

‘The Pole’ and Other Stories by J.M. Coetzee.

5 Of these six stories, ‘The Pole’, dated 2022, is the most recent. It is also much the longest: at 146 pages, it occupies two-thirds of the book. Four of the remaining five stories (dated between 2004 and 2019) concern episodes in the life of Elizabeth Costello, the fictional Australian novelist who first surfaced in J.M. Coetzee’s work in 1997 and who has made intermittent appearances since then. Here, as elsewhere, she is the voice  
10 that speaks of man’s inhumanity to animals. ‘The Pole’, meanwhile, is a kind of love story. Thus, this volume brings together two of Coetzee’s main preoccupations: on the one hand, the ethics of the human collective, and, on the other, the comedy of manners as it is played out in relationships between men and women.

15 ‘The Pole’ is divided into six short chapters. The paragraphs of the first five chapters are numbered, with generous spaces between them. The approach to the story is puzzling. The title is blunt and ambiguous (what sort of pole?), and the first chapter opens with an enigmatic one-sentence paragraph: ‘1. The woman is the first to give him trouble, followed soon afterwards by the man.’ We might suppose ‘him’ to be the story’s main  
20 character, but the second paragraph makes clear that he is in fact the writer, who is inviting us to share in his creative process, to track the movements of his inner eye as it discerns the features of his protagonists.

Coetzee likes to trespass on his own fictional territory. In Elizabeth Costello (2003) he  
25 was quickly on the scene to pause the action and deliver a little lesson in the nature of fictiveness: ‘The presentation scene itself we skip. It is not a good idea to interrupt the narrative too often, since storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state in which the time and space of the real world fade away, superseded by the time and space of the fiction.’ And so on. By contrast, the writer’s early intervention  
30 in ‘The Pole’ is less about *Verfremdung* - reminding us that it’s only a story - than about the nature of the fictional imagination, about inspiration: ‘Where do they come from, the tall Polish pianist and the elegant woman with the gliding walk, the banker’s wife who occupies her days in good works? All year they have been knocking at the door, wanting to be let in or else dismissed and laid to rest. Now, at last, has their time  
35 come?’

It’s not unusual for novelists to speak of their characters as visitors who come to them unbidden. Coetzee elaborates (even labours) this conceit most exuberantly in *Slow Man* (2005), where, just as the novel is reaching cruising speed, Elizabeth Costello, its  
40 putative author, steps across the frame and impedes its progress - or attempts to impede it - with a view to making her protagonist, Paul Rayment, more interesting. Is it her fault, she asks, that Paul has turned out so dull? He arrived in her imagination uninvited and now she is saddled with him. In ‘The Pole’ the touch is much lighter, the purpose of the trope seeming to be to create a sense of the story as an improvisation, as coming  
45 into being as we read. The numbering of the paragraphs contributes to this feeling. Already by paragraph nine the writer has handed over proceedings to ‘the elegant

woman', only occasionally thereafter tapping us on the shoulder as if to remind us that he is still there.

50 The tall Polish pianist is Witold Walczykiwicz, known for his revisionist interpretations of Chopin, a distinguished musician whose career is now on its downward path. He is 72. The elegant woman is Beatriz, who helps out at the Concert Circle, an organisation in Barcelona that sponsors classical music events. She is 49. Witold has been invited to Barcelona to give a recital, and Beatriz finds herself tasked with looking after him -  
55 shepherding him around, taking him out to dinner, that sort of thing. Some months later, she receives an email from him saying he is back in Spain, in Girona, giving masterclasses. He has fallen in love with her. Will she meet him in Girona? Will she accompany him on his concert tour in Brazil? Beatriz is not in love with Witold. What is he thinking? She is a married woman with two successful grown-up sons. It's true that  
60 her marriage has cooled and she knows her husband has affairs (though 'he is careful not to involve himself with women from their own social circle'), but she herself has never had an affair. She is aware that she is a handsome woman, attractive to men; it is just that 'she has not taken the step yet ... that is hers alone to take, the step from No to Yes.' 'The Pole' tells the story of this step and what happens afterwards.

