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Paradoxes of Love in J.M. Coetzee's *The Pole*

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Abstract. This paper tries to interpret John Maxwell Coetzee's 2023 novel *The Pole* as a twenty-first century metaphysical romance involving a Catalonian female and the titular male Pole. While the woman treats the whole affair with the much older Polish pianist as an occasional "fling," the male falls in love with her, treating her almost like an object of religious veneration and comparing themselves to the legend of Dante and Beatrice. Only after his death and after translating into Spanish all eight-four poems dedicated to her does Beatriz start to understand Witold's genuine intentions and desires. *The Pole* is, doubtless, a postmodernist romance where human relations are, one the one hand, treated conventionally in terms of genders, but, on the other, they are shown in their utmost complexity, touching upon the legendary love story, where love is not purely physical. It may reasonably be concluded that Witold through loving Beatriz's body came to love her soul and as such wished to immortalise her in the form of sonnets he wrote from his deathbed, thus exposing himself as an impotent love-maker who, in an old style, compensates his physical inadequacies with poetic ecstasies.

Key words: J. M. Coetzee, Dante, love convention, pastiche

"A paradox of love: we love simultaneously a mortal body and an immortal soul. Without the attraction of the body, the lover could not love the soul. To the lover the desired body is a soul."

Octavio Paz

"An old man in love. Foolish. And a danger to himself" (P 41)

1. Introduction

The point of departure in this paper is that Coetzee's *The Pole* (2023) bears resemblances to Dante Alighieri's *Vita Nuova*, the thirteenth-century account of the poet's falling for an inaccessible object of his love, Beatrice, of a wealthy family background, and may be interpreted as its contemporary re-working. The device that both the poet and the novelist are employing in their *ouvres* is masking, veiling, obscuring their genuine intensions. The secrecy is maintained either by addressing the love poems

to other women (Dante) or using a foreign language – Polish – and its translations into Spanish and then English. This evasiveness on the part of the authors allows them to play various language games with their readers, in the case of Coetzee – through the use of numerous foreign language incursions, mostly Spanish but also Polish and Russian, but also the writer's speculations as to the nature of a language itself where there is a huge gap between the intention and its actual verbal realisation and the other way round, the real poles apart.

2. GENDER STEREOTYPES

Coetzee presents a traditional, patriarchal vision of the gender roles in Western society: it is the males who are supposed to make success of their lives: "[Beatriz's] sons too have been blessed. They have turned out to be energetic young men deeply involved in independent projects of making successes of their lives.… In their drive for success, her sons take after their father, not their mother. Their father has made an indubitable success of his life," while the mother's success is not that "indubitable": "[a]s for their mother, one cannot be sure. Is it enough to have propelled two such well-fed, energetic young male beings into the world?" (10). Indirectly, the mother's success to have "propelled" children into the world does not equal with the father's; yet, on the other hand, the boys (and males in general) cannot aspire to women's role in the world, which, biologically, is to give life. Womanhood in *The Pole*, however, cannot be – and certainly is not – confined just to a reproductive function of women:

> They have grown apart, she and her husband. They were students together; he was her first love. In those early days they had a great passion for each other, insatiable. That passion persisted even after the birth of the children. Then one day it was no longer there. He had had enough. She too. Nonetheless she has remained a faithful wife. Men make passes at her, which she evades, *not because they are unwelcome* [emphasis added, RW] but because she has not taken the step yet, the step that is hers alone to take, the step from No to Yes. (11)

This contemporary courtly love convention differs so much from its 16th century predecessor even though married women feature in them powerfully and not only because the male suitors are not valiant knights on horseback. The suitor in *The Pole* is "a man who, finding himself alone and lonely in a foreign town, makes a play for a woman he once crossed paths with" (27). Thus, the contemporary romance is just a play between two people who met each other by a pure coincidence. Moreover, the narrator is clearly saying that she is not a complete woman since she is not yet able to take a step from "no" to "yes" (capitalised to emphasise the weight of the decision), that is to say, from rejecting extramarital sexual partners to accepting them. The final decision is, as we may conjecture, in the woman's moral choice, even though "moral" has never been used: "What would it say about her if she were to respond? More to the point, what does it say about her that the man expects she will respond" (27). She eventually responds, and her response is "Yes".

