Writing and Translating on the Margins Dissonance in J. M. Coetzee's *The Pole*

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1. Prelude

In *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*, literary scholar Daniel Albright uses the musical concept of dissonance as an approach to the relationship among the arts. He writes, "[t]here is a dissonance *within* music, such as the minor second or the tritone; but there is also a dissonance *between* music and painting or poetry – or other arts" (Albright 2000, 29; italics in original). Then in his 2014 book *Panaesthetics: On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts*, Albright looks systematically into "the ways in which artistic media interact – sometimes cooperating genially, sometimes poaching on one another's territory, sometimes dissonating, clashing" (Albright 2014, 4). As in his earlier study, dissonance becomes a way to understand various forms of artistic expressions: Albright's panaesthetic view explores the interconnectivity of the arts and the boundaries of intermediality through figures of dissonance (see Albright 2014, 210-212). Although inspired by music, the use of dissonance is not limited to musical spheres, as it also helps illuminate boundary-crossing relationships beyond music. This is how Rosi Braidotti reflects on her own migratory journey between Europe and Australia. In *Patterns of Dissonance*, Braidotti claims the coming together of various languages – Italian, French, Dutch, and a variety of English – as crucial

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in the interdisciplinary conception of her research. In particular, she refers to this coexistence of different voices as "[t]ranslation, transposition, transferral" that "contributes considerably to the creation of the effect of dissonance" (Braidotti 1991, 14-15). Similarly, a fellow Australian scholar named Mary Besemeres is also inspired by the constant movements between languages such as her own bilingual upbringing in a Polish Australian household (Besemeres 2008, 128). For Besemeres, the immigrant's navigation between languages is a process of "*cultural* self-translation" (Besemeres 2003, 32; italics in original). Like many immigrants, Besemeres is struck by a paradox: she is between languages and cultures, because she feels attached to both Polish and Australian yet does not quite belong to either.

It is in this light of dissonance and marginality that I approach John Maxwell Coetzee's 2023 novel *The Pole*, which was first released as *El polaco* in 2022 by the Argentinian publisher El hilo de Ariadna. Born in South Africa in 1940, Coetzee moved between Africa, Europe, and the United States in his early life. In 2002, Coetzee permanently relocated to Australia. Language and identity have always been among the central issues of Coetzee's fiction and nonfiction alike since his debut novels *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), both of which bear traces of Coetzee's family history in South Africa (see Attwell 1993, 37 and Dovey 2018, 18). In particular, Coetzee's "either/or" identity (Coetzee 1992, 209) has come to shape his linguistic, cultural, literary identity and vision. The split between Coetzee's European heritage and his South African reality thus generated a perpetuating dissonance in his life, which is then reflected in his literary works. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee claimed that "in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it" (Coetzee 1992, 17). In many ways, Coetzee's own migratory journey – echoing that of Braidotti and perhaps also Besemeres – has enlightened him on his otherness and the "dissonating" (Albright 2014, 4) interaction between different languages and cultures, which prompts him to critique "the exclusionary tendencies of national-literary traditions" (Van der

Vlies 2023, 484). In his most recent novel *The Pole*, Coetzee once again brings the issue of marginality to the fore: by shedding light on the dissonance among languages and artistic media both *within* the work and *about* the work, Coetzee also turns a musical novel into a modern allegory about writing and translating on the margins in the multilingual age.

2. Before *The Pole*

In Michael Gorra's review of *The Pole*, Coetzee was juxtaposed with Jhumpa Lahiri – a British American writer of Bengali parents – in their distancing from English as acclaimed writers in this language. Similar to Coetzee, Lahiri finds her life split between languages and cultures, and as a result she continues to reflect on her existential dissonance in her works. In the introduction to her 2022 collection of essays *Translating Myself and Others*, Lahiri looks back at her life between languages: "I was raised speaking and living, simultaneously, in English and Bengali, and this meant translating between them, constantly, for myself and for others" (Lahiri 2022, 3). Having been well versed in translingualism, Lahiri aptly refers to her writing in English as "a form of cultural translation" (2). Lahiri launched her career as a writer in 1999 with *Interpreter of Maladies* – a collection of short stories that won her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction the following year. Having already established herself as a prominent writer in English, Lahiri moved to Italy in 2012 and began to write in Italian. This dramatic transformation of linguistic landscape (3) is not imposed but rather a choice willingly made in adulthood. In the essay "Why Italian?" Lahiri explains her switch to Italian as an act of "transgression" coming from "a writer without a true mother tongue" (10). Lahiri writes:

> The more I write in Italian, the more I feel in turmoil, suspended between my old knowledge of English and the new door in front of me. I'm forced to acknowledge that there is a distance between me and both languages. […] Writing in another language reactivates the grief of being between two worlds, of being on the outside. Of feeling alone and excluded (14).

Yet unlike Lahiri, who recently adopted Italian as her language of writing, Coetzee has never turned away from English (Gorra 2023). Indeed as Gorra claims, Coetzee did not abandon English but rather made an effort to marginalize English – or at least *his* English – by drawing attention to *other* languages through translation: “Coetzee claims that his books are not only easy to translate but that their translations are ‘in no way inferior to the original’” (Gorra 2023). In recent years, Coetzee’s multilingual deliberations have turned into a growing mistrust of English and even a “War Against Global English” (Marshall 2022), which is the befitting title for the 2022 review on *The New Yorker* for Coetzee’s latest novel *El polaco*. As Colin Marshall explains:

> “El polaco” is the second of Coetzee’s novels to appear in Spanish first, but he began privileging translations much earlier in his career: in the past twenty years, he’s seen to it that many of his books be made available in Dutch before any other language (Marshall 2022).

It is in this background of linguistic displacement that *The Pole* first appeared in a Spanish translation by Mariana Dimópulos (see Marshall 2022). Before the publication of *The Pole* in English in 2023, the first glimpse of Coetzee’s novel must come from *El polaco* (see Kusek 2023). Coetzee’s refusal to make *The Pole* available first to the English-speaking world is not only a linguistic recalibration but also a reconsideration of the North-South hierarchy in the literary world. As Meg Samuelson argues in her article on Coetzee and “Literatures of the South” (a term translated from “Literaturas del Sur” seminar, which Coetzee launched in 2015 in Buenos Aires), Spanish has been conceived as “a language of the South” in Coetzee’s literary works such as the Jesus trilogy (Samuelson 2021, 138-139, 146). And in a recent conversation with the American publisher and translator Valerie Miles that took place in Barcelona, Coetzee reflected on the choice of publishing *The Pole* first as *El polaco* as an attempt to reshape the privileged position of

the Anglo audience in the northern hemisphere. In fact, it has been a transformation long in the making, as Coetzee described his partnership with his Argentinian publisher María Soledad Costantini from El hilo de Ariadna:

> It was no accident that these collaborative books were published first in Argentina, then later in Australia, two countries of the southern hemisphere. They appeared first in Spanish just as the after world in which my three Jesus novels are situated is a Spanish-speaking world. Spanish-speaking, not because I think Spanish is in some sense better than English, but simply because in the world we live in, Spanish is viable as an alternative to English. And also because I thought it would give a jolt to Anglo readers to find that the language of the afterlife would not be English. These collaborative texts appeared first in Spanish and then appeared first in the southern hemisphere. Thus, they did not have to pass the scrutiny of the gatekeepers of the North, the editors, reviewers, etc., before they could be read in the South. It's important.
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> So in this way, we arrive at *El polaco*, which first saw the light of day in Buenos Aires in 2022. Then in Australia some months ago, then a few days ago in the North (Coetzee & Miles 2023).

As explained by Coetzee, multilingualism has been built into the life story of *The Pole* not simply as a form of resistance against "the hegemony of the English language" (qtd. in Marshall 2022) but also as a dissonant counterbalance to the dominance of the northern gaze (see Vold 2011, 47). At the same time, Coetzee's juxtaposition of *The Pole* and *El polaco* also creates a sense of dissonance that is reminiscent of a musical counterpoint, which can generate "interesting patterns from their friction against one another, without agreeing on a single effect" (Albright 2014, 211f.). By giving *El polaco* the same weight as *The Pole*, Coetzee also seeks to turn the vertical relationship between languages and hemispheres into a horizontal and contrapuntal interrelation.