65 Its trajectory is a kind of descent, as Beatriz falls from ledge to ledge of her resistances towards an outcome that she consciously refuses at every stage. She will on no account go to Girona, yet she gets in her car and drives there. Brazil is out of the question, but she invites Witold to visit her and her husband at her husband's family home on  
70 Mallorca, and then contrives it that he should be there when her husband has left. She has no intention of sleeping with him but beckons him into her bed. She sleeps with him on four successive nights, then ends the affair. He leaves for Warsaw, she for Barcelona, never to meet again. Time passes. He writes to her but she deletes his emails unread. And then, four years later, she receives a message from a woman in Warsaw that says he  
75 has died and there is a package for her. She decides against travelling to Poland to collect the package, then changes her mind and flies to Warsaw. She spends a night in Witold's forsaken and desolate apartment on the outskirts of the city, his ashes on a shelf in the kitchen. The mysterious package contains a sequence of 84 poems by Witold, written in Polish. She hesitates to have them translated, but then does so. They are love  
80 poems, modelled on Dante's love for Beatrice. Disconcerted, but obscurely flattered, she locks them in a drawer. But forgetting is not so easy. She starts writing letters to the dead man, and the story makes clear that the two letters we get to read will not be her last.

85 The story is overborne by its title - ugly, graceless, singular. The Pole. Coetzee sanctioned the publication of the Spanish translation of the book before the appearance of the English original, apparently saying that the Spanish version better represented what he intended (a characteristic Coetzee-ism). It's inconceivable, nonetheless, that in choosing the English title he did not have its ambiguities in mind. Hitherto, in Coetzee's  
90 fiction, poles have been wooden sticks. A pole is at the centre of the cruellest of the images of torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). When, at the emotional climax of *Disgrace* (1999), David Lurie embraces his daughter to comfort her following her gang rape by three men, she is described as 'stiff as a pole'. Long after she knows his name,

95 Beatriz insists on thinking of Witold as ‘the Pole’: it’s one of the ways she has of keeping him at arm’s length, fending him off, othering rather than mothering him - she won’t touch him with a bargepole. For her, the relationship with Witold lacks reciprocating energy: ‘Between a man and a woman, between the two poles, electricity either crackles or does not crackle,’ she thinks. They are poles apart.

100 Coetzee is acutely sensitive to the way words breed with one another, forming associative groups, based on meaning but also sound and look. Threaded through *Slow Man*, for example, is a background meditation on the sequence ‘Care’, ‘Cure’, ‘Core’, ‘Coeur’ (Coetzee?). And it could be argued that the lexical set ‘Pole’, ‘Soul’, ‘Hole’, ‘Cold’, ‘Old’ is embedded as a deep structure across much of his work. There’s a  
105 disreputable old music hall doggerel that comes to mind here: ‘You know my cousin Maby?/You mustn’t tell a soul/She had a wooden baby/You see - she was married to a Pole.’ In the world of Coetzee’s fiction, all women are ineluctably married to a pole, being under no illusion as to what it is men are after; meanwhile, his men are plagued by the ceaseless quest of their poles for holes. In ‘The Pole’, the reciprocal arrangement  
110 of human genitals is the subject of one of Witold’s poems. In it, he rehearses a conversation he had as a child with his mother:

‘Have you got one?’ I asked my mother  
as she dried me after my bath.

115 ‘No,’ said my mother, ‘I am a woman,  
the one built to receive,  
while you, my young man,  
are the one built to give.’

120 Elsewhere, Beatriz recalls the curiosity of her boys when they were growing up: ‘If girls did not have it, what did girls have? It could not be nothing; but if it was not nothing, what could it be?’

The notion of existential lack, of a hole that yearns to be filled, of the human need to  
125 be made whole through connection with another, is a fundamental and recurrent preoccupation in Coetzee’s fiction. Most commonly, it is the male side of this mutual search that is represented and explored, a search that is vitiating by disabling asymmetries. Coetzee’s men, often characterised as old and past it sexually, typically fall for much younger women who are less than enthralled by their advances. The men  
130 gaze on the unsuitable objects of their yearning from a distance, idealising the women and intellectualising their desire for them. As lovers they are inept, incapable of communicating human warmth. Their prototype is John Coetzee, the subject of *Summertime* (2009), the third in Coetzee’s triptych of ‘autobiographical’ novels. Its metafictional conceit is that Coetzee has died and a biographer, writing about him in the  
135 1970s when he was still making his way as a novelist, interviews people he knew at the time, notably four women with whom he had relationships of a kind. The women’s verdict on John is mottled, but there is general agreement about his unfitness for love. The harshest judgment comes from Adriana, a dancer and dance teacher:

140 Your Mr Coetzee may have had a talent for words but ... he could not dance to save his life ... This man was disembodied ... To him, the body was like one of those wooden puppets that you move with strings ... In dance ... it is the body itself that leads ... its body soul ... That is why the wooden puppet cannot dance. The wood has no soul.

145 Did the other women in his life find him to be made of wood, she wonders. The biography, she says, should be called 'The Wooden Man'.

In some ways, Witold fits the model of the Coetzee male quite well. Beatriz is 23 years younger than him, and he falls in love with her on the flimsiest of pretexts, idealising her in the manner of medieval courtly love. His efforts at wooing her are clumsy and at the same time dreamy and quixotic. She is irritated by 'his stiffness, his remoteness from the world around him, above all the pompous way he talks'. Apart from the writer's opening description of him, the only objective access the reader has to Witold is through his poems, which are inept and amateurish. In this respect, the story is unusual for Coetzee's writing on sexual relationships, in that it comes to us in the consciousness of the woman rather than the man. It also represents lack as the condition of both sides of the relationship. Witold's overt and floridly expressed need for Beatriz is balanced by an uneasy sense in Beatriz of an absence in her life. Puzzling to herself about 'why her mind keeps going back to the Pole', she concludes 'it is a matter of missing things.'

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Later, she reflects on the death of her mother: 'She, Beatriz, lost her mother early. The loss left a gaping hole in her life.' The lack is necessarily unassuageable. Unconsciously drawn to Witold as to her true north, she experiences a repeated rhythm of half-formulated expectation and subsequent disappointment in him.

165 Their union is the crux of the story, the point to which it tends as under the pull of a magnet. The crisis occurs two-thirds of the way through, structuring the narrative rather elegantly according to the proportions of the golden section. Musically considered, 'The Pole' sets up a harmonic incongruity, an area of discord that propels it forwards to a climax and a resolution of sorts. Once Beatriz dismisses Witold from her bed at the end of their week together in Mallorca, he vanishes, leaving only fragmentary memories and a residuum of personal traces (his apartment, his ashes, his poems). The final third of the story is given over to the effect on Beatriz of what has happened.

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The brief affair, the move from No to Yes, is represented as traumatic for her. It is, as it were, her encounter with the Real, an encounter which the elaborate paraphernalia of her surface consciousness has been dedicated to avoiding. Intermittently, her efforts to repress the significance of what she has done fail her: 'You thought you would get away scot-free, you thought there would be no consequences, but you were wrong, wrong, wrong.' Her way of absorbing the shock, of containing the emotional detonation in her inner being, is to find ways to describe what happened that muffle its force. She settles on the word 'fling' - if anyone finds out about the affair, she will say it was just a fling. But her unconscious leads her out of her comfort zone back into Witold's force field. Once in possession of his poems, her task to forget him, to bury him for good, becomes impossible. She cannot bring herself to burn the poems, but they seem to accuse her, to undermine her effort at trivialising her experience with him. Her fear is that, were her affair ever to come out (and the poems cannot be gainsaid), people will think of her as a

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whore, as a woman too easily accessible. One poem in particular discomforts her. In it Witold writes of having found peace through 'the perfect rose between the legs of a certain woman'. The invisible worm has found out her bed of crimson joy. She dislikes the image: it is at once too flowery, too perfumed and too coarse. Naming the rose and locating it with such anatomical literalness returns her to the inescapable and irreducible fact of what they did together.

In 2015 Coetzee published a series of dialogues with the psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz in which they ruminated on the nature of the self. Coetzee's contributions are attractively hesitant and undogmatic. He puts his ideas forward tentatively, as if puzzled by what a lifetime of reflection has disclosed to him. He admits to having no direct experience of therapy but is clearly knowledgeable about psychoanalytic theory, though he takes issue with what he understands to be some of its key tenets, and he does not use its terminology. His conception of selfhood returns repeatedly to two insights: that there is no 'true self', or not one that we can identify; and that our consciousness is polyphonic - the self is a multistorey structure.