3. SEXLESS LOVE AND FORNICATION

Coetzee seems to be saying that contemporary married couples do away with sex. They do not share a bedroom, preferring a good sleep to sexual intercourse or simple cuddling: "She and her husband are no longer intimate. She is getting used to doing without sex. She does not seem to need it. Her climacteric has not yet arrived, but is on its way. Then she will cease to be fruitful, and the body's faint cry for union will die away" (40). Instead, at least some of them, have extramarital love affairs: "her friends have love affairs but she does not. Her friend Margarita is having an affair with a well-known professor of anthropology, a media celebrity, a married man. They meet in hotels or in an apartment belonging to an obliging colleague" (40). When Beatriz's husband enquired about the Pole, whether they are "in correspondence," she angrily replied to him: "I am not answering any more questions. Don't you find this a strange conversation for the two of us to be having – a *civilized married couple* [emphasis added, RW]?" (45). As it seems, civilized married couple do not ask themselves personal questions as to their other, even potential, partners. Marital sex has been subdued to the category of exclusive privacy and intimate freedom. Yet, she is scared to sleep with the Pole – she cannot imagine it: "[s]he would have to pretend to be in ecstasies and he would have to pretend to believe her. *I absolve you* [again, a mock-religious phrase, RW]: that is what she needs to say to him before they set foot on Brazilian soil. *I absolve you from all erotic duties. You sleep in your bed and I will sleep in mine* [emphases original, RW]" (47). This way Beatriz wishes to replicate the marital model of sex in extramarital circumstances, calling an intercourse "erotic duties" in a fashion of "matrimonial duties." The reason, as it seems, is that she loves neither the husband nor Witold, for whom she just feels pity: "There is no crisis in her marriage. She has no intention of leaving her husband; and her husband would be a fool if he left her. She is not in love with the Pole. At most she is sorry for him: sorry for his being lonely and old and out of touch with the world that is less and less receptive to his at-a-distance renderings of Chopin" (46).

When Witold states that "'We are civilized' … 'But she [his daughter, RW] does not have my soul. She has her mother's soul'" (59), Beatriz ponders upon the meaning of the word: "Civilized. How to translate? *We do not fly at each other's throat? We do not yawn in each other's face? We greet each other with a kiss on the cheek* [emphasis original, RW]? Whatever the case, being civilized in each other's company does not seem much of an achievement for a father and daughter" (60). Being civilized, then, means being conventional and maintaining pretences, veiling true intentions and putting disguising masks on their faces.

4. WOMAN IS OF AIR, MAN OF SUBSTANCE

In his linguistic game, Coetzee the narrator breaks language barriers and invents new meanings to well-known English words, like "heavy": "'In Polish we talk of a person who is heavy, a person who is not made of air. You are a heavy person'" (69-70). Beatriz, who is the addressee of Witold's comment, responds with laughter: "'I am glad to hear you don't think I am made of air, but you are wrong, I am not solid, not a person of substance.' She thinks: *If you now say I am liquid, then, I will begin to believe in you*. But he does not. *I am liquid. If you tried to hold me, I would flow out of your hands like water* [emphases original, RW]" (70). In his deconstructive method, Coetzee takes a

word, puts it into the mouth of a foreigner (the Pole) and makes the other foreigner (the Catalan) comment on its meaning: "'You are gracious,' says the Pole. *Gracious*: what an old-fashioned, bookish word. Does it have a meaning any longer? *Ave Maria, gratia plena, ora pro nobis*" (56). His etymological scrutiny has been aimed either at the Latin roots of the English language and/or its religious underpinnings, not apt for the contemporary, secular usage. Witold's politeness looks old-fashioned, outdated and artificial even for the Catalan user of English. Further, the reader may have the impression that Coetzee tries to mock the Pole's obsolete religiosity in his choice of vocabulary. Talking about his daughter, a former singer, living in Germany, he concludes: "So: successful, yes, but not happy. Not blessed" (59), which meets with Beatriz's linguistic and cultural commentary: "Not blessed. It is sometimes hard to know what the man means, with his *incomplete English* [emphasis added, RW]. Is he saying something profound or is he simply hitting the wrong words, like a monkey sitting in front of a typewriter? … Perhaps he means that the daughter in Berlin is discontented. Discontent is not uncommon. Discontent: not knowing what one wants" (59). Apart from an obvious and openly defamatory national slander directed at the Pole (monkey and the typewriter) apparently motivated by his "incomplete" English, Beatriz, for the narrator, rejects the religious "blessed" for a more neutral "discontent," which are not synonymous at all.

