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From the Heart of the Country to the European Core: J. M. Coetzee and *los polacos*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate Coetzee’s decades-long, multifaceted, and, essentially, transnational dialogue with Poland and its cultural production—from Coetzee’s encounter of Polish poetry in the early 1960s until his 2022 novel *El polaco*. It intends to argue that Coetzee’s preoccupation with Polish literature and culture is part of a larger strategy of seeking new alliances and partnerships across the north-south/east-west divide, of building an alternative “affective community,” and of, simultaneously, de- and re-provincializing oneself and one’s oeuvre. Most importantly, Coetzee’s dialogue with Poland will be interpreted as an attempt to seek one’s rightful ancestry: literary and cultural, as well as genetic. The article will argue that the figure of the Pole is not simply a literary trope or the subject of Coetzee’s scholarly/readerly interest, but an instrument of both: self-defacement and identification with his Polish heritage.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee; Polish literature; South African literature; transnational heritage; comparative studies

Introduction: “His Mother Is a Polish Princess”

In mid-September 2002, J. M. Coetzee commenced his work on the concluding volume of his *autre*-biographical trilogy *Scenes from Provincial Life*. Although in most cases the “scenes” written between September 2002 and March 2006 did not make it to the final version of *Summertime* (2009), they offer a fascinating insight into the creative process behind Coetzee’s radical act of both self-narrativization and self-fictionalization. One “scene” drafted on September 24, 2002, remains of special interest to the present article. It reads:

His mother is a Polish princess. She has dark hair and a long nose. Her name is Vera. She speaks Polish: “Yaksha braksha watlmeyer, yaksha braksha

marsh; yaksha braksha meva shonka, sar dou magwash.” She is not just the daughter of a farmer from Uniondale.¹

Without a doubt, this passage is intriguing for a number of reasons and, like many archival documents from the *J. M. Coetzee Papers* held at the Harry Ransome Centre in Austin, Texas, provides a valuable insight into different aspects of Coetzee’s oeuvre.² For example, it reaffirms the central role of Coetzee’s mother, Vera Wehmeyer, to the writer’s autobiographical project and the impact of what Kai Easton has defined as Coetzee’s “maternal lines” onto his entire creative practice.³ Also, it can be seen as an expression of Coetzee’s own sense of “marginality” and “provincialism” in South Africa;⁴ as another exercise in the poetics of self-estrangement whose first traces are to be found in *Boyhood* (1997) with John identifying himself first with the Jews and then with the Russians.⁵ I should, however, like to pay special attention to what clearly remains the most puzzling fragment of the “scene”: the line “Yaksha braksha watlmeyer, yaksha braksha marsh; yaksha braksha meva shonka, sar dou magwash.”

Although the passage unambiguously stipulates that the line attributed to Vera is in the Polish language, anybody who is fluent in Polish is likely to find it as confusing as a non-Polish speaker would—at least at first glance. First, none of the language units identified in the fragment corresponds to the actual words that exist in the Polish language corpus. Second, even when read phonetically, the sound units and their composition bear little resemblance to linguistically meaningful expressions in Polish. However, a detailed scrutiny of the fragment—one that has been carried out for the purpose of the present article and has involved syntactic, phonemic, and semantic analysis⁶—encourages one to conclude that the piece spoken by Coetzee’s mother is the opening lines of the 19th-

¹ John Maxwell Coetzee, “Scenes from Provincial Life III. Notes. September 2002–March 2006,” *J. M. Coetzee Papers*, container 46.1 (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center, 2002–2006), 3.

² On the role of the *J. M. Coetzee Papers* and the contribution of archival research to Coetzee scholarship see, for example, Jan Wilm, “The J. M. Coetzee Archive and the Archive in J. M. Coetzee,” *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee*, eds. Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 215–32; Marc Farrant, Kai Easton, and Hermann Wittenberg, eds., *J. M. Coetzee and the Archive: Fiction, Theory, and Autobiography* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

³ Kai Easton, “Landmarks: Reading Coetzee’s Maternal Lines,” *J. M. Coetzee and the Archive*, 17–28; according to Easton, Coetzee’s “maternal lines” are not only geographical or biographical but also textual; they are “materials acts of inscription, lines on the page” (21).

⁴ See, for example, Jonathan Crewe, *In the Middle of Nowhere: J. M. Coetzee in South Africa* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2016); Andrew van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 51–74.

⁵ John Maxwell Coetzee, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Vintage Books, 1998), 19–25, 26–28.

⁶ Among others, it has required the employment of phonemic decomposition and subsequent rearrangement of phonemes into new units (e.g., “dou magwash”—“dougmag wash”), identification of such process as phonetic assimilation, mergers, splits, as well as vowel shifts (e.g., the Polish word *miewa* [ˈmijɛva] has been turned into “meva” [ˈmɛva]), as well as recognition of anaphoric expressions (“yaksha”) and, consequently, metrical encoding (feet, rhymes, e.g., “marsh”/“wash”), which has led to the claim that the quoted fragment might be a song or poem.

century Polish song “Jak się macie Bartłomieju” (How Are You, Bartholomew) whose first written version is to be found in the 1882 collection *Wybór pieśni narodowych*⁷ (A Selection of National Songs). Consequently, one is justified to argue that the cryptic line in the early “scene” of *Summertime* reads as follows:

Yaksha braksha watlmeyer, / Jak się bracie Bartłomieju, / Oh how, brother
Bartholomew,
yaksha braksha marsh; / jak się bracie masz? / oh how are you, brother of
mine?
yaksha braksha meva shonka, / Jak się bracie miewa żonka, / Oh how,
brother, is your wife,
sar dou magwash. / cały domek wasz? / your entire house?⁸

The perplexing materialization of the Polish language (or some version of it) in one of Coetzee’s manuscripts encourages one to pose a number of questions regarding, among others, its origin, history, meaning, as well as justification for its appearance. In the light of the existing biographical findings,⁹ the first and the last issues appear to be the easiest to address. The scene in which Coetzee’s mother is described as a “Polish princess” was drafted around the time when Coetzee himself was involved in researching his family’s genealogy, which concluded with the discovery that his great-grandfather (hitherto referred to as Batlthazar 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.¹⁰ Therefore, given her Polish roots, it is not surprising that Coetzee’s mother could recite (or sing) some lines in broken Polish—most likely unaware of their meaning or even language—which her son remembered and, subsequently, recalled in the early draft of *Summertime*.

⁷ Józef Chociszewski, ed., *Wybór pieśni narodowych w którym się znajdują dumki, arye, marsze, krakowiaki, mazury, pieśni patriotyczne, wojenne, historyczne itd* (Poznań: Drukiem Jarosława Leitgebra. Nakładem J. Chociszewskiego, 1882), 61–62. The best-known, five-stanza version of the song under the title “Lament chłopski” [the peasant’s lament] is to be found in the third volume of the 1901 collection of Polish songs collected by the Polish composer and musicologist Stefan Surzyński. See Stefan Surzyński, ed., *Nasze hasło. Zbiór pieśni polskich obyczajowych i okolicznościowych, pieśni patriotycznych i narodowych, piosnek żartobliwych i towarzyskich; polonezów, mazurów, marszów, krakowiaków, kujawiaków, obertaszów, piosnek dla sokółów, aryj, dumek i różnej innej treści z melodyami. Dla młodzieży polskiej. Tomik III* (Tarnów: Nakładem i drukiem Józefa Pizsa, 1901), 55–56.

⁸ My translation.

⁹ Jerzy Koch, “J. M. Coetzee in Poland,” *Werkwinkel: Journal of Low Countries and South African Studies* 7.2 (2012): 9–11; John Christoffel Kannemeyer, J. M. Coetzee: *A Life in Writing*, trans. Michiel Heyns (Melbourne and London: Scribe Publishing, 2013), 30–31; Zbigniew Białas, “Laudation,” in *John Maxwell Coetzee: Doctor Honoris Causa Universitatis Silesiensis*, eds. Krzysztof Jarosz, Zbigniew Białas, and Marek Pawlicki (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2018), 18–19.