3. Marginalizing *The Pole*

In many ways, *The Pole* is a displaced and dissonant literary work, whose origin is deliberately altered by its author. By publishing it first as *El polaco* and thus placing translation in center stage, Coetzee has cast *The Pole* to the margins. Like many of Coetzee's works with strong autobiographical echoes, *The Pole* also reflects its author's own marginality despite his status as an "international author" (Samuelson 2021, 146). Growing up in an English-speaking household with Afrikaans ancestry, Coetzee was surrounded by linguistic, cultural, and racial divides. In comparison to Lahiri, who has come to realize her lack of mother tongue due to the absence of a truly dominant language, Coetzee has only "speculated that he might not have a mother tongue", feeling "like an outsider" to both English and Afrikaans (Attwell 2016, 34, 38-39). The dissonance in Coetzee's linguistic background leads to his own marginalization, as he confessed: "No Afrikaner would consider me an Afrikaner […], because English is my first language, and has been since childhood" Coetzee (1992, 341f.) confessed, whereas English offers Coetzee no sense of belonging either:

> I became […] an English writer in the sense that I wrote in the English language. Though I tended to treat the language with suspicion rather than affection, reflecting a feeling that it did not really belong to me (Coetzee & Miles 2023).

In other words, Coetzee has been plagued by his own in-betweenness (see Karwowska 2014, 1; Wiegandt 2016, 156) that in turn sharpened his sense and awareness of marginality, when he was growing up in South Africa and later on when he was working in the United Kingdom, when he was studying and teaching in the United States, and as an immigrant in Australia for the past two decades. As summarized aptly by Laura Wright, Coetzee is an outsider "in the realm of white South Africa, as an English speaker with an Afrikaans surname and by virtue of his own self-placement" (Wright 2006, 193). It is thus no surprise that Coetzee

continues to focus on the complex relationship between language and identity in his literary works.

The title protagonist of *The Pole* is a foreigner who is surrounded by other foreigners, and they communicate in a language that is foreign to all of them. At first glance, it is a love story in the shadow of Dante and Chopin – about a Polish pianist pursuing a Catalan lady named Beatriz. The story is narrated in the third-person voice from the perspective of Beatriz, and with almost half of the novel taking place after the death of the Pole, Beatriz turns out to be the real protagonist of this novel. This mismatch between voice and stance, between titular and actual protagonist already sets up a dissonant background for this "tale of translingual seduction" (Fry 2023), and the Polish pianist's musical translation also adds another level of dissonance to it.

Coetzee's approach to music resonates in particular with Albright's application of dissonance as a point of both convergence and contention. Already before *The Pole*, Coetzee has cleverly woven music into the fabric of his novels, such as the use of Schubert in *Summertime* and the essay "On J. S. Bach" at the end of *Diary of a Bad Year* (see Englund 2017, 99-113). Then in the novel *Disgrace* (1999), the protagonist David Lurie – a professor of English with an academic interest in music – was working on an opera called *Byron in Italy*. "What he wants to write is music: *Byron in Italy*, a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera" (Coetzee 2000, 4). In the words of Carrol Clarkson:

> It is through the composition of his opera that David Lurie in *Disgrace* hopes to create a sound that cuts across all cultural divides, that expresses something common to all forms of animal existence, both human and non-human (Clarkson 2009, 121).

Lurie envisioned *Byron in Italy* as a love story with the fabric of dissonance interwoven into its plot and music. It is thus an artistic expression of linguistic and temporal displacement that predates Coetzee's own migration.

> That is how he had conceived it: a chamber-play about love and death, with a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than passionate older man; as an action with a complex, restless music behind it, sung in an English that tugs continually toward an imagined Italian (Coetzee 2000, 180).

However, with a vision of utopia and yearning for harmony, Lurie's opera in post-apartheid South Africa is doomed to fail. Two decades later, after having settled down in a new home in Australia, Coetzee picked up from where his protagonist had once left off with his unfinished opera. This time in *The Pole*, Coetzee moved the story from Byron's Italy to the cacophonous soundscape of contemporary Europe.