Beatriz is not god or a divine being, even though she calls herself "I am who I am", alluding to the name of Yahweh. She is (a divine) grace. As she emerged from the ladies' room, she noticed the sight of men fixed on her: "She is aware of the effect she can have on men. Grace: not such an antique concept after all. In Poland or Russia, she thinks, he [Witold, RW] will relive this moment, the moment when, crossing the floor towards him, came *a vision of grace embodied* [emphasis added, RW]" (76). Coetzee uses the term in a very biblical sense, i.e. "divine favour", "that which gives joy", "that which is a free gift". Thus understood, grace is the undeserved gift of God. According to the New Testament, the greatest of God's gifts is his son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, though not directly, she may be identified with divinity: "*What have we done to deserve this,* he will think, *guests, cooks, waiters, all of us? Grace that descends from the skies, shedding its radiance on us* [emphasis original, RW]" (76).

5. Secret lovers

In this somehow artificial romance, even love making is a certain artificial convention initiated by an unwilling lady: "They eat in silence. Afterwards she says: 'I am going to clear up, then I am going to retire. I will leave the back door unlocked. If you feel lonely during the night and want to visit, do so.' That is all she says. She does not want a discussion" (76). In Coetzee a male partner does not have a voice – he does not even wish to have a voice. The love game occurs within the female's mind, preceded by physical preparations like teeth's brushing or combing her hair. She also inspects her body, assessing it with an unhidden pride ("*Two children and you still have the figure of an eighteen-year-old!*"). Then the spectacle commences: "She hears the back door open, hears his footsteps, hears him enter the bedroom. Without a word he undresses; she averts her eyes. She feels his body stretch out beside hers, feels the barrel chest against her and the hair that covers it in a thick mat. *Like a bear!* she thinks" (77). Unexpectedly, she has

got some pricks of conscience: "*What am I letting myself in for? Too late: no going back now*" (78). Without hesitation, she takes the role of a love guide straightway: "She helps him as best she can with the lovemaking. Though she has no experience of old men, she can guess what their troubles in bed will be, their deficiencies. It is a strange experience, and not a little frightening, to have that huge weight pressing down on her, but before long it is over" (78). Coetzee's insistence on a significant age gap between the lovers determines the kind of sexual practice they are expected to have. Yet, what is at stake here is not just the length of the intercourse, which would rather be typical in an inexperienced young male, but most definitely a complete lack of any romantic involvement on the side of the female and a kind of nostalgia for the time past in the male. No wonder, then, that after they had finished, there was no expression of love, no word of tenderness or endearment exchanged between them; instead, just a simplistic statement of fact as an achievement: "'So now you have had me,' she says. "You have had your gracious lady. Are you at last content?'" (78). Beatriz again refers to herself as a "gracious lady", making a direct reference to the Virgin Mary, the phrase which reflects her role as a figure of grace and compassion in Christianity. Witold's reply is equally puzzling: "'My heart is full,' he says" (78), giving her to understand that his mindsets are above physicality and are decidedly more spiritual than carnal. Her mind, however, does not go that high, is more down-to-earth. Witold testified his declaration about the fullness of his heart by pressing her hand to his chest: "Dimly she can feel the beating of a heart *trip-trip-trip* [emphasis original, RW], faster than her own steady heart – in fact alarmingly fast. The last thing she wants is a corpse in her bed" (78). Neither does she want to "spend the night with this huge lump of a man in her bed" (78), so she asks him to leave. When alone, some reflections (pricks of conscience?) come to her mind: "Three more nights in Sóller. Is he going to expect her to accommodate him on each of them? … She wishes she were back in Barcelona in her own bed, in her own life, without these complications" (79). Grace once granted and no more. A sacrifice from the side of a "gracious lady"? An effect of boredom with her routine matrimonial and family life? Certainly, not a sign of love or any affection, just complications, a set of voluntary complications that are meant to bring greater problems. "*You have only yourself to blame* [emphasis original, RW], she chides herself. Two strangers thrown together in the dark, performing an act neither was ready for. Actors. Performers" (79). Her alter-ego is yet more stringent and ominous: "*You thought you would get away scot-free, you thought there would be no consequences, but you were wrong, wrong, wrong* [emphasis original, RW]" (79). After their haste lovemaking, there is "no room left for adoration, for veneration. Adoration sent packing" (80) – a current motto for today.