¹⁰ It might be argued that the recollection of the Polish song in September 2002 led to the writer’s genealogical inquiry and the discovery of his Polish background. What substantiates this claim is that it was only in June 2004 that Coetzee emailed his Polish colleague Zbigniew Białas to inquire about the Polish provenance of the name “Dubiel” and his Polish lineage. It was Białas who accurately identified Schwarzwald mentioned by Dubiel in his biography as Czarnylas in the Wielkopolska (or Greater Poland) region. Białas, “Laudation,” 18–19.

I should, however, like to insist that the presence of the opening lines of the “peasant’s lament” in the writer’s manuscript is not just a “footnote” to Coetzee’s genealogy and a demonstration of his Polish lineage.¹¹ Also, I would argue that the passage’s implications transcend it being merely a testament to the trans-generational and cross-continental sustainability and longevity of Polish memory in South Africa. As a matter of fact, it appears tenable to claim that the “peasant’s lament” recited by Vera and quoted by her son could be recognized as one of the most powerful articulations of a transnational affinity between Poland and South Africa, J. M. Coetzee and his Polish ancestor.

What justifies this reading is the song itself and the story it narrates. Most likely created after the January Uprising of 1863–1864, that is, a failed insurrection against the Russian Empire in partitioned Poland, it focuses on the misfortunes of Poles who suffer from violent repercussions imposed on them by “Muscovites” (including arrests, deportations to Siberia, confiscation of property, etc.) voiced by the titular Bartłomiej—one who laments the fate of his family and fellow Poles. Hence, what Vera recites is the story of colonial expansion in Central-eastern Europe¹² and its tragic consequences for the conquered people, including her grandfather, Balcer.¹³ Because the lines are pronounced “in the heart of the country,”¹⁴ in colonial South Africa, however, they (inadvertently) also become an expression of anguish over one’s entanglement in colonial relationships and its history of violence and persecution.

The voicing of the Polish song by Uniondale-born Vera and their inscription by her son decades after first hearing them clearly bear witness to the existence of what Leela Gandhi has aptly described as the “axis of filiation”—one that, in this particular case, successfully crosses the Central Europe–South Africa divide, is essentially transhistorical, and reveals a “transnational or affiliative solidarity” between colonized subjects.¹⁵ But there is one aspect of the “peasant’s lament” (as pronounced by Vera) that this article finds particularly pertinent to its main concern, namely the continued, multifaceted, and transversal relationship between J. M. Coetzee and Poland. If one looks closer at the Polish song and

¹¹ This is similar to Nadine Gordimer’s short story “My Father Leaves Home,” about the writer’s father, a Jew from Central Europe who is oppressed at home but joins the oppressors upon immigrating in Africa. Coetzee’s “lament” and Gordimer’s piece of nostography not only testify to both writers’ late discovery or acknowledgment of their Central European heritage but also show the complicated position of Central Europeans in South Africa.

¹² On Poland and Central-eastern Europe as a colonized territory in the nineteenth century, see, for example, Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

¹³ Given the fact that Balcer Dubiel (vel Balthazar du Biel) was born in 1844, it is more than likely that he not only witnessed the January Uprising (due to his village’s proximity to the battlefields) but also actively participated in it—for example, by smuggling arms or helping the insurrectionists cross the border between Prussia and Russia. On the attitudes of the Poles to the January Uprising, particularly in Prussia-annexed borderland territories, see Julian Łukaszewski, *Zabór Pruski w czasie Powstania Styczniowego* (Jassy: Nakład własny autora, 1870).

¹⁴ Vera was born in Uniondale in the Little Karoo in 1904, thirty-six years after her grandfather left his Polish hometown and arrived in South Africa. Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 29–30.

¹⁵ Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 10.

its rendition by Coetzee, it becomes evident that the common name “Bartłomiej” (Bartholomew) becomes substituted by the word *watlmeyer*, which bears a strong resemblance to Vera’s family name, that is, Wehmeyer. Thus, what we can observe here is a shift from one self (generic, collective, Polish) to another (specific, individual, South African); in short, “Bartłomiej” equals Wehmeyer (Bartłomiej = Wehmeyer). However, given the autobiographical nature of Coetzee’s *Scenes from Provincial Life* (where the quote does rightfully belong) and the trilogy’s repeated concern with ancestry, parenthood, and lineage, as well as the writer’s preferential treatment of the mother’s side of his family and his ostensible self-identification with Balcer Dubiel recognized as the first writer in the family, one is invited to extend this equation by adding one more unit to it, that is, J. M. Coetzee himself. Thus, in its final version, the equation could look like this: Bartłomiej = Wehmeyer = Coetzee; or, in its simplified form, Bartłomiej = Coetzee, which, in turn, could lead us to a conclusion (both false and true¹⁶) that J. M. Coetzee is a Pole.

Of course, the aim of this article is not to formulate any claims (absolute or partial) about J. M. Coetzee’s national identity. Instead, I would like to use the formula “J. M. Coetzee = a Pole” as a convenient metaphor to talk about Coetzee’s lifelong preoccupation with Polish literature and visual culture, which in 2022 culminated with the publication of his novel *El polaco* (*The Pole*). The article does not intend to identify and thoroughly discuss all the Polish “traces” in Coetzee’s writing; yet by selecting a handful of them it intends to argue that Coetzee’s transnational dialogue with Poland is by no means accidental but part of a larger strategy of seeking different alliances and partnerships, of building an alternative “affective community,”¹⁷ of simultaneously de- and re-provincializing oneself and one’s oeuvre by initiating and sustaining the conversation with another minor culture and literature,¹⁸ finally, of seeking one’s rightful ancestry, both literary/cultural and genetic. Consequently, what this article wishes to showcase is how the figure of the Pole is not simply a literary trope or the subject of

¹⁶ About Coetzee’s relationship with his memoiristic persona(s) as engaged in creating ambivalence, “a ‘neither yes nor no,’ a ‘both/and’ rather than an ‘either/or,’” see Sue Kossew, “Border Crossings: Self and Text,” *J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*, eds. Elleke Boehmer, Robert Eaglestone, and Katy Iddiols (London: Continuum, 2009), 62.

¹⁷ Gandhi, *Affective Communities*.

¹⁸ The reading of South African and Polish literatures in terms of *littérature mineure* is indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s conceptualization of the category, in which “minor literature” is not primarily the literature of numerically small nations/groups, but the literature of the oppressed, avant-garde literature or literature characterized by a minor usage of the major language. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1975). The proposed framing of both literatures as “minor” allows us to recognize Coetzee’s interest in Polish literary heritage as a manifestation of what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih have identified as “minor transnationalism,” that is, a nonbinary configuration that prioritizes the horizontal model of cultural exchange and opposes vertical (the kind based on the core/centre-periphery structure) method used to conceptualize the global circulation of ideas, cultures, capital, and so on. See Françoise Lionnet, Shu-mei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

Coetzee's scholarly/readerly interest, but an instrument of both self-defacement and self-creation—another “fiction[s] of the self, version[s] of the self.”¹⁹

Among the Poles

In Coetzee's writing (both published and unpublished), the Poles appear to be everywhere. The likes of Stanisław Barańczak, Frédéric Chopin, Zbigniew Herbert, Andrzej Konwicki, Jerzy Kosiński, Czesław Miłosz, Andrzej Munk, Bruno Schulz, Wisława Szymborska, and Aleksander Wat (to name the main ones) show up in the writer's novels, essays, interviews, lectures, (e-)letters, notes, manuscripts, and research materials.²⁰ Their presence is subtle, often bracketed, quiet, and unostentatious, many a time unexpected. However, once they materialize in his writing (as historical or fictional figures,²¹ as sources of inspiration or subjects of inquiry,²² or providers of intertexts²³) they usually become crucial points of reference and interpretative tools in one's attempt to establish the possible meaning(s) of his works. Suffice it to mention *Foe* (1986) in which

¹⁹ John Maxwell Coetzee, “Interview,” in *J. M. Coetzee: Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 17–30. On the issue of selfhood in Coetzee's writing and the writer's self-representation consult, among others, Carrol Clarkson, *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 19–46; Eckard Smuts, “J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Selfhood,” *English in Africa* 39.1 (2012): 21–36; Angela Müller, “Autre”-Biography: Poetics of Self in *J. M. Coetzee's Fictionalized Memoirs* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2016); David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (New York: Viking, 2015).