The titular hero of *The Pole* is a pianist named Witold Walczykiewicz, yet his name does not appear until almost halfway through Part One. Until then he is simply referred to as "the Pole". Witold's life is inseparable from his art, just as his personal identity is woven into his nationality:

> He is a Pole, a man of seventy, a vigorous seventy, a concert pianist best known as an interpreter of Chopin, but a controversial interpreter: his Chopin is not at all Romantic but on the contrary somewhat austere, Chopin as inheritor of Bach. To that extent he is an oddity on the concert scene, odd enough to draw a small but discerning audience in Barcelona, the city to which he has been invited, the city where he will meet the graceful, soft-spoken woman. But barely has the Pole emerged into the light than he begins to change. With his striking mane of silver hair, his idiosyncratic renderings of Chopin, the Pole promises to be a distinct enough personage. But in matters of soul, of feeling, he is troublingly opaque. At the piano he plays with soul, undeniably; but the soul that rules him is Chopin's, not his own (Coetzee 2023, 4-5).

The Pole's un-Polish interpretation of Chopin – "as an inheritor of Bach" – represents his inner dissonance: by characterizing his art as foreign, Coetzee also draws attention to the often ignored fact that musical interpretation is in fact a

form of translation. Rather than being cast as an artist in his own right, the Pole is portrayed as an interpreter under the command of the composer. In other words, Witold is less of a pianist and more of a faithful translator:

> "So you have always been a pianist. From a child."
> Gravely the Pole considers the word pianist. "I have been a man who plays piano," he says at last. "Like the man who punches tickets in the bus. He is a man and he punches tickets, but he is not a ticket man" (Coetzee 2023: 22).

Witold's uneasiness towards being characterized as a pianist is both a choice of identity and a choice of word by alluding to the act of translation: the word "pianist" suggests a deliberate distancing from the Polish word *pianista*, as Wotold opts for the German equivalent *Klavierspieler*, literally a piano player. The German resonance is in line with Witold's un-Romantic and austere translation of Chopin under the influence of Bach, as two languages and musical traditions – rather than the monolingual Polish – interweave into an illuminating dissonance that is deliberately foreign, as Walter Benjamin lays out in *The Task of the Translator*:

> If the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations, this is not accomplished through a vague alikeness between adaptation and original. It stands to reason that kinship does not necessarily involve likeness (Benjamin 2000, 18).

Paradoxically perhaps, Benjamin's view of linguistic kinship underscores the innate dissonance or "alterity" of languages (Yoo 2013, 234), which Coetzee explores in the linguistic polyphony – with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin – in his earlier novel *Slow Man* that reaches "beyond the boundary of one national language" (Yoo 2013, 250). Although seemingly contradictory, Coetzee's status as an international writer and his marginality are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are even inseparable, because in 2003 the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Coetzee, "who in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the

outsider" (qtd. in Van der Vlies 2023, 481). Coetzee's marginality is tied to his boundary-crossing sensibilities as a translingual and transnational writer.
Almost as an act of transgression, *The Pole* is also Coetzee's attempt at an intermedial narrative with the interplay of both text and music (see Albright 2014, 209). In this dissonant music-literary space, Coetzee draws attention to the question of authenticity regarding one's identity, as reflected in Beatriz's opinion about the Pole's concert:

> She is not satisfied. The fact is, she listened this evening, listened intently, and did not like what she heard. […] *It is not Chopin who fails to speak to me, Witold, but your Chopin, the Chopin who uses you as his medium* – that is what she would say. *Claudio Arrau – you know him?* – she would go on – *Arrau remains, for me, a better interpreter, a better medium. Through Arrau, Chopin speaks to my heart. But of course Arrau was not from Poland, so perhaps there was something he was deaf to, some feature of the mystery of Chopin that foreigners will never understand* (Coetzee 2023, 24-25; italics in original).