For Coetzee, the idea that we have a stable self - that we can account for ourselves consistently across time - is unsustainable in the light of the fragmentary and unreliable nature of memory. Most of our existence is dark to us: we have forgotten it. Indeed, the thought of what we have forgotten fascinates and haunts him. Since we cannot live with the reality of our radically interrupted and discontinuous selfhood, we make up stories about ourselves that paper over the innumerable cracks and lacunae in our experience of being. We choose our relationships based on stories that we make up about other people. Within this economy, love relationships depend for their success on the degree of congruity between the mutual fictions we tell one another: 'When the fictions interlock well, the relation works or seems to work (I am not sure that there is a difference between the two). When they don't interlock, conflict or disengagement follow.' Since self-invention is inescapable, writing novels is, by definition, a metafictional activity: stories about people making up stories.

Much of Coetzee's fiction is written in the third-person present. For a novelist who doubts the consistent identity of the self across time, for whom memory is wayward and most of what happens forgotten, to write in the third-person past tense would be to imply a certainty that cannot be had. On the other hand, the first-person present deprives the imagination of the narrative omniscience that opens the story's perspective beyond the narrow purview of the self. By contrast, when used as well as Coetzee uses it, the third-person present represents the movements of a character's thought with great subtlety, while at the same time weakening the illusion of subjective agency created by a first-person narrative. A third-person narration acknowledges the split perspectives of the self, the way the 'I' can watch the 'me' and find it strange, be proud or ashamed of it, applaud or disown it. 'Who is this that does and says these things? Who does she think she is? How amazing! How deplorable!' (the experience of looking in the mirror for a Coetzee character can be distinctly unheimlich). The third-person present is also well suited to representing the unheard counterpoint of human thought, the way we live simultaneously on several levels of consciousness while taking care that communication between these levels remains strategically partial - it is often politic for

the right hand not to know, or to pretend not to know, what the left hand is doing.  
235 Coetzee's fiction is intensely interested in this polyphony.

To signal the hidden voice of a character, the silent commentary that accompanies public speech acts, Coetzee will sometimes use italics, but he often relies on free indirect style, for which he has a superb ear and feel:

240 Years later, when the episode of the Pole has receded into history, she will wonder about those early impressions. She believes, on the whole, in first impressions, when the heart delivers its verdict, either reaching out to the stranger or recoiling from him. Her heart did not reach out to the Pole when she saw him stride onto the platform, toss back his mane, and address the keyboard. Her heart's verdict: What a poseur! What an old clown! It would take her a while to overcome that first, instinctive response, to see the Pole in his full selfhood. But what does full selfhood mean, really? Did the Pole's full selfhood not perhaps include being a poseur, an old clown?

250 Here, the oscillation of perspectives between the narrator and Beatriz shimmers like light on shot silk.

Coetzee's 1997 Tanner Lectures at Princeton provoked an expected and not unsatisfying quantum of academic murmuring. Instead of conventional lectures, he read out two stories about Elizabeth Costello, who, invited by an American liberal arts college to lecture on literature, talks instead about animal rights (the stories were later incorporated into the novel Elizabeth Costello under the heading 'The Lives of Animals'). To some, this looked like an evasion, a tricky manoeuvre by Coetzee to sidestep saying what he 'really' believed. Peter Singer, one of Coetzee's designated respondents, was particularly exasperated: 'I prefer to keep truth and fiction clearly separate.' Others saw it as an effective polemical gesture, concisely articulating the proposition that ideas are always an expression of personality, that conviction entails embodiment. In Coetzee's fiction the harshest condemnation is reserved for systems of thought that pretend to an ideal impersonality (the bureaucratic and nationalistic jargon of the Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the chilling abstractions of the young revolutionary Nechaev in *The Master of Petersburg*).