²⁰ The claim is based on the quantitative analysis of the *J. M. Coetzee Papers* carried out in the Harry Ransom Center in Austin. Despite the prominent position occupied by the Polish writers and artists in Coetzee's oeuvre, little scholarly attention has been paid to this aspect of Coetzee's work. The notable exceptions are Bożena Kucała and Robert Kusek, eds., *Travelling Texts: J. M. Coetzee and Other Writers* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2014)—an early monograph that attempts to trace the distinctive Central European legacy in Coetzee's writing, including his interest in selected works of Polish literature; Hermann Wittenberg, “Film and Photography in J. M. Coetzee's: *Life and Times of Michael K*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 58.4 (2016): 473–92, one in a series of Wittenberg's highly influential studies that identify the impact of Andrzej Munk and his 1963 film *Passenger* on Coetzee's literary technique employed in his early novels and film screenplays. The most recent addition to this small corpus is an interview that Coetzee gave on the occasion of being awarded an honorary degree by the University of Silesia in which he shares some reflections about the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz. See John Maxwell Coetzee and Marek Pawlicki, “Kilka refleksji o nauczaniu, literaturze, pisarstwie i języku: z J. M. Coetzeeem rozmawia Marek Pawlicki,” *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne* 15.1 (2020):1–6,

²¹ For example, the Polish cleaning woman/concentration camp guard whom Elizabeth Costello encounters in “At the Gate” (2003) and Witold Walczykiewicz in *El polaco* (2022).

²² For example, see the entire folder dedicated to the life and writing of Bruno Schultz. See John Maxwell Coetzee, “New York Review of Books: Schulz, Bruno, Faxed Marked Galleys and Photocopies of Research Materials, 2002,” *J. M. Coetzee Papers*, container 67.9 (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center, 2002). Coetzee's research resulted in the publication of an essay about Schultz in the *New York Review of Books* and, subsequently, in his collection *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000–2005* (2015).

²³ For example, the presence of Czesław Miłosz's line “I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing” (from the 1975 poem “Secretaries”) in “At the Gate.” See Czesław Miłosz “Secretaries,” *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001* (New York: Ecco, 2003), 343. Compare John Maxwell Coetzee, “At the Gate,” *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), 199.

mutilated Friday playing the “damnable tune”²⁴ on his flute is likely to be recognized as a version of Marsyas from Zbigniew Herbert’s poem “Apollo and Marsyas.” Or the impact of the WWII-ravaged landscapes in Jerzy Kosiński’s *The Painted Bird* (1965) onto the setting and the main character of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980).²⁵ Or the writer’s acknowledgment of the linguist Anna Wierzbicka and her book *Imprisoned in English* (2013),²⁶ which, in hindsight, could be considered instrumental in Coetzee’s growing alienation from English and decision to publish his latest works in a Spanish translation.²⁷

In the light of the wide scope of Coetzee’s Polish interests, as well as the sheer quantity and variety of Polish references that can be identified in both his published works and the writer’s archive, it seems justified to focus on just one example—the kind that might best illustrate the article’s argument about Coetzee’s affinity (or self-identification) with the figure of the Pole and serve as an appropriate introduction to its discussion of *El polaco*. To this aim, I should like to briefly address a few instances of Coetzee’s lifelong concern with the life and work of Zbigniew Herbert.²⁸

There is no doubt that Polish poetry has been on Coetzee’s radar since the beginning of his literary career. The earliest newspaper cut that is to be found in the writer’s research materials comes from the 3,262 issue of *The Times Literary Supplement* (September 3, 1964) and already contains two poems by Miron Białoszewski: “War Myths” and “Concerning the Revolution of Things.”²⁹ Over the next decades, Coetzee’s reputation as a reader of Polish poetry grew to such an extent that in 2001 he was the first to be approached by the vice-president of W.W. Norton to provide a jacket comment for a new translation of Wisława Szymborska’s selected poems entitled *Miracle Fair*.³⁰ However, it is with Zbigniew Herbert that Coetzee has developed a special kind of comradeship that is not “substantialize[d] ... via race, ethnicity, nationality” but rests on a shared sense of belonging, on being “on the same side of the division.”³¹

²⁴ John Maxwell Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 29.

²⁵ On August 10, 1977, in his notebook Coetzee writes about the future character of the magistrate in the following manner: “The one role he can see for himself in a war-struck country is that of burier of the dead (Am at the moment reading Kosiński’s *Painted Bird*)”. John Maxwell Coetzee, “Waiting for the Barbarians, Small Spiral Notebook, 11 July 1977–28 August 1978,” *J. M. Coetzee Papers*, container 33.3 (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center, 1977–1978).

²⁶ John Maxwell Coetzee, “Laureate Address,” in *John Maxwell Coetzee*, eds. Jarosz, Białas, and Pawlicki, 57–59.

²⁷ Colin Marshall, “J. M. Coetzee’s War against Global English,” *The New Yorker*, December 8, 2022 (<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/j-m-coetzees-war-against-global-english>).

²⁸ Compare Johan Geertsema, “Hidden Literality: Coetzee, Beckett, Herbert, and the Attempt to ‘Touch Reality,’” *Travelling Texts*, 21–33; Bożena Kucala, “On Lost Causes: Zbigniew Herbert and J. M. Coetzee,” *Travelling Texts*, 35–47.

²⁹ John Maxwell Coetzee, “Research Materials. Times Literary Supplement: Uncut Newspapers, 1964–1965; 1983,” *J. M. Coetzee Papers*, container 100.1 (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center, 1964–1965).

³⁰ John Maxwell Coetzee, “Business Correspondence, January 2001,” *J. M. Coetzee Papers*, container 87.5 (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center, 2001).

³¹ Jodie Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2019), 39, 35.

If one is to believe the narrator of *Youth* (2002), Coetzee discovers Herbert when he moves to London in early 1962.³² The Polish poet—who together with Joseph Brodsky and Ingeborg Bachmann provides a counterpoint to John’s reading of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and F. M. Ford—becomes his aesthetic compatriot: “[he] is with him, by his side, day by day.”³³ Herbert, whose poetry Coetzee might have, indeed, first heard on the radio during his stay in Britain,³⁴ speaks to John “from lone rafts tossed on the dark seas of Europe.”³⁵ The lines of Herbert, as well as those of fellow Central and eastern European poets, are:

release[d] ... into the air, and along the airwaves the words speed to [John’s] room, the words of the poets of his time, telling him again of what poetry can be and therefore of what he can be, filling him with joy that he inhabits the same earth as they. “Signal heard in London—please continue to transmit”: that is the message he would send them if he could.³⁶

A detailed scrutiny of Coetzee’s work confirms that the “transmission” has never stopped and the “signal” has been heard regardless of the writer’s location, his current literary projects, professional commitments, and aesthetic concerns. In the 1970s, Herbert’s two poems “Apollo and Marsyas” and “Elegy of Fortinbras” occupied a privileged position in the poetry course that Coetzee cotaught with Jonathan Crewe at the University of Cape Town—even though the course was supposed to pay tribute to the poetic works of Hugh MacDiarmid and Pablo Neruda.³⁷ In the 1980s, he repeatedly read and studied Herbert’s poetic oeuvre, including the Mr Cogito series, as well as kept himself informed on the latest contributions to Herbert’s criticism.³⁸ Not only did it result in the well-known essay “Zbigniew Herbert and the Figure of the Censor” in which Coetzee

³² It might be argued that Herbert is not the only Pole who attracts John’s attention during his London years. Although Andrzej Munk and his film *Passenger* are not mentioned by the narrator of *Youth*, it is more than likely that Coetzee saw the movie for the first time in London in 1964, when he returned to the United Kingdom together with his newlywed wife, Philippa Jubber (compare Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee*, 130–32).