Like a truly ancient goddess, she is able to metamorphose herself and the deep is her life element: "Alone in the sea: a profound relief. She could dive down, metamorphose into a dolphin, feel the whole mess she has created wash away. What a stupid idea to invite a strange man to her husband's childhood home!" (80). The life makes a full circle. She is aware of what they are doing, she is able to give their action a proper name. Speaking to him about her housekeeper, she argues: "We cannot insult her by carrying on an *adultery* [emphasis added, RW] – because that is what it is, that is its name – under her nose. She has her pride. She will walk out and not come back. And I will be humiliated" (81). In response, Witold proposes a "secret love," saying that he has been her lover since the day he met her and no one knew like it was with Dante, Beatrice's secret lover and admirer.

6. DANTE AND BEATRICE

The unrealised – and unreal – secret romance between Dante Alighieri, the Renaissance Supreme Poet, and Beatrice Portinari, his beautiful muse, has been the subject of many literary elaborations, and became a symbol of an impossible love, largely due to an unequal social and financial status of both families. More importantly, what Dante brought to the world intellectual and artistic heritage was the relationship between the language, spirituality and art. Their impossible and never actualized love transformed into Dante's creation of something sublime that remained in the poet's mind, where he raised her to the level of an angelic woman who guided him through heaven in his poetry. She was an ethereal figure and great beauty, *"so kind and so honest she seems"*, portrayed several times as a fairy, both weightless and elevated. Witold humbly admits, "I am not Dante. I am not inspired. And I am not clever with words" (82), forgetting, as if it were, the Dantean concept of a sublime, secret love he cherishes so much: "Sometimes she has the feeling that he is not listening to what she says, *only to the tone of her voice, as if she were singing rather than speaking* [emphasis added, RW]. She is not fond of her own voice – too low, too soft – but he seems to drink it in. Always he sees the best in her" (82-83). This idealised love is definable by male gaze: "When she walks into the room, his face, usually so dour, lights up. In the gaze that bathes her there is a quantum of male desire, but finally it is a gaze of admiration, of dazzlement, as though he cannot believe his luck. It pleases her to offer herself to his gaze" (83). Yet, on her side there is no love for him, not even a desire, but rather something despicable: "If she does not love him, what is the name of the feeling she has for him, the feeling that has led her down this questionable path? If she had to pin it down, she would call it *pity* [emphasis added, RW]. He fell in love with her and she took pity on him and out of pity gave him his desire. That how it happened; that was her mistake" (84).

Pity is the lowest form of love and an excuse for the adulterous acts committed and quickly to be forgotten ("Whatever occurred here in Sóller will be swept into the past and forgotten," 84). Was this Beatriz's only motive? Certainly not: "The shock of the new. A bright shock, like being electrocuted, not a dark one, like being swept away and buried in a mudslide" (85). A new sexual partner, even though not a loved one, not even a distant object of a concealed sexual desire, is still an attraction, promising some fresh experiences, some new fragrances, some new touches, but also some old memories: "There is a moment on the second night when out of the past there re-emerges the *delicious feeling of falling* [emphasis added, RW]. She had thought it gone forever, that it belonged only to youth or even childhood: the terror and delight of shooting down a water slide, when the will is abdicated and one is, briefly, pure experience" (85). Is this delicious feeling of falling, however, just a reminiscence of joyful youth experience or, perhaps, a mature attempt for the things to fall into oblivion, or into an abyss of existence, a bottomless pit of eternal damnation, Dantean style?