According to Jennifer Wilson, Beatriz's disappointment in Witold's interpretation of Chopin has cast doubt on her belief that a Polish pianist must have had "the music [of Chopin] in his bones and blood", which implies Coetzee's very own critique of national purity (Wilson 2023). In addition, Witold's "idiosyncratic renderings of Chopin" are a form of artistic displacement and self-elected marginalization – not unlike Coetzee's choice of diverting this book's course of production by releasing it first in translation. According to one of the reviews, Witold's rejection of the "historically authentic Chopin [has] led the way for a new generation of Chopin interpreters in his native land" and thus should be praised (Coetzee 2023, 6). In a similar way perhaps, Coetzee's war against global English is just as daring and groundbreaking as Witold's "revisionary reading of Chopin" (7). Here, the matter of authenticity surrounding Witold's interpretation of Chopin is juxtaposed with Coetzee's own musing on textual originality when it comes to the life story of

The Pole, for which the Spanish translation would assume the status of the "original" – or as Coetzee had intended, "no translation of this particular book should be inferior to the English language version" (Coetzee & Miles 2023). Although *El polaco* does not quite break free from the shadows of *The Pole*, the novel's complex linguistic border-crossings are crucial to Coetzee's ambitious endeavor to shake the English-dominated publishing industry with translation.

4. The Translation Game

Paradoxically, this choice of marginalization – for the Pole and Coetzee alike – has also pushed them to the center of the stage. And ironically perhaps, despite his effort to distance himself from Polish authenticity, Witold is still unable to escape the shadow of Chopin. At his concert in Barcelona, Witold played Chopin's preludes, which had been finished in Mallorca, when Chopin was accompanied by his French lover George Sand. It is no coincidence that Witold and Beatriz would also meet in Mallorca, prompted by the occasion of the Chopin festival there. In some way, this rather dry and sparkless affair between Witold and Beatriz is conditioned by a doomed precedent – between Chopin and George Sand. Without even realizing it perhaps, before meeting Witold, Beatriz had already imagined the Pole as Chopin in her head: "There is no reason to expect he speaks Spanish", thought Beatriz, "What if he does not speak English either? What if he is the kind of Pole who speaks French?" (Coetzee 2023, 9). To Beatriz, her interaction with Witold is defined by his linguistic foreignness, which also strikes the first dissonant chord in their relationship.

After his death, Witold left behind a series of poems written in Polish dedicated to Beatriz. The dissonance between languages culminates in the second half of the novel, which centers around Beatriz's effort to retrieve and her struggles to translate these poems. Beatriz's linguistic journey started with a phone call mixed in German and English with Witold's daughter who now lives in Berlin. Beatriz

then asked a Russian violinist for help in an attempt to translate a message for Witold's Polish neighbor in Warsaw:

> "I don't speak Polish," says the violinist. "Polish is not Russian, is different language".
> "Yes, I know, but this is an elderly lady, she has lived through a lot of history, she must know some Russian, and it is a very simple message".
> "Speak Russian to Poles is like insult, but for you I try" (107).

In the end, the Russian violinist wrote a message in Roman alphabet using not-so-good Russian to approximate a pseudo-Polish through what Beatriz believed to be a process of translation and the Russian violinist's transliteration:

> "Write the text in Russian and I will send it. The text is: Good day, Pani Jabłońska. My name is Beatriz, I am the friend of Pan Witold. A courier will come on Friday. Please give the box to the courier".
> "I write in Roman alphabet", says the violinist. He writes: *Dobri den, Pani Jablonska. Menya zovut Beatriz, ya drug... You write his name. Kuryer priyedet u pyatnitsu. Parhalysta, otdayte korobku kuryeru*. "Is not good Russian, but maybe Polish lady understands. I go now. You tell me if you have success, yes?". And he hurries off (108; italics in original).

This pithy lost-in-translation episode encapsulates a dissonance in crescendo as Beatriz moves to the linguistic margins, where her knowledge of dominating languages – English and Spanish – intensifies her own marginality. After bringing these poems back to Barcelona, Beatriz had to go through her linguistic journey backwards from Polish to Spanish.

Beatriz's first attempt to translate these poems with a Polish-Spanish translation program failed given the obscure literary quality of poetry – a form resistant to automated decryption:

> She does not demand that the computer provide a perfect translation. All she wants is an answer to the question: Is the tone of the poems positive or negative, celebratory or accusatory? Are they a hymn to the beloved; or on the contrary are they a bitter parting shot from a rejected lover? A simple enough question; but the computer is as tone-deaf as it is stupid (126).