³³ John Maxwell Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Vintage Books, 2003), 91.

³⁴ The first English-language collection of Herbert’s poems appeared in print in 1968, but individual poems were available to the English-speaking readership prior to that date. For example, the first issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* published in 1965 already contained four poems by Herbert translated by Czesław Miłosz (“Reconstruction for a Poet,” “Poem,” “Period,” and “The Langobards”). However, it is likely that Coetzee refers to three BBC radio productions of Herbert’s plays that he might have heard during his stay in London: “The Other Room,” “The Philosophers’ Den,” and “Reconstruction of a Poet” broadcast on the BBC Third Programme in 1962, 1963, and 1964, respectively. See Bolesław Taborski, “Polish Plays in English Translations: A Bibliography,” *The Polish Review* 9.3 (1964): 78. Also, given Coetzee’s propensity for collapsing temporalities, violating chronologies, as well as combing fact and fiction, it is possible that Coetzee got familiar with Herbert’s poetry only when he moved to the United States in the summer of 1965.

³⁵ Coetzee, *Youth*, 91.

³⁶ Coetzee, *Youth*, 91.

³⁷ Jonathan Crewe, “Arrival: J. M. Coetzee in Cape Town,” *English in Africa* 40.1 (2013): 11–35.

³⁸ For example, the J. M. Coetzee archives contain several pages of research notes produced in the aftermath of reading Stanisław Barańczak’s essays (“Poems and Tanks,” “The Gag and the World”) and

showed an extraordinary expertise in Cold War poetry from “the other Europe,”³⁹ but it also provided him with much needed inspiration in the early stages of conceiving *Age of Iron* (1990). In November 1988, while trying to establish the nature of the relationship between the female narrator and Pratt (a prototype for Vercueil), as well as the latter’s status in the narrative, he reminds himself that he should “re-read Z. Herbert.”⁴⁰ Although neither the *Age of Iron* black-and-red notebook nor the book’s manuscript reveals which poems by Herbert Coetzee had in mind, in the fragments written over the next three days, one is likely to identify the direct impact of (at least) two of his poems: “Mr Cogito’s Abyss” and “Why the Classics.” Be it when Coetzee wonders whether Pratt, the figure of an angel, should communicate through the medium of poetry in line with the belief that “the obligation of the poet [is] to act heroically”⁴¹ or when the future Mrs. Curren confesses that what was “called for” in the dark days of apartheid was “heroism,” where a “hero” is understood as a “figure from antiquity.”⁴² Finally, in the 2000s, when acting as a curator of Berlinde de Bruyckere’s exhibition displayed in the Belgian Pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennial, he responded to the artist’s plea to provide her with “something” she could draw inspiration from by sending her two pieces: his new Elizabeth Costello “lesson” entitled “The Old Woman and the Cats” and Zbigniew Herbert’s poem “Apollo and Marsyas.”⁴³

The complex and multifaceted relationship between Coetzee and Herbert is worth a monograph in itself. However, I would like to call attention to only one of its many aspects: a special kind of affinity that appears to characterize their relation (despite the fact that this relationship is essentially one-sided).

It is evident that Herbert’s poetry has appealed to Coetzee, both aesthetically and politically. But it is also clear that Coetzee has felt a strong sense of identification⁴⁴ with Herbert as a “historical” figure, as the inevitable “product of a difficult, complex, ... Polish history.”⁴⁵ Crewe, for example, interprets

monograph on Herbert (*A Fugitive from Utopia*). John Maxwell Coetzee, “Long Works: *Giving Offence*, Annotated, Undated,” *J. M. Coetzee Papers*, container 53.6 (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center, n.d.).

³⁹ Stephen Watson, “Two Writers from the Other Europe,” *Selected Essays, 1980–1990* (Cape Town: Carrefour Press, 1990), 103.

⁴⁰ John Maxwell Coetzee, “*Age of Iron*. Small Black-and-Red Notebook, 2 July 1988–5 May 1989,” *J. M. Coetzee Papers*, container 33.6 (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center, 1988–1989), November 15, 1988.

⁴¹ John Maxwell Coetzee, “*Age of Iron*,” November 18, 1988.

⁴² John Maxwell Coetzee, “Long Works: *Age of Iron*: Handwritten Draft 6 with Extensive Revisions, 9 March 1988–5 March 1989,” *J. M. Coetzee Papers*, container 14.3 (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center, 1988–1989), 229.

⁴³ Berlinde de Bruyckere and John Maxwell Coetzee, *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* (New Haven and London: Mercatorfonds, 2013).

⁴⁴ In a letter to Paul Auster, Coetzee explicitly refers to Herbert and his poetry as a “guide to living [my emphasis]”: “I do believe that in the 1960s and, up to a point, the 1970s a lot of young people—indeed, many of the best young people—took poetry as the truest guide to living there was.... Who today has the power to shape young souls that Brodsky or Herbert or Enszenberger or (in a more dubious way) Allen Ginsberg had?” John Maxwell Coetzee and Paul Auster, *Here and Now. Letters: 2008–2011* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), 97–98.

⁴⁵ Crewe, “Arrival,” 19.

Coetzee's choice of Herbert for their shared poetry course due to the latter's ambiguous position and resistance to be easily positioned in a binary model of perpetrators or victims ("neither a Stalinist nor a freedom-loving poster-boy of the US State Department"),⁴⁶ as well as him being powerfully affected by the legacy of oppression and suffering handed down from one generation to another. This corresponds to Coetzee's own sense of implication in the history of violence in South Africa to which he alluded a number of times, most explicitly, perhaps, in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech delivered in 1987. In that speech, the echoes of Herbert's "Gordian" situation (to use a classical reference favored by both writers) and his acceptance of one's inescapable involvement in the transgenerational transmission of historical traumas are acutely heard. For example, when Coetzee addresses his own sense of entanglement in South Africa's legacy of oppression ("the power of the world his body lives in to impose itself on him and ultimately on his imagination, which, whether he likes it or not, has its residence in his body")⁴⁷ or when he acknowledges his problematic and morally compromised subject position (he argues that in South Africa everyone born with a white skin inescapably belongs to a "closed hereditary caste [from which one] cannot resign.")⁴⁸

Coetzee's affinity with Herbert is also disclosed in his partly autobiographical piece "What Is a Classic?"—despite the fact that Herbert, "the great poet of the classic of our own times,"⁴⁹ appears only in the concluding section of the essay. In the piece, Coetzee writes about himself deliberately choosing classical musical culture represented by Bach over the middle-class popular musical culture of his South African childhood and suggests two alternative readings of the episode, which he calls "transcendental-poetic" and "sociocultural." While exploring the latter, he asks the following question:

Was I ... symbolically electing high European culture, and command of the codes of that culture, as a route that would take me out of what I must have felt, in terms however obscure or mystified, as an historical dead end—a road that would culminate (again symbolically) with me on a platform in Europe addressing a cosmopolitan audience on Bach, T. S. Eliot, and the question of the classic?⁵⁰

For Coetzee, the "high European culture" that he embraced in place of his "native" culture comprises not only Bach but also Herbert. Consequently, the "sociocultural" interpretation of one's identity formation also applies to Coetzee's early election of Herbert and positioning the Polish poet in the very heart of

⁴⁶ Crewe, "Arrival," 19.

⁴⁷ John Maxwell Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987)," *J. M. Coetzee: Doubling the Point*, 98.

⁴⁸ John Maxwell Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987)," 96.

⁴⁹ John Maxwell Coetzee, "What Is a Classic? A Lecture," *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 16.

⁵⁰ Coetzee, "What Is a Classic?," 9.

his own literary patrimony. Choosing Herbert is not merely an act of self-deprovincialization.⁵¹ It is, above all, the election of one's ancestry.