And, finally, there is something extra, popularly known in romances without love, fascination and passion, something unwanted yet inevitable and commonly anticipated – boredom: "Sometimes, while he is about his erotic business, her mind drifts idly to the shopping she must ask Loreto [her housekeeper, RW] to do, to the appointments she has missed with the dentist" (85). Yet, as it seems, boredom only adds up to the awareness of his considerably limited physical capabilities: "No matter how resolute the spirit, he cannot prevent the creakiness of his physical being, his lack of vital

force, from infecting his lovemaking" (86). This had a bearing on her perception of his body: "She cannot bring herself to caress him. He is aware, she knows, of this reluctance on her part, this physical distaste. Awareness of it enters into his ritual thanks. *Thank you for descending so far* [emphasis original, RW]" (86).

What is more, this postmodern romance is not marked with the feeling of guilt on the part of the married woman: "She ought to feel guilty. One should not go to bed with a man whom one does not desire. But she feels no guilt. *I give enough*, she says to herself. *And it is not forever* [emphasis original, RW]" (86). Beatriz excuses herself mainly – if not exclusively – on the grounds of transience of her sexual affair with Witold. Her decision to finish it off is as brief as her romance and is announced when she is in his arms: "'This is not easy to say, Witold, but tonight we have come to the end. We are not going to see each other again. It makes life too difficult for me. I do not need to explain. Just accept it'" (86-87). The brevity and abruptness of her decision makes him act mechanically, mindlessly, unmanly: "The man reacts by slackening his embrace, which a moment ago was warm but has now turned cold; he reacts by turning away from her, getting up, reaching for his clothes. He reacts by finding his way to the door … and making his exit" (87). There is not a single word of protest, no plea, no begging – just a plain acceptance of her painful decision, a sheer capitulation, a shameful retreat. But she feels a relief – a burden taken off her shoulders: "She allows herself to exhale. She is glad, unutterably glad, that he did not react with anger, with hurt pride, that he did not humiliate himself by pleading. If he had pleaded she would have turned against him forever" (87). Yet, on the day of his final departure from Sóller and from her, he makes his last pathetic proposal to her: "'After Russia is finished we can fly to Brazil,' he says. 'You can swim in the sea in Brazil'" (88), which meets with her decisive rebuff: "'No, she says. 'I am not going to follow you around the world – you or any other man. No'" (88).

Beatriz is such a kind of woman who does not take any chances, preferring the comfort of her middle-class and middle-life stability, the peace of mind. She does not have any pricks of conscience or any distant remorse. Shortly, she is ready to come up with her own narration of what had happened between her and the Pole: "She *had a fling* [emphasis original, RW] (she uses the English term). She had a fling with a visiting musician, which had its rewards but is now over" (89). This short, sexual relationship has, basically, no meaning for her: just a deviation from her boring, everyday routine ("*He was free, I was free, we spent a few days together. Nothing serious* [emphasis original, RW]", 89).

In the auto-narration she created – one can hardly called it an examination of conscience though – there is an element of incompleteness, doubt or even untruthfulness; yet, "looking into her heart, she can find no dark residue: no regret, no sorrow, no longings – nothing to trouble the future" (89-90). The brevity of contemporary love/sexual affairs: no seduction, no long fore-plays. In postmodern times, there is no time nor will for extended romances in a traditional sense of the word, and certainly there is not space for a serious, mutual love: "Is love a state of mind, a state of being, a phenomenon, a fashion that recedes, even as we watch it, into the past, into the backward reaches of history?" (90). Yes, love is a bygone fashion, an obsolete artefact that used to change the world, but today, also at the personal level, largely belongs to history. Now, it is clear that Witold – an elderly Pole and old-fashioned Catholic, the compatriot of the late Pope John Paul the Second and the proponent of Frederic Chopin, was in love and

Beatriz was not: “The Pole was in love with her, *seriously* [emphasis original, RW] in love – and probably still is – but *the Pole himself is a relic of history* [emphasis added, RW.], of an age when desire had to be infused with a tincture of the unattainable before it could pass as a real thing” (90). This unattainability has for long been a form of certain impossibilism, particularly on the part of a male suitor since the lady of his choosing had not been readily available, unattainable to him. And, “what of her, Beatriz, his beloved? Well, she was certainly not unattainable. On the contrary, she was all too attainable. *Come and visit me in my house. Come and visit me in my bed* [emphasis original, RW]” (90). Her apparent promiscuity, as it seems, may be attributed largely to a boring and monotonous stability of a middle-aged, middle-class non-Catholic housewife. However, such short-lived romances were not her daily routine: “[i]f she has saved herself, in the end, from the stigma of the too easily attainable, it was only by sending the Pole packing – the Pole who is not doubt at this very moment working up a story of his own about a cruel Spanish mistress who left a scar on his heart that will take a long time to heal” (90).