Beatriz's disappointment with the computer-based translation program is not only a shrewd take on the dissonance between human intuition and modern technology; it also recalls an earlier episode in Coetzee's life. After graduating from the University of Cape Town with a degree in English and mathematics, Coetzee moved to England in 1962 and worked in computers before devoting to literature (Head 2009, 1). This period was then transformed into the second installment of Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy *Youth* (2002):

> There is something about programming that flummoxes him, yet that even the businessmen in the class have no trouble with. In his naïveté he had imagined that computer programming would be about ways of translating symbolic logic and set theory into digital codes (Coetzee 2003, 46).

Here, the protagonist John reflects on his training to be a computer programmer at IBM in terms of translation. Towards the end of the novel, John's interest in programming would intersect with his pursuits in literature, when he used the Atlas to generate "pseudo-poems" from the translation of Pablo Neruda's *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* and published them back in Cape Town[1] (see Head

[1] "Although Atlas is not a machine built to handle textual materials, he uses the dead hours of the night to get it to print out thousands of lines in the style of Pablo Neruda, using as a lexicon a list of the most powerful words in *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*, in Nathaniel Tarn's translation. He brings the thick wad of paper back to the Royal Hotel and pores over it. 'The nostalgia of teapots.' 'The ardour of shutters.' 'Furious horsemen.' If he cannot, for the present, write poetry that comes from the heart, if his heart is not in

2009, 14). According to Samuelson, Neruda once claimed that “I felt Chilean, Peruvian, Americ” having been inspired by the sight of Macchu Picchu (qtd. in Samuelson 2021, 144). Thus it is no accident that in *Youth* John chose a poem both *from* and *about* the South, which alludes to a transhemispheric vision of the poet. Over half a century later, Coetzee refashioned John’s early failure to become a poet into the modern computer’s failure to untangle poetry in a telling story about translation. The journey of *The Pole* also took off in the southern hemisphere, even with a musical nod to Neruda through his fellow countryman Arrau. And not surprisingly perhaps, the Pole’s poems – like his renderings of Chopin – did not speak to the heart of Beatriz either, as if they had been generated by a machine.

Writing and translating are often interwoven endeavors for multilingual authors. In the words of Lahiri, “[t]o be a writer-translator is to value both being and becoming. What one writes in any given language typically remains as is, but translation pushes it to become otherwise” (Lahiri 2022, 8). Similarly in her *Reflections on Translation*, Susan Bassnett reveals how translation can offer multilingual writers “a vital liminal space where they could be neither one thing nor the other, neither here nor there” (Bassnett 2011, 10f.). Here, she refers to Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*, which Steven G. Kellman deems as a translingual memoir (see Kellman 2020, 77-88). Bassnett’s characterization of Hoffman’s tangled language and identity as a celebration of plurality (Bassnett 2011, 11) also echoes Braidotti’s description of her own translingual mode as a multilingual scholar: “My work as a thinker has no mother tongue, only a succession of translations, displacements and adaptations to changing conditions” (Braidotti 2011, 21), like the patterns of dissonance that she described in her first book – “a play of lines which intersect only to break up instantly, of breaches which open into the void, of tracks

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the right state to generate poetry of its own, can he at least string together pseudo-poems made up of phrases generated by a machine, and thus, by going through the motions of writing, learn again to write?” (Coetzee 2003, 160-161).

which multiply indefinitely" (Braidotti 1991, 15). Perhaps for Coetzee, too, this is the paradox of language and identity: *The Pole* is the ultimate expression of a multilingual author seeking to capture dissonance both as an in-between space and a "null linguistic state" that can generate plurality through translation itself (Coetzee & Miles 2023).