However, Coetzee's identification with Herbert—one where the latter is a mirror of not only the former's artistic and cultural longings but his life experiences as well⁵²—is particularly well articulated when one considers Coetzee's recurrent acknowledgment of "Apollo and Marsyas"⁵³ in his writing. Surely, the poem in which Apollo becomes an indifferent witness to Marsyas's agony⁵⁴ must have appealed to Coetzee due to the way it showcases different responses to multiple forms of violence that one witnesses or is involved in: those of the "judges [who] have awarded victory to the god," of Apollo with his "nerves of artificial fibres," of a "petrified nightingale," which falls at Apollo's feat in the wake of Marsyas's scream.⁵⁵ Given Coetzee's preoccupation (both literary and personal) with the question of "response-ability"⁵⁶ in the face of suffering, oppression, and cruelty, it is evident that the Polish poet—for whom, according to Alissa Valles, the myth was just an "intensification ... of reality"⁵⁷—and his lines have served as a kind of lens through which Coetzee could investigate his own authority and accountability, his own status as the "implicated subject"⁵⁸ in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

But a comparative reading of Herbert's poem and Coetzee's early draft of *Boyhood* (1997) adds another reason why Coetzee's repeated evocation of "Apollo and Marsyas" should be read—first and foremost—autobiographically. Central to this interpretation is the image of the tree to which Marsyas is tied and which in

⁵¹ This is a perverse one, given the fact that Coetzee "elects" a provincial poet. For this reason, my reading of Coetzee's deprovincialization, which is based on the process of simultaneous re-provincialization (understood as creating a "minor-to-minor network" [see Lionnet and Shih, *Minor Transnationalism*, 8]) differs from Crewe's interpretation, which sees the strategy of deprovincialization as synonymous with responding to the global literary fashions of the time. "At a time of Marxist academic enthusiasm, it was salutary to encounter an Eastern Block writer," Crewe writes. See Crewe, "Arrival," 19.

⁵² Coetzee's affective response to Herbert is best exemplified by an anecdote about the 1994 incident concerning the Neustadt Prize to which Herbert was nominated and Coetzee served as a member of the jury. When the majority of the judges decided against awarding Herbert with the prize (in favor of Edward Kamau Brathwaite), Coetzee supposedly left the jury meeting, slamming the door behind him. See Andrzej Franaszek, *Zbigniew Herbert. Biografia II. Pan Cogito* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2018), 260–61.

⁵³ Coetzee was introduced to the poem when he was in the United States via Czesław Miłosz's and Peter Dale Scott's translation. See Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968).

⁵⁴ Perhaps also a perpetrator given the ambiguity of the line about Apollo "clean[ing] his instrument." Zbigniew Herbert, "Apollo and Marsyas," *The Collected Poems: 1956–1998*, trans. Alissa Valles (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 138. For a detailed discussion of the poem and its interpretations, see Stanisław Barańczak, *A Fugitive from Utopia: The Poetry of Zbigniew Herbert* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), 58–59.

⁵⁵ Herbert, "Apollo and Marsyas," 138, 139, 140.

⁵⁶ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 28.

⁵⁷ Valles, "Translator's Note," *The Collected Poems*, 5.

⁵⁸ Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

the final line of Herbert's poem turns white. If one is to believe the majority of ancient writers,⁵⁹ it is a pine tree, which, in the aftermath of Marsyas having been nailed to it, becomes a crippled tree. Coetzee is not alien to the image of a crippled pine tree either. In "Notes for Autobiography," under the date of May 11, 1993, he makes a direct link between a crippled pine tree and his life in South Africa. He evokes the deformed trees that grow on the golf course in Simonstown—the pine trees that are both alien and dangerous species; alien because they are native to the Mediterranean region and were introduced to South Africa during the seventeenth century and dangerous because they use more water than native vegetation. In Coetzee's reading, they become a metaphor for his own position as a white South African citizen: "Deformation. My life as deformed, year after year, by South Africa. Emblem: the deformed trees on the golf links in Simonstown."⁶⁰

In the light of this, it appears justified to argue that the crippled pine tree evoked by Herbert in "Apollo and Marsyas" is recognized by Coetzee as a "preposterous"⁶¹ version of Simonstown's damaged pine trees whose "bones," as he has observed elsewhere, are twisted by "something in [their] genes, some bad inheritance, some poison."⁶² But Herbert's white, grief-stricken tree, which, in my reading, mirrors Coetzee's deformed trees not only testifies to the affinity between the two writers understood as sharing parallel experiences, subject positions, or historical conditions (in regime-controlled states). It also reveals an affinity, which true to the word's Latin provenance (*affinitās*) implies a family relationship. Thus, similarly to the peasant's lament identified in the opening section of this article, "Apollo and Marsyas" becomes a trace of Coetzee's patrimony, of his lineage: not only aesthetic or ideological but also genetic. It is an expression of his "Polishness," which, just like the crippled tree, "grows out of the buried past into our clean present, pushing its knotted fingers up through the grate/gate behind which we have shut it."⁶³

J. M. Coetzee Is (Not) El polaco

"Enter into my bosom, thou, and breathe / As at the time when Marsyas thou didst draw / Out of the scabbard of those limbs of his."⁶⁴

⁵⁹ The only writer who did not identify the tree to which Marsyas was nailed as a pine tree was Pliny. See James Frazer's commentary to Book 1.4.2 of Apollodorus's *The Library*. Apollodorus, *The Library*, trans. James George Frazer (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1921).

⁶⁰ John Maxwell Coetzee, "Notes for Autobiography, 11 May–8 August 1993," *J. M. Coetzee Papers*, container 27.2 (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Center, 1993), 1/1. David Attwell also makes a reference to this fragment in his 2015 biographical study of Coetzee's writing. He not only explains the reason for the trees' shape (the result of southeasterly wind from the Atlantic Ocean) but also emphasizes the fact that their deformation is a "mockery of the [golf] club's wistful founders." Most importantly for the present discussion, he sees them as "emblems ... for the effects of place and history on one's character." Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 4.

⁶¹ About the concept of "preposterous" history, see Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1999).

⁶² De Bruyckere and Coetzee, *Cripplewood*, 46.

⁶³ De Bruyckere and Coetzee, *Cripplewood*, 46.

⁶⁴ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1893), 493.

In the autumn of 2022, J. M. Coetzee published the latest addition to his long-standing dialogue with Poland: a novel⁶⁵ entitled *El polaco*, which at the time of writing this article has not been published in English. There is no doubt that the book remains the most profound, complex, and extensive means of addressing Coetzee's concern with Polish cultural heritage to this day. The titular character of "el polaco" is Witold Walczykiewicz, a Polish pianist in his seventies who has risen to international success due to his "revisionary" and highly "idiosyncratic" interpretations of Chopin's music: "His Chopin is not at all romantic but, on the contrary, austere; a Chopin who is an heir to Bach," the narrator states.⁶⁶ The novel opens in 2015 when Witold arrives in Barcelona to give a piano recital upon the invitation of the *Circulo de Conciertos*—a group of Catalan enthusiasts of classical music. It is in Barcelona that he meets Beatriz, a member of the group who acts as his host and who in the subsequent parts of the book becomes the unwilling object of his affection/obsession,⁶⁷ his reluctant muse,⁶⁸ unenthusiastic lover ("out of pity"⁶⁹ and for three nights only), and, finally, an inheritor of eighty-four poems in Polish written by Witold and dedicated to her, which she collects in Warsaw and translates into Spanish to decipher their meaning.

Though in itself a late supplement to Coetzee's oeuvre, *El polaco* bears no trace of so-called "late style"⁷⁰ but, in fact, might be seen as an extension of the writer's earlier works, particularly *Foe* (1986), *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), and his *autre*-biographical trilogy. For example, it has an explicit intertextual frame, which is provided by Dante Alighieri's *La Vita Nuova* and *The Divine Comedy* with Beatriz becoming a contemporary incarnation of Beatrice.⁷¹ What is more, it

⁶⁵ *El polaco* is expected to be published in English in October 2023 as part of the volume entitled *The Pole and Other Stories*—thus implying that it is not a specimen of the novel but a short story. All translations from Spanish to English are mine.

⁶⁶ "Su Chopin no es nada romántico sino, por el contrario, austere, un Chopin heredero de Bach." John Maxwell Coetzee, *El polaco* (Madrid: El hilo de Ariadna, 2022), 17–18. Later, Margarita, who is a friend of Beatriz and is responsible for inviting Witold to Barcelona, interprets Witold's interpretation of Chopin as having an "Italian imprint" ("impronta italiana"). Coetzee, *El polaco*, 19.