Disregarding the brief sexual relationship, the real romance occurs in the spheres of, on the one hand, Witold’s mental fascination with Beatriz (there is not even a single hint that he desired her sexually), a kind of artistic idealisation of a (female) partner in a very conventional sense, vaguely based on the story of Dante and Beatrice, and, on the other hand, Beatriz’s unpremeditated, unconscious wish to escape temporarily from a daily routine of a middle-class and middle-aged woman. Beatriz represents, thus, a twenty-first century liberated middle-aged European, who, for the believers like Witold, may serve as a symbol of grace, a contemporary incarnation of female sanctity, a postmodern goddess.

7. THE LOVER’S DEATH

After Witold’s quiet, solitary death in an obscure Warsaw flat, Beatriz changes. And what really changed her was not the very fact that her suitor had died so inconspicuously and in such an unmemorable way, and that his daughter had found her Barcelona telephone number, but, rather, the fact that he had left a file of poems dedicated to her. Was it a curiosity that made her go to Warsaw to get them or just a fear that their sex affair may be revealed to the eyes of both families, in Poland and in Spain? Metaphysically, it was a clear sign from his grave that their business has not been ended, that it only changed the medium (“She does not miss the Pole, not at all. He writes to her. She deletes his letters without reading them,” 91), and now it is as if it were a time bomb ticking off, threatening her with an invisible explosion: “The future lies open before her and the Pole is trying to draw her back. From the grave he stretches out a great claw to drag her into the past” (96). She does not wish to be dragged into the past, into what was and is not, not even worth recalling. The easiest way to cut herself off Witold and the unwelcome past is to declare to the man in the grave that, “*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 yourself dead and forgotten* [emphasis original, RW]” (96). But no matter what she declares, he has got the power. The metaphysical power over her of which she is not yet aware.

8. THE LOVER'S ASHES

When Beatriz learns that Witold is dead and has left "some things" (92) for her in a box with her name, she is positively traumatised not only because of this shocking news, but primarily because of being identified by his German daughter as the woman with whom the late Pole had an attachment. While looking for her box in his Warsaw apartment, she first finds an urn containing his ashes and only later the file containing her photograph and eighty-four poems in Polish dedicated to her. His ashes proved his previous point that "man is of substance" – the Derridean ashes (*cendre*) – yet, it is not ashes that really remained of him but his Polish poems, unprofessionally translated into Spanish, the poems too difficult to understand for the untrained reader as Beatriz was, the poems that she treated as the letters she had previously deleted without reading them. To the poem in which he confessed that he was only able to look at her ("Staring at her was his way of possessing her," 147), the gaze was his weapon and sexual tool to possess "*la modesta*, the modest one. /(Modesty high among her virtues: /modesty, grace, goodness.)" (147-148), she reacted, "*La modesta* [emphases original, RW]. Thank you for that. Thank you for your high opinion of me. I will try to live up to it. But it is getting late. Good night, my prince – time for bed. Sleep well. Sweet dreams. Yours, Beatriz P.S. I will write again" (148).

As it seems, their romance is still going on, or actually growing and developing, taking on some new-fangled dimensions achievable only after the actualisation of Witold's poems by Beatriz – she starts to realise who her secret admirer/lover really was and what opinion he had of her. Apart from the obviously religious tropes, the readers are given to understand that the genuine intergender relationship occurs not in postmodern haste of multiple affairs but in written communication, in messages being exchanged between the lovers, strangely, after the death of one of them. All this may prove the point that the "dead" letter on the page is very much a living one when read by the one to whom it is addressed. Coetzee, cleverly, finishes off his novel at this point, leaving open the space for interpretation of what happens next, how she sends the message to the deceased, whether she will write again, will there be just eighty-four messages to Witold or more, how long it will continue and the like.