The four Elizabeth Costello stories published here are further examples of philosophy that lives and breathes. They follow the novelist in her later years, each story a station on the *via dolorosa* of her progress towards death. On first reading they might seem to be makeweights and to have little to do with 'The Pole'. But their intellectual concerns speak to the novella in subtle and interesting ways. For example, as a late essay in the nature of the Coetzeean self, 'The Pole' can be read as an elegant and compelling representation of what Elizabeth Costello, in 'The Glass Abattoir', the third of her four stories here, refers to as 'dispersed human consciousness', which she contrasts with 'the single-minded intensity' of a tick. The comparison surfaces in a text she has written taking issue with Heidegger's view of animals. Why, she asks, should we privilege our fuzzy consciousness over what we imagine to be the unimpeded flow of animal existence? Is it not ironic that Heidegger, 'who thinks the tick's experience of the world is impoverished', should himself hunger for those moments of ecstasy when - in bed with

Hannah Arendt - 'his awareness of the world shrinks to nothing and he loses himself in mindless sensual transports'?

285 This text figures in a journal that, along with a jumble of other papers, Elizabeth has sent to her son, John, in America, with a view to him telling her what he thinks. Leafing through the papers he comes across a document called 'The Glass Abattoir'. It explores an idea his mother has already pestered him with during one of her habitual late-night calls ('she keeps eccentric hours and thinks the rest of the world keeps eccentric hours too'). 'It occurred to me,' she explains, 'that people tolerate the slaughter of animals  
290 only because they get to see none of it. Get to see, get to hear, get to smell.' If there were a glass abattoir in the middle of the city, in which people were confronted with the slaughter of animals, maybe they would 'change their ways'.

It's difficult to think of a better image for Coetzee's fiction than the glass abattoir, a  
295 public display case confronting us with things we would prefer not to see. Even this little story acts on us in this way. Elizabeth tells her son she has seen a television programme about factory farming, and describes to him in graphic detail the way the male chicks are separated from the female, sent down a conveyor belt and ground into paste. It's the kind of passage that prompts people to speak of their discomfort when reading  
300 Coetzee, but it is precisely this discomfort that he wants us to feel.

With the introduction of Elizabeth Costello at the end of the 1990s, the gaze of Coetzee's work shifted away from the gorgon of man's inhumanity to man towards man's  
305 inhumanity to animals. If this was in some sense a narrowing it was also a sharpening, for it brought the horror, and our complacent toleration of it, closer to home and blocked off the escape route of projective identification, that convenient reflex whereby we push the worst of what humans can do onto remote others. Torture? How shocking, how unbearable, but what has it to do with me? The sheer mundanity of the food industry and its embeddedness in so-called civilised life makes its routinely  
310 accepted cruelties so revealing. Coetzee's central insight is that the mechanism that allows us to carry on doing something we know to be wrong is essentially the same whether it's a matter of love relationships or cruelty to man or animals: we compartmentalise. Like Beatriz in 'The Pole' we deposit things we find unacceptable in ourselves in an obscure drawer of the mind and shut it. (In Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*,  
315 published in 2007, this layering of awareness, this constitutional duplicity of the self, is represented visually: the top half of every page is occupied with Mr C's ruminations on everything from Tony Blair to Bach, while the bottom half tracks his attempt to get off with a young woman decades younger than himself whose arse excited him when he observed it in the launderette of the building where they both live.)

320 The ethical and, dare one say it, theological, framework within which Coetzee's fiction is set is recognisably Protestant, but agnostically so. The mind of his work - if one can posit such a hypostasis - is divided between competing impulses. Rationally, intellectually, it discounts the idea of God and the afterlife and the Day of Judgment, as  
325 the most egregious of the stories we tell to comfort ourselves. And yet the characters it so vividly imagines are wracked by doubt and shame, are represented as falling from grace into disgrace - according to the moral norms of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

330 The influence on Coetzee of Beckett and Kafka has been often noted, but his vision is  
not straightforwardly cognate with theirs. His universe is not without Value, and he  
cannot give up on the Good. Like Matthew Arnold, spooked by the melancholy long  
withdrawing roar of the ocean, he still holds to the ideal of being true to one another.  
It's not that the injunction 'only connect' is meaningless, just that in practice it proves  
335 so difficult. In this, he is essentially a comic writer, endlessly interested ('curious' is one  
of his favourite words) in the incongruities of human attempts to give lives meaning. The  
most reliable source of meaning is life itself: 'Such a good thing, life! Such a wonderful  
idea for God to have had! The best idea there had ever been,' as Mrs Curren puts it in  
Age of Iron (1990). And then there is the soul - a word that, together with 'heart', is  
340 central to Coetzee's vocabulary. The complacent and self-serving deviousness of human  
personality is everywhere contrasted in his novels with the life of the soul, as though  
personality were a force dedicated to bringing the soul low.