⁶⁷ To be close to her, he follows Beatriz to Girona and Mallorca, as well as implores her to travel with him to Brazil.

⁶⁸ Witold calls her, among others, his "joy" ("degría") and "destiny" ("destino"), as well as "embodied grace" ("la gracia encarnada"). Coetzee, *El polaco*, 42, 76.

⁶⁹ "If she had to define it, she would call it a pity. He fell in love with her and she felt sorry for him; and she granted him his wish out of pity" ("Si tuviera que definirlo, lo llamaría lástima. Él se enamoró de ella y a ella le dio lástima y por lástima le concedió su deseo"). Coetzee, *El polaco*, 82.

⁷⁰ Unlike, for example, the Jesus trilogy, which obeys Said's "law of late works" by offering a "new idiom" and being synonymous with "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction." See Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 6, 12.

⁷¹ The scope of this article does not allow for a detailed study of all Dantesque references in the novel. Suffice it to say that the book of poems bequeathed to Beatriz Witold (identified as a "nameless wanderer" ["vagabundo sin nombre"]) is accompanied by three guides: Virgil, Beatrice, and Dante, thus mirroring the three companions of Dante in *The Divine Comedy* (i.e., Virgil, Beatrice, and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux). Also, the three major locations in *El polaco*, namely Barcelona, Mallorca, and Warsaw, seem to correspond to the three places visited by Dante in his narrative poem: Purgatorio, Paradiso, and Inferno, respectively. Additionally, one should note a number of direct references to Mary the mother and the symbol of the rose—both occupying a prominent position in Dante's poem and Coetzee's novel. Finally, one of the lines from poem no. 20 whose translation has been

addresses the problem of authority, which has occupied a central position in Coetzee's fiction and criticism.⁷² Echoing Susan Barton's struggle for her own story (and the right to tell it), Beatriz repeatedly fights with Witold (alive and dead) over herself and the role she is supposed to play in his fantasies and in his poems: among others, she refuses to consider herself the lost object that he has been looking for, reasserts her autonomy ("I am who I am" ["Yo soy quien soy!"]),⁷³ protests against being seen as part of history (unlike Witold whom she calls a "relic of history" ["una reliquia de la historia"]),⁷⁴ and fiercely opposes the ways she is represented in Witold's "pathetic project" ("patetico proyecto"),⁷⁵ which she regards as his act of revenge on her.⁷⁶ The book is also profoundly preoccupied with the question of translation and its consequences, including the threats of miscommunication and the process's imminent failure.⁷⁷ When Beatriz and Witold communicate in English (the only language they share) she often wonders about the actual meaning of his words in his native tongue and whether in Polish he might actually be a "perfectly charming" companion ("perfectamente encantador")⁷⁸—contrary to the way he appears to her and others when he speaks English. As a matter of fact, the final part of *El polaco* is in itself a penetrating examination of translation and its ultimate defeat. To learn about the meaning of the poems, Beatriz first uses computer-assisted translation software but, having found the result baffling, she decides to employ a translator, one Clara Weisz Urizza. Not only does Clara have no experience with literary translation but also—due to not being a native Polish speaker herself—requires assistance from her son Natán, who appears to be critical of the literary qualities of Witold's poems;⁷⁹ and, as Beatriz suspects, prejudiced against Poland and the Poles because of his Jewishness and the latter's anti-Semitism. Much to Beatriz's confusion, Clara's and Natán's translations differ significantly from the computer-generated translations. Consequently, neither Beatriz nor the reader of *El polaco*—even

commissioned by Beatriz reads: "There is always a new time / a new life / una vita nuova" ["Siempre hay un nuevo tiempo / una nueva vida / una vita nuova"]. Coetzee, *El polaco*, 134.

⁷² For example, Chris Danta, Sue Kossew, and Julian Murphet, eds., *Strong Opinions: J. M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

⁷³ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 48.

⁷⁴ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 87.

⁷⁵ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 126.

⁷⁶ "His revenge on her: to freeze her, aestheticize her, turn her into an art object, into a Beatrice, a plaster saint to be venerated and carried in procession through the streets. *Mother of Mercy*" ("Su venganza hacia ella: congelarla, estetizarla, volverla un objeto de arte una Beatrice, una santa de escayola a ser venerada y transportada en procesión por las calles. *Madre de la piedad*"). Coetzee, *El polaco*, 116.

⁷⁷ About Coetzee's view of translation and his own translation attempts, see Jan Steyn, "Translations," *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Coetzee*, ed. Jared Zimble (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 103–21.

⁷⁸ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 40.

⁷⁹ Given the only line in Polish that appears in the book, that is, "having achieved an ideal rose between the legs of his mistress before" ("wcześniej między nogami jego pani osiągnając idealną różę"), one is tempted to agree with Natán's harsh verdict. Coetzee, *El polaco*, 112.

a Polish reader⁸⁰ fluent in Spanish—is able to formulate any judgment with regard to the two poems (nos. 2 and 20) that feature in the final chapter of the book—be it with reference to their potential (un)faithfulness to the source texts or the nature and quality of Witold’s poetic diction.

However, the most ostensible link between *El polaco* and Coetzee’s earlier works is the character of Witold, who could be put on a par with Coetzee’s other autofictional (or *autre*-biographical) creations such as Señor C or John from the *Scenes from Provincial Life* trilogy. Typically for Coetzee’s avatars, Witold’s portrayal is ruthless and offers an amalgamation of (self-)contempt,⁸¹ mockery, and deprecation—with a pinch of irony, for example, when Witold compares himself to Max von Sydov, whom he names his “evil brother” (“hermano malvado”).⁸² Beatriz, on the other hand, joins the company of such female characters as Julia Frankl, Adriana Nascimento, and Sophie Denoël, who remain highly critical and condescending toward their admirer. She is disappointed by his much-awaited recital: while she hopes that the performance will transport her to the “Polish plains” (“llanuas polacos”), she finds it “overintellectualized” (“sobrintelectualizad[o]”), “stern” (“sever[o]”), and characterized by “aridity” (“aridez”).⁸³ His behavior will constantly irritate her, particularly his moodiness (“malhumorado”), lack of initiative, frequent retreats into silence, and, finally, coldness that emanates from him (“algo frío”).⁸⁴ She will call him a “mummy’s boy” (“un niño de su mamá”), a “poor old man” (“pobre viejo”), and, most painfully of all, an “old clown” (“viejo payaso”).⁸⁵ In Beatriz’s view, Witold’s “dry” soul (“seca”) is matched by his frigid body—although she agrees to have sex with him, she is repulsed by his chest hair (“like a bear” [“como un oso”]) and skin of an old man (“la piel de un hombre viejo”).⁸⁶ Finally, just like other autofictional selves, Witold shares a number of biographical characteristics with his creator: both were born during WWII, both refuse to eat meat, both divorced their wives (Philippa Jubber and Małgorzata, respectively) in the late 1970s, both have a complicated relationship with their daughters (Witold refers to his

⁸⁰ It should be noted that *El polaco* includes a few examples that testify to Coetzee’s familiarity with the Polish language and its position as a minor or peripheral language. For example, when Beatriz attempts to communicate with Witold’s neighbor Mrs Jabłońska in order to collect the poems, she intends to speak to her in Russian, having wrongly assumed that the two languages are identical (this, in turn, might be seen as Coetzee’s ironic comment on the way the West perceives Central Europe). Later, when the two women finally speak (in French), Beatriz is confused by Mrs Jabłońska using the phrase “à l’arabe” (“in those days, the builders did things in the Arab way” [“los constructores hacían las cosas à l’arabe en esa época”]), which is not a correct French idiom but supposedly a translation of the Polish expression “po arabsku,” which might mean “in the wrong way,” “backward.” Coetzee, *El polaco*, 118.