In the end, Coetzee failed to make *El polaco* as the new original in place of *The Pole* (see Coetzee & Miles 2023), so the story about translation in *The Pole* turns out to be a prophecy of real life. In the novel, Beatriz found a translator who works mainly with "commercial and legal documents [and] speaks rapid Castilian with an Italian accent" (Coetzee 2023, 128-129). The presence of the translator named Clara Weisz Urizza further adds to the linguistic dissonance between Beatriz and the Pole, as Señora Weisz is a foreigner to both of them and their languages. It is also no coincidence that Coetzee cast this translator as "a grey-haired woman" with a Jewish-Italian name and a first degree from Trieste.[2] As expected perhaps, Beatriz's endeavor to translate this linguistic mess is futile, let alone the puzzle of the Pole's mediocre literary hodgepodge. This "penetrating examination of translation and its ultimate defeat" (Kusek 2023, 280) is the only fitting conclusion to a rather dull love affair. It also reflects Coetzee's own critique of the center-periphery model which he had considered obsolete years ago, as explained in his interview with Attwell:

> To an extent the metropolitan center has run out of steam, to an extent the ex-colonial subjects are running the show. But to an extent also, with electronic communications, the old opposition metropolis-periphery has lost its meaning; and to

[2] Here, Coetzee also alludes to the atmosphere of twentieth-century multilingualism and multiculturalism, as well as the marginalization and dissonance that come with it. The cultural and linguistic diversity of turn-of-century Trieste are featured in Coetzee's essays on the Triestine writer Italo Svevo and – by extension – James Joyce (see Coetzee 2007, 1-14).

> an extent the success of “international” writers (a telling word!) flows from a metropolitan taste for the exotic, provoked and catered to by the entertainment industry (Coetzee 1992, 202f.).

Coetzee’s own remark has also become a fate foretold, as he would consolidate his status as an international writer with his second Booker Prize in 1999 and the Nobel Prize in 2003. As Rebecca L. Walkowitz argues in *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in the Age of World Literature*, Coetzee seeks to challenge the status of English as the literary lingua franca by electing Spanish as the alternative medium, thus pushing translation to the foreground (see Walkowitz 2015, 5). If the vaguely Spanish backdrop of Coetzee’s Jesus trilogy set the stage for his writing in English on the margins, then a decade later English has become a foreign language submerged in the foreignness of *The Pole*, just as Coetzee admitted, “my particular ‘idioma’, lacks the earthiness, the rootedness, the solidity of the English of less self-conscious native speakers” (Coetzee & Miles 2023). Coetzee’s lack of linguistic belonging and growing suspicion towards the language in which he writes would make *The Pole* not simply a “born-translated novel” but rather an imperfect or imperfectible imitation in itself. It “ask[s] readers to consider that literatures, as we have known them, are already combined” (Walkowitz 2015, 22), while at the same time, the Pole’s untranslatable poems – like an irresolvable dissonance – illuminates the multilingual reality that aspires to a homeless and rootless future.

5. Coda

Having now sealed his fate as an immigrant, Coetzee can look back at his own linguistic and cultural wanderings from a marginal perspective, like his fellow Aussies Braidotti and Besemeres, whose translingual and transnational life experience is central to their intellectual identity. In her debut as an Italian writer in 2015 (*In altre parole*), Lahiri described a state of marginality familiar to them all:

> I write on the margins, just as I've always lived on the margins of countries, of cultures. A peripheral zone where it's impossible for me to feel rooted, but where I'm comfortable. The only zone where I think that, in some way, I belong (Lahiri 2016, 93).

It is also on the margins that Coetzee wrote *The Pole* – in a language he considers as foreign and from which he continues to distance himself. And this story about translation is further marginalized by taking place in Catalonia, which remains at an angle to the Spanish center. It is off-center, which brings to mind Coetzee's 2000 story "A House in Spain". The protagonist, an aging writer from a different continent, bought a house in rural Catalonia, where his hesitant and bookish Castilian makes him stand out among the locals (Coetzee 2014, 72). The bumpy start of a foreigner's life in a Catalonian house is narrated as an unlikely love story:

> What it comes down to, astonishingly, is that he wants a relationship with this house in a foreign country, a human relationship, however absurd the idea of a human relationship with stone and mortar might be (19).

Now two decades later, with *El polaco/The Pole* Coetzee seems to have settled in a metaphorical house in Spain, a foreign space distant from his languages and continents, living a life no longer new and always on the margins.

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