The dialectical tension between Coetzee's attraction to the numinous and his deep  
suspicion of it finds its most compelling embodiment in his late trilogy, *The Childhood of*  
345 *Jesus*, *The Schooldays of Jesus* and *The Death of Jesus*, published between 2013 and  
2019. Set in an imaginary Spanish-speaking country (an altered Patagonia) at an  
unspecified time, the trilogy centres on a young boy, David, and his adoptive parents,  
Simón and Inés. Simón is an immigrant, who, noticing an unaccompanied child on the  
boat bringing them to the imaginary country, takes him under his wing and determines  
350 to help him find his mother. He duly finds a woman, who though she has never seen  
David in her life, is persuaded to take on the role. Simón and Inés devote themselves to  
bringing up the boy, but he is something of a handful, at once seraphic and stubborn,  
affectionate and imperious, exceptionally gifted yet strangely erratic in his capacity to  
learn. His specialness is evident to everyone he comes into contact with, and when he  
355 starts his studies at a local academy - a kind of music school run along visionary lines -  
he quickly becomes the focus of his peers and his teachers. He seems destined for great  
things, but at the age of ten falls mysteriously ill and dies. As, in some sense, a chosen  
one, David attracts a discipleship and his death effects a canonisation - the work ends as  
a cult begins to form around his memory.

360 The singular achievement of the Jesus trilogy is to evoke the numinous as a palpable and  
plausible reality. It's as though the books themselves are entranced by David; he lives in  
them as a believably enchanted child, trailing clouds of glory from some unearthly  
realm, a heavenly sphere from which he mysteriously came and to which he returns. Yet  
365 his beatification is uneasy. He himself experiences his specialness as troubling, a feeling  
of the uncanny that crystallises in his conviction that he is not called David, while his  
real name - who he really is - is obscure to him. Biblical allusions sound an almost  
imperceptible ostinato beneath the textual surface of the novels, with analogies to the  
life and character of Jesus strongest in the depiction of David as almost scarily severe in  
370 his rejection of his adoptive parents, his insistence that they do not recognise who he is  
and that he must go to those who do. The counterbalancing force to David in the novels  
is his guardian, Simón. The entire trilogy unfolds in Simón's perspective (once again  
narrated in the third-person present). He is the Coetzeean subject, the conscience of  
the work and the carrier of the weight of its ethical uncertainties. As David's surrogate



375 father (Joseph, as it were), he is unfailingly loving and caring, devoting his life to the  
boy's wellbeing. He is the voice of reason and compassion and humane common sense in  
the face of the mystifications that gather around and through the boy. And yet, tellingly,  
he is a man who cannot dance.

380 As the medium through which the numinous speaks in the Jesus trilogy, dance is  
represented as the supreme art form, to which even music is subservient. In the  
Coetzeean aesthetic order, music is itself dance just as dance is music. In the  
pedagogical system of the academy, the pupils learn to 'dance the numbers', to express  
through dance the nature of the positive integers. David refuses to engage with the  
385 arithmetic of adding and subtracting because to him each number has its own unique  
irreducible integrity (hence 'integers'). The burning question about number is how to  
get across the gap from one number to the next, especially how to get from zero to one.  
This is a subject of some fascination to Coetzee: he foreshadows it in *Diary of a Bad Year*  
where he has things to say about Zeno and his paradoxes of motion; and in a sense it  
390 furnishes him with the underlying metaphor in all his writing about relationships - how is  
it that one person crosses the gap to another? The answer is dance: to get from one  
number to another, to get from one person to another, to get from one fragment of  
oneself to another, one dances. David's apotheosis, before he falls ill, is to dance the  
number seven. (Given Coetzee's interest in numbers, it's a bit surprising that he doesn't  
395 make more in 'The Pole' of Dante's mystical relationship with the number nine in the  
*Vita Nuova*. One might have expected Witold to have written 81 poems instead of 84,  
but apart from the fact that he is 72 and that there are 153 numbered paragraphs in the  
story, the dance of nine misses its moment.)