⁸¹ Witold’s self-contempt is so severe that he does not even recognize himself as a pianist but someone who simply plays the piano (“un hombre que toca el piano”). Coetzee, *El polaco*, 29.

⁸² Coetzee, *El polaco*, 27.

⁸³ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 25, 19, 18.

⁸⁴ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 21, 76. This is yet another application of the motif of “cold,” “frozen,” and “dead” heart that one frequently encounters in Coetzee’s *autre*-biographical trilogy. See Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 123; Coetzee, *Youth*, 168.

⁸⁵ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 42, 127, 25.

⁸⁶ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 78, 62.

daughter Ewa who lives in Berlin as “not blessed” [“no bienvenida”] and describes their relationship as “civilized” [“somos civilizados”].⁸⁷

However, what clearly distinguishes *El polaco* from Coetzee’s earlier works and what remains of primary interest to this article is the book’s unprecedented (in terms of scope and complexity) acknowledgment of Coetzee’s conversation with Poland, the Poles, and Polishness, which can be interpreted as a recognition of the writer’s “unpronounceable” and “untranslatable” heritage, a tribute to his (and his mother’s, and Balcer Dubiel’s) “meaningful past.”⁸⁸

In Coetzee’s novel, the Polish tropes manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Poland itself is a frequent topic of conversation between Beatriz and Witold.⁸⁹ The former’s idea of Poland mirrors her idea of Witold: it is a place that is “stuck in the past” (“atascada en el pasado”)⁹⁰—one that is incapable (or unwilling) to follow the principles of modernization and rationalization and is firmly cemented in the old ways, such as the presence of ticket collectors (“hombre[s] que recoge[n] los tickets”) on buses, trams, and trains. When she visits Warsaw in October 2019 to collect her “inheritance,” Poland makes a disappointing (and quite surreal) impression on her with its characterless buildings, an empty square where three solitary children riding their bikes are chased by a white dog, as well as a woman dressed in black who is spying on her from her balcony. She spends the night in Witold’s apartment, which matches its bleak surroundings: it is inhospitable, very simple and austere, practically empty with just a piano, a plaster bust of Bach, a photo of her, and an urn with Witold’s ashes. “There is nothing worth seeing” (“No hay nada que valga la pena ver”)⁹¹—she will say before her quick departure back home. For Witold, however, Poland is a more complicated case and the way he talks about the place and its impact on his life distinctly reminds one of Coetzee’s own troubled relationship with South Africa. He confesses to having a love-hate relationship with Poland (“Amo a Polonia y odio a Polonia”⁹²), which, in his view, is characteristic of a number of his fellow country(wo)men. He also acknowledges its haunting legacy and the impossibility to escape it. According to Witold, if Chopin had lived longer, he would have returned to Poland⁹³ because of the way the place has been “crippling” or “deforming” (to use Coetzee’s terms quoted before) its children. Witold’s idea of his motherland is, perhaps, best summed up by his vision of Poland as a dumping ground, a site for all that is unwanted and unusable. He will say: “Poland is full of garbage. Centuries of garbage. We do not bury it. We do not

⁸⁷ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 64, 65. He also adds that she has the “soul of her mother,” not his (“tiene el alma de su madre”).

⁸⁸ Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

⁸⁹ Another contribution to the novel’s representation of Poland is provided by Natán, who states the following: “In Poland, poetry is a disease. Everyone catches it” (“En Polonia, la poesía es una enfermedad, todo el mundo se contagia”). Coetzee, *El polaco*, 120.

⁹⁰ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 73.

⁹¹ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 102.

⁹² Coetzee, *El polaco*, 68.

⁹³ “Si Chopin hubiera vivido más tiempo hubiese regresado a Polonia.” Coetzee, *El polaco*, 27.

hide it” (“Polonia está llena de basura. Siglos de basura. No la enterramos. No la escondemos”).⁹⁴ In short, Poland is a landfill of history, which, in turns, compels Witold to identify himself as history itself (“Soy historia”).⁹⁵

But Witold is not just history but, as a matter of fact, a composite of histories, including individual histories of a number of Polish artists who—in the wake of *El polaco*—should be recognized as an essential part of Coetzee’s cultural patrimony. One of them is Witold Gombrowicz, who shares with “the Pole”⁹⁶ his first name, an ambivalent relationship with his home country,⁹⁷ a special affection for South America,⁹⁸ as well as the prominent role of Barcelona in both men’s lives⁹⁹—not to mention the fact that the ship that brought Gombrowicz from Argentina to Europe in 1963 was named “Federico C.”¹⁰⁰ Another is, of course, Frédéric Chopin who in Coetzee’s novel undergoes a complex transformation process that consists of two elements. The first is heterodiegetic transformation: one in which Witold becomes an incarnation of Chopin with his unique vital statistics and features (these include small hands, paleness, gauntness, as well as suffering from a terminal illness). The second is transposition¹⁰¹—a procedure in which the events of one’s life become transposed from one period to another or from one location to another. In *El polaco*, the event in question is Witold’s “randezvous” with Beatriz in Mallorca, which is a reenactment of the famous (and equally frustrating) visit to Palma de Mallorca and Valldemossa by Chopin and George Sand in the winter of 1838/1839. Beatriz herself is particularly distressed with the evident parallel between the two situations—especially as she fears the role that she might be asked to play (i.e., of George Sand): “Perhaps this is what the Pole really wants: a nurse to look after him in his final years” (“Quizá es eso lo que realmente quiere el polaco: una enfermera que lo atienda en sus años finales”).¹⁰²

But there is one Pole whose “marks” become particularly noticeable in the character of Witold, namely Zbigniew Herbert. The first trace of a special affinity between the two is the novel’s early mention of Bach,¹⁰³ who emerges as one of

⁹⁴ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 68.

⁹⁵ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 73.

⁹⁶ “The Pole” refers to not only Witold but Coetzee himself. Perhaps the most conspicuous similarity between the two writers is their preoccupation with the autobiographical self and experimentation with different modes of self (mis-)representation.

⁹⁷ Most explicitly addressed in *Ferdynand* (1937), *Trans-Atlantyk* (1953), *Dziennik* (1957, 1962, 1966, 1992).

⁹⁸ This is where Gombrowicz lived between 1939 and 1963. In *El polaco*, Witold dreams of escaping to Brazil with Beatriz—to a place that will free them from all the constraints that have been imposed upon them (by their nationality, language, personal, and professional commitments).

⁹⁹ Gombrowicz landed in Barcelona on April 22, 1963. The capital of Catalonia was thus the first place on the European continent where the writer set his foot in after twenty-four years of exile. Klementyna Suchanow, *Gombrowicz: Ja, geniusz* (Wołowiec and Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czarne & Muzeum Literaturny im. Adama Mickiewicza, 2017), 267.

¹⁰⁰ Suchanow, *Gombrowicz*, 255.

¹⁰¹ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 294–303.

¹⁰² Coetzee, *El polaco*, 51.

¹⁰³ “[H]is Chopin is not at all romantic but, on the contrary, austere; a Chopin who is an heir to Bach.” Coetzee, *El polaco*, 18.

