) and even gesturing towards "futurity" (Murphy, Selinger & Vivanco 2021, 501) through the final postscript: "I will write again" (147).

8. RENEWING THE ROMANTIC GENRE THROUGH "FLAT AFFECT"

As we have seen, *The Pole* is "at its heart a novel about language," in more ways than one: beyond being "a love story that unfolds across a language barrier" (Wilson 2023), it tackles the respective importance of "dominant" and "non-dominant" languages and literatures at the global level (taking issue with the hegemony of English and, more directly, with the power structures that may result –even within Europe– in the inferiorisation or invisibilisation of supposedly "minor" languages and literatures, like the Polish ones), questions the specific linguistic asymmetries in one of Coetzee's "relations of inequality" (Liu 2023) –that of Beatriz and Witold– and highlights the potentially transformative effects, even in (mis)translation, of superior forms of language like poetry (be it in relatively "bad" (Coetzee 2023, 136) varieties). Additionally, Coetzee seeks to challenge the linguistic legacy of what is commonly understood as Romanticism, particularly in romance narratives –an issue that is both thematised and textualised in *The Pole*, which could accordingly be labelled "meta-R/romantic" (see Teo 2021, 472). The latter term is productive on two counts, as it suggests, on the one hand, that *The Pole* somewhat obliquely yet critically comments on various aspects –including the linguistic one– of the Romantic inheritance (see Section 5, where Coetzee's conceivable engagement with a contemporary propensity for associating, sometimes mistakenly, Romanticism with exceedingly intense affects, is discussed) and, on the other hand, that the text itself, through its author's very language, encapsulates a response to this critique. At the thematic level, the character of Beatriz indeed allows Coetzee to assess the implications of expectations based on the "Romantic" language of excessive emotions for, and more broadly the often overly important part played by language in, romantic relationships. In textual terms, Coetzee is shown to resist the emotionally stereotypical excesses of Romantic language through the formal economy of means that signs "his trademark clarity" (Wilson 2023). With its "signature sparseness" (Wilson 2023) and "reserved" (Demneri 2023) –not to say "austere" (Wilson 2023)– writing style, *The Pole* has been described as "Coetzee's most pared-down novel to date" (Liu 2023). In terms of the text's "gestural" structure, the first five of the narrative's six "[i]ndividual sections ... are further broken up into subsections, clearly delineated by numbers—a ... choice which itself lends a sense of preordainment or organized inevitability to the

[6] An abbreviation that stands for "happy/-ily ever after" in dedicated scholarship (see Kamblé, Murphy Selinger, & Teo 2021, 4; Murphy Selinger & Vivanco 2021, 489-490, 501).

progression of events" (Eberlee 2023). *The Pole* is thus "unconventional" (Demneri 2023) insofar as the austerity of the writing –which echoes Witold's playing style, thereby strengthening the idea that the latter might be a stand-in for Coetzee– and the mathematically ordered subsections, which seem incompatible with a literary project involving the depiction of possibly intense emotions, break both stylistically and structurally with what is traditionally expected from romance novels and romantic narratives in general. Moreover, this sense of dryness, which may hold the reader at bay (as opposed to the R/romantic sentiments one may feel carried away by), is reinforced by the metafictional comments the text is occasionally interwoven with. Through these comments, Coetzee develops a narrative mode favouring what Lauren Berlant has called "flat affect," namely a form of "affective minimalism" (Zarranz & Ledoux-Beaugrand 2017, 16) characterised by an "underperformance of emotion" (Duschinsky & Wilson 2015, 185). The opening pages of *The Pole*, for instance, display a third-person narrator self-reflexively (and rather straightforwardly) interrogating his own fictional practice and wondering how to portray –or at least "channel" (Kirkus 2023)– his protagonists, and what to do with them:

> 1. The woman is the first to give him trouble, followed soon afterwards by the man. 2. At the beginning he has a perfectly clear idea of who the woman is. ... 3. The man is more troublesome. In concept, again, he is perfectly clear. ... 4. Where do they come from, the tall Polish pianist and the elegant woman ...? All year they have been knocking at the door, wanting to be let in or else dismissed and laid to rest. Now, at last, has their time come? (Coetzee 2023, 2-4)