400 The benign director of the academy in the Jesus trilogy is Juan Sebastián Arroyo, a  
gentle and unworldly composer who, together with his wife, Ana Magdalena, teaches the  
mystic dances. Readers well versed in Coetzee will know that Bach represents the best  
argument we have for a world beyond this one. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Mr C adopts Bach  
as his spiritual father. One might even say that the Coetzeean world turns on the twin  
405 poles of Bach and - in the words of Berryman's Henry when contemplating suicide -  
everything that is 'unlike Bach, horribly, unlike Bach'. Bach at one pole, torture at the  
other. What makes the Jesus trilogy so interesting is its suspicion that the Bachean ideal  
may itself be questionable, may even attract the forces of the horribly unlike Bach. A  
sinister figure stalks the work: Dmitri, a psychopath who seduces and then murders Ana  
410 Magdalena, under the nose of the unworldly Juan Sebastián, and latches on to David as  
his chief disciple and advocate.

One of the oddities of Coetzee's critical reception is the characterisation of his prose  
style as 'cold'. Par for this course is a recent round-up of Coetzee's work in the New  
415 York Times, in which Jason Farago speaks of his 'icily precise books'. What a 'warm'  
book would be like and why a metaphor of heat is thought to make sense when applied  
to words remains unclear. Coetzee's prose is certainly economical. It avoids  
embellishment of any kind - adjectives, appositions, repetitions. And, in that it avoids  
ambiguity, it is not poetic. Its main purpose is to render the muddle and fog of  
420 experience with clarity and fluency, and in his later works Coetzee achieves this with  
the sprezzatura of an Old Master. There's not a sentence in 'The Pole' that isn't crystal

clear. And it flows with such grace that you could read it from beginning to end while standing propped up against the mantelpiece. Perhaps the metaphor of water is where the idea of coldness comes from. But it remains a nonsense. There is nothing cold about Coetzee's prose and ultimately nothing cold in his vision of things.

In *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), Dostoevsky finds it in himself to reach out to the man whose bloodless and inhuman idealism repels him most: the revolutionary Nechaev. At the climax of the novel, he embraces the young man. To embrace, to put one's arms around another, is perhaps the ultimate gesture of forgiveness and compassion. In the fairy tale, it's usually a frog that asks to be embraced. If we can only embrace what is most repulsive to us, so the story goes, we will reap untold rewards. It is an act of blessing and of grace. Flaubert's Saint Julien embraces the leper (his skin 'colder than a snake's and coarse like a rasp') and ascends to heaven in the arms of Christ. The coldness and oldness and putative soullessness of Coetzee's men makes it hard for the women they desire to embrace them. Beatriz is repelled at the thought of Witold's cold hands on her body, and when she is in bed with him she cannot bring herself to caress him. Coetzee has gone out of his way to present himself as lacking in warmth, as in some sense rebarbative, as a metaphoric bargepole to fend off intruders - critics, biographers. Unsurprisingly, he has too often been taken at his word, so that the warmth and gentleness and forgiving humour in his novels is simply overlooked and the mistake is made of attributing the bleakness of what he displays in the glass abattoir of his work to the novels themselves. His determined *noli me tangere* frightens people off and they berate him for not being more embraceable.

There's a Polish joke about a man of certain age out for a walk in the woods, who is accosted by a frog. The frog urges the man to give him a kiss, on the promise that he, the frog, will instantly turn into a gorgeous young princess and fall into his arms. The man takes no notice and eventually puts the frog in his pocket. 'What's wrong with you?' the frog expostulates. 'A man of your age, well past it as far as young women are concerned.' To which the man replies: 'Yes, I realise it would be lovely in its way to have a young princess on my arm, but quite frankly, at my age, I'd rather have a talking frog.' At the end of the first interview in *Summertime*, Julia describes John to Coetzee's biographer as 'a man who loved by numbers'. She goes on: 'That is why he was never my Prince Charming. That is why I never let him bear me off on his white steed. Because he was not a prince but a frog.' But when a frog talks like this, who wants a prince?