Witold's spiritual and aesthetic fathers and whose bust the pianist keeps in his Warsaw apartment. Bach—to whom Coetzee referred in “What Is a Classic?” alongside Herbert himself—was also the “beloved”¹⁰⁴ composer of the Polish poet and features in his poem “What Mr Cogito Thinks of Hell”—one that is set in the lowest circle of Dante's *Inferno*. What Witold and Herbert also share is the role they played in the dissemination of the post-WWII Polish cultural production abroad. If Witold is credited by Margarita for “paving the way”¹⁰⁵ for the new generation of Polish musicians, Herbert is correctly acknowledged for leading the way in introducing the international readership to the poetry from the “other Europe.” Both are celebrated and recognized abroad but have chosen to live in Warsaw. Both write poetry and their lines contain the same repertoire of references, mostly classical (e.g., Aphrodite or Orpheus).¹⁰⁶ Natán's claim that Witold's poetry reminds him of the verses of the Polish Romantic poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid is yet another example of the pianist's kinship with Herbert. For the latter, Norwid—who knew Chopin personally and who dedicated a series of works to him¹⁰⁷—consistently served as a major point of reference and source of inspiration: particularly as one of the forefathers of his own “classicism.”¹⁰⁸ Herbert's professed “love”¹⁰⁹ for Norwid, whom he considered his favourite Polish poet,¹¹⁰ was so great that he regularly used to read his poems out loud to celebrate his poetic genius.¹¹¹ Needless to say, another link between Witold and Herbert is Chopin. Quite ironically, one of Herbert's early works was a 1949 radio program entitled “Chopin in a common room” (“Chopin w świetlicy”) in which he introduced the life and works of Chopin to the people of the People's Republic of Poland—in line with the requirements of the new communist doctrine.¹¹² Even the apartment that Beatriz visits in order to collect the poems is reminiscent of Herbert's flat in Warsaw's Promenada street, while a desire to escape to South America makes one think about Herbert's craving to flee to Bayonne, Pisa, or Venice in the final months of his life.¹¹³ Still, the most powerful connection between Witold and Zbigniew Herbert is one Władysław Walczykiwicz, Herbert's closest friend who shares his surname with Coetzee's character. Not only did Herbert and Walczykiwicz study and work together (at the Nicolaus Copernicus University and at the Ministry of Foreign Trade, respectively), but they lived together (in Toruń

¹⁰⁴ Franaszek, *Zbigniew Herbert. Biografia II*, 375.

¹⁰⁵ “[Witold] abrió el camino.”

¹⁰⁶ Two of Herbert's poems that feature Aphrodite and Orpheus are “Ornamental but Real” and “Winter Garden.”

¹⁰⁷ Most notably, *Czarne kwiaty* (1856) and “Fortepian Chopina” (1863–1864).

¹⁰⁸ Classicism understood by Herbert as “stones, gestures, clouds, the perspective of art and the eternal man, the quiet imagination, intellectualism, esteemed conventions, incessant shuffling of props” (“kamienie, gesty, obłoki, perspektywa sztuki i wiecznego człowieka, spokój wyobraźni, intelektualizm, konwencje szacowne, niezmordowane tasowanie rekwizytów”; see Herbert in Andrzej Franaszek, *Zbigniew Herbert. Biografia I. Niepokój* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2018), 442.

¹⁰⁹ Franaszek, *Zbigniew Herbert. Biografia II*, 507.

¹¹⁰ Alongside Juliusz Słowacki. Franaszek, *Zbigniew Herbert. Biografia II*, 508.

¹¹¹ Franaszek, *Zbigniew Herbert. Biografia II*, 315, 507.

¹¹² See Franaszek, *Zbigniew Herbert. Biografia I*, 284; Henryk Citko, “Nieznana publicystyka Zbigniewa Herberta z lat 1948–1955. Uzupełnienia do bibliografii,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4.140 (2020): 198.

¹¹³ Franaszek, *Zbigniew Herbert. Biografia II*, 812.

and Warsaw) and, until the latter's death in 1980, they enjoyed a "brotherly" relationship characterized by mutual care, loyalty, and support.¹¹⁴ Herbert's late elegiac poem "Mr Cogito on a Set Topic: 'Friends Depart,'" which is dedicated to Walczykiewicz, is a tribute to the "devoted Władysław" and the two men's kinship (or twinning): to their "common tastes / ideals / twin characters."¹¹⁵

Consequently, what one is bound to conclude is that Witold is a commixture of selves: of Gombrowicz, Chopin, and Herbert. The Pole is a complex "avatar" or a "mask" that stands for (or hides) a number of other Poles—in the manner of Herbert's Mr Cogito, about whom Coetzee wrote extensively in "Zbigniew Herbert and the Figure of the Censor." His surname, which (apart from its link to Herbert's friend) derives from the word *waltz* (Pol. "walc"), clearly implies the act of rotation: not only the constant movement of selves but, more importantly, an alternation of selves.

But Witold is not just an incarnation of Gombrowicz, Chopin, and Herbert. As argued before, he is also an avatar of Coetzee himself. In this sense, the correlation that lies at the very heart of *El polaco* (i.e., Witold = Herbert = Chopin = Gombrowicz = the Pole, as well as Witold = Coetzee) is not only an encouragement to recognize a special kind of kinship or affinity between Coetzee and selected giants of Polish culture (e.g., Coetzee = Herbert)—one which, after Mr Cogito, we could define as a communion of "common tastes / ideals / twin characters." More importantly, it is also a means to acknowledge Coetzee's own "Polishness," his Central European patrimony (i.e., Coetzee = the Pole). What further emboldens me to offer such an interpretation of *El polaco* is what I consider two subtle allusions to the unpublished *Summertime* scene that I referred to in the opening of this article. One is the profession of Witold's mother. According to the pianist, she was a singer, which, one could claim, tallies with Vera singing "Jak się macie Bartłomieju" to her son. The other is the recurrent complaint made by Beatriz about the unpronounceability of the Pole's name, which matches the unpronounceability of the lines of the "peasant's lament" evident in the song's inaccurate and faulty transcription.

Clearly, *El polaco* is a testament to Coetzee's lifelong interest in Polish cultural production and an extension of the conversation with the Polish writers in which he has been continually involved since the 1960s. Most of all, however, it is an act of self-identification with his Polish heritage, with his Polishness, which "presumably is behind English" ("presuntamente está detrás de inglés").¹¹⁶ If Witold plays Chopin because he believes that the latter tells us about ourselves,¹¹⁷ then Coetzee writes about Witold and Herbert, and other Poles because, in the end, they tell him of himself.

¹¹⁴ Among others, Herbert attended Walczykiewicz's wedding and was a godfather of his daughter Barbara. He also regularly sent letters, postcards, and gifts from his trips abroad to Władysław and his family. The word *brotherly* appears in his letters to Walczykiewicz. See Franaszek, *Zbigniew Herbert. Biografia II*, 846, 849; Joanna Siedlecka, *Pan od poezji* (Warszawa: Fronda, 2018); Barbara Konarska Pabiniak, "Herbert w Gostyninie" (<https://gostynin24.pl/index.php/publicystyka/item/6518-herbert-w-gostyninie>).

¹¹⁵ Zbigniew Herbert, "Mr Cogito on a Set Topic: 'Friends Depart,'" *The Collected Poems*, 176.

¹¹⁶ Coetzee, *El polaco*, 38.

¹¹⁷ "Porque nos habla de nosotros." Coetzee, *El polaco*, 31.

Conclusion

The major thematic preoccupation of Coetzee's *autre*-biographical trilogy was the parent–son relation. If *Boyhood* paid more attention to Coetzee's mother, *Summertime* unambiguously focused on the father. The book's exploration of the figure of Jesus, this fatherless man for whom the relationship with his "father" (God) was an ontological imperative, offered an opportunity for Coetzee to creatively revisit his own difficult relationship with Jack Coetzee, who first appears in the trilogy as "an appendage, a contributor to the economy as a paying lodger might be."¹¹⁸

David Attwell most accurately defined *Summertime* as an "act of reparation"¹¹⁹ toward Coetzee's father. But if *Summertime* was concerned with "being a son,"¹²⁰ *El polaco* is—in the light of the reading proposed in this article—about being a great-grandson. Consequently, Coetzee's transnational dialogue with Poland and its cultural production whose various manifestations have been addressed throughout this article is not only part of the writer's attempt to claim a new political and aesthetic alliance across the north-south/ east-west divide. More so, it is not only a proof of Coetzee's comradeship with the poets and writers from behind the Iron Curtain and his recognition of a shared implication in the history of the past and present injustices. Finally, it is not only about a special kind of solidarity between colonized subjects. *El polaco*—a supplement to Coetzee's *autre*-biography—proves that Coetzee's conversation with Poland is, more than anything else, about Coetzee's patrimony and about his Polish heritage. It is an instrument of acknowledging one's ancestry and a means of self-identification. It is about being Balcer Dubiel's great-grandson.

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¹¹⁸ Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 12.

¹¹⁹ Attwell, J. M. *Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 160.

¹²⁰ John Maxwell Coetzee, *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Harvill Sacker, 2009), 31.

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