Leaving all these practicalities aside, we may conclude that this 21st-century romance is certainly written in a disturbingly odd convention, where the gaze of an incidental male visitor initiates a very one-sided, unwished for relationship, which is, traditionally speaking, not a romance at all but just an occasional fling for a female partner – the fling that only much later develops into something radically different. Only the death of the male in a far-away country and the poems he dedicated to her bring the woman to understand that he meant *something* to her, and only then does she start to metaphysically communicate with him, first, with what could have been his ghost: during the night she spent in his Warsaw apartment with his ashes on the shelf, "she wakes up briefly, sensing someone else in the apartment. 'Witold, if that is you, come and lie with me,' she murmurs into the darkness. There is no answering movement, no sound. She goes back to sleep" (107). And then, with his poems translated into Spanish, she started to communicate with the dead pianist by writing letters to him as a form of her critical appraisals of particular poems dedicated to her. She complained that he never seduced her, which admittedly indicates a lack of authentic sexual desire in their relationship, and returns us to traditional love conventions. As she explained the relation to her husband,

"I was never in love with him. He was in love with me. A one-sided affair. That's all" (107). When asked about his importance for her, she bluntly denied: "No, not important, not in himself. But one needs to be reassured every now and again, if one is a woman. One needs proof that one can still make an impression" (108), indicating thus that in that case it was she who had problems with her aging and uncertainty of being still attractive as a woman, but lovewise, "her heart has never belonged to the Pole" (108).

9. The lover's poems

After In the first poem, the narrator says that, after following the footsteps of Homer and Dante and having crossed the wine-coloured sea, he found the perfect rose between the legs of a certain woman, and thus attained the final peace. He sings his song in praise of the woman who showed him the way (115). In the next one, prefaced by an epigraph taken from Dante in old Italian ("*Per entro i mie' disiri, che ti manavano ad amar lo bene*. The love you felt for me led you to love of the good", 116), the narrator speaks of the male desire to a woman which climbs up from his private parts to his eyes, and through his eyes he possesses her. The woman's name is Beatrice, *la modesta*: "Modesty, he says, is her highest virtue, also grace and goodness" (116). And then there comes the narrator's confession that openly refers to Witold's experiences: "I had no luck, I came too late, I lived too far away, I had only her picture in my eyes, which is like a bird that flutters in memory" (116). It seems that the late Polish pianist tried to shape his fascination with the Catalan woman to the picture of the star-crossed romance between Dante Alighieri, the Supreme Poet, and Beatrice Portinari, his muse, where the poet's eyes played the fundamental role. Why did not he just send her a short message saying that he still loves her, deciding instead to prove it by "performing for her sake a lengthy and inherently meaningless task" (121) of writing so many poems? It seems that he just wanted to speak to her from beyond the grave in what may be termed a never-ending process of actualization of the poems' meanings dependent on her presumably growing awareness of the written word on the page.

In the final part of the novel, Coetzee confesses to the reader that his narrative is basically and fundamentally a continuation of the ages-long war between the sexes: "*I had her, that smart woman from Barcelona. I crushed her in my arms, I crumpled her rose*. The war between men and women, primeval, never-ending. *I had her, she was mine, read all about it* [emphases original, RW.]" (123). On top of that, he adds an element of revenge for the unreciprocated love, for the insult of throwing Witold out of her bed, for his wounded pride: "His revenge on her: to freeze her, aestheticize her, turn her into an art-object, a Beatrice, a plaster saint to be venerated and carried in procession through the streets. *Mother of mercy* [emphasis original, RW]" (123). Out of a plethora of possibilities, a likely solution to the riddle of this postmodern quasi-romance is that the female in the narrative wanted to be seduced, conquered and possessed in a most violent of ways: "it is hard to admit to, but she was hoping that the man who loved her would have used that love, that energy, that *eros* [emphasis original, RW], to bring her to life better than he has managed to do" (136). Moreover, in a very self-reflective way, Coetzee blames the male's old age and his old-style mentality for the failure of the 21st-century romance: "the Pole thought of himself as an artist in the grand old sense, a *maestro* [emphasis original, RW], and an artist in the grand old sense (Dante!) would have given

her a new life that was believable, that was proof against her own easy mockery" (136-137). The female certainly did not mean it. Notwithstanding, the novella, paradoxically, concludes with Beatriz promising Witold to write again. So, Coetzee's linguistic game is not over!

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