In Part Two, the beginning of the ninth section is similarly underperformative:

> 9. They go for a walk on a tree-lined path along the riverside. It is a pleasant autumn day. *The leaves are turning, et cetera*. (30, italics added)

Refusing as it does to provide a detailed description of a natural environment generally regarded as conducive to the development of a romantic relationship, the excerpt points to a possible exhaustion of the realist genre Coetzee himself is not facing for the first time but is pithily illustrating, here (see italicised terms in particular), with the help of "playful" yet "critically self-aware metafictional gestures" (Kamblé, Murphy Selinger, & Teo 2021, 16).

9. CONCLUSION

Crucially, this mode of "underperformed emotion" (Berlant 2015, 193) enables Coetzee to depart from the modern conventions of romantic narratives and, by extension, to call the Western ideal of romantic love, on which these narratives are based, into question as a cultural construct. As previously submitted, romantic love is a historically constituted –and thus also mutable– concept that has been fashioned by our reading of Romantic literature's influential classics. In *The Pole*, Coetzee brings our romantic expectations into dialogue –overtly or more implicitly– with major cultural

Romantic legacies, be they musical, literary or linguistic. Inasmuch as our aspirations for emotional excess remain shaped, as he subtly demonstrates, by the contemporary –and potentially reductive– understanding of Romanticism, he endeavours to widen our understanding of romantic love by emphasising the unexpectedly transformative effects of non-Romantic love. The romantic heroine's inner transformation is, in this case, intimately bound up with a shift in narrative perspective. As in other fictions by Coetzee, "narration ... is not gender-neutral" (Boehmer 2019, 241): in the first five sections of *The Pole*, Beatriz's femininity is performed by a third-person narrator, who seems to have access to her female interiority; although the use of the pronoun *him* in the text's opening line (see first displayed quotation in Section 8) makes it clear from the outset that "a woman" is "enacted by a man" (Dooley 2019, 30), and thus that female otherness is "ethically inhabited," this type of narration remains "an expression of the masculine consciousness that governs the work" (Boehmer 2019, 241) up to this point. It is, therefore, not surprising that she resists her own idealisation –an outcome of male fantasies– and remains fairly insensitive to Witold's otherness. In this part of the narrative, each protagonist is, in fact, the product of the other's romantic expectations, to which they refuse, or are simply unable, to conform: such "a projection of oneself onto another being" can only boil down to "a reduction of the otherness of the other" (Attridge 2019, 49) and, consequently, to an unsatisfactory relationship. In the sixth and last section of the text, however, Beatriz gains a degree of agency and control of her own voice. Even though she remains a muse, one that ironically elicits "bad" art, instead of entering the realm of proper creation, she is finally given a chance to narrate herself in the first person and, as a corollary, tentatively opens up to Witold's alterity. In *The Pole*, then, two competing, and hardly compatible, models of romantic love –Romantic *vs* courtly– are presented to the reader and respectively associated with female and male subjectivities: that the former emerges as less valid than the latter may at least partly result from the fact that it is more likely to incite the male sexual violence (see Giles 2019) some Western artistic traditions (including literary Romanticism, with its logic of passion and excess) contributed to legitimising by aestheticising it, even if they did not willingly seek to do so. All in all, *The Pole*'s narrative progression, without entirely erasing the power imbalances between the main characters, partly bridges the gap that separated them when they were both alive. As a mere muse, Beatriz does not transcend her status as "subordinate patriarchal subject" (Wright 2019, 23). Without achieving full artistic credibility, Witold posthumously sparks Beatriz's tenderness and interest as a man and poet. While Beatriz, the surviving protagonist, does not fulfill the impossible task of fully penetrating the otherness of the late Witold, she does take a step towards "overcoming [her] own too fixed ideas" (Attridge 2019, 47) regarding both the deceased other and R/romantic love itself. As for the self-reflexive, or meta-R/romantic, strategy of revision that registers traces of Coetzee's vast and ambitious questioning, it arguably allows him to contest the archetypality of the romantic narrative and, ultimately, to push back the limits of the genre.

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