



The Trio of Resistance: On the Musical Writing in Coetzee's *The Pole*

Yanlin Long¹

¹College of Foreign Languages, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, China
Email: longyanlin02@outlook.com

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Abstract— In J. M. Coetzee's novel *The Pole*, the portrayal of the protagonist Witold as a Polish pianist specializing in Chopin's works underscores the central role of music in the text. Music is used in the novel as a medium whereby Witold faces the fear of growing old and dying, as well as a tool of reaction to the marginalization of the cultural identity in the environment of exile. Finally, it is a protest against commodification of art in consumerist systems, an aesthetic protest. The aesthetic tension that Witold attributes to the music of Chopin as an externalization of his own will, is the counter-mainstream aesthetic of Said's "late style". It shows his attempt to restore national memory by way of music, and the obdurate tradition of the artistic subject in the culture industry which Adorno criticizes. Music in the novel serves both as a mode of experience of duration in time, a process of expressing cultural identity, and an exercise of maintaining artistic dignity. The three dimensions are interwoven to develop a multilayered form of resistance.

Keywords— Adorno, J. M. Coetzee, Musical writing, Said, *The Pole*.



I. INTRODUCTION

The Pole is the latest work by Nobel Prize-winning author John Maxwell Coetzee (1940 -), published in 2023. It is a typical "music novel"[1] that involves musicians. The protagonist, Witold, is a 70-year-old Polish pianist renowned for playing Chopin's music and traveling around the world to give performances. Coetzee has a deep passion and expertise for classical music[2]. In his writing, music has always been the core of the text construction. *The Pole* also continues the previous narrative logic and involves musical elements. However, unlike other music novels, the protagonist of this work is directly set as a musician, highlighting the important position of music in the novel even more. The choice of "Chopin" as the entry point is not accidental; it contains profound implications. Currently, the music research on Coetzee's novels mostly focuses on the "musicality" analysis of the text, that is, the corresponding relationship between music and literature at the levels of rhythm, structure, and other forms. However, compared to the question of how the novel and music are similar, the question of why the novelist directly or indirectly mentions music, musicians, instruments, music events, or music scenes in the novel, and what role and significance these various embedded music within the novel actually play, is actually more worthy of exploration[3]. Therefore, this article focuses on the

functional role of music in *The Pole*, proposes the innovative perspective of "Resistance Trio", and argues that music in *The Pole* constitutes a "trio" field of resisting aging and the passage of life, the dissolution of cultural identity, and the commercialization of art. Witold uses music to resist physical aging, and his life is transformed into cultural self-expression through the persistent interpretation of Polish sounds. However, this cultural expression is once again suppressed under the regulation of capital logic, forcing his musical practice to further turn to a clear resistance against the cultural industry. The three resistances are nested and intertwined with each other.

II. RESISTING THE PASSAGE OF TIME: MUSICAL EXPRESSION IN THE LATER LIFE

In Coetzee's works, aging is ubiquitous. According to the classification of life stages by age critics, 72-year-old Witold belongs to the third age, and people in this age group, as they grow older, experience physical decline, the onslaught of diseases, and the gaze from others, will realize that "old age" is nowhere to hide[4]. Witold has overly white hair, puffy lower eyelids, sagging neck skin, hands with age spots, and shiny white false teeth, being "a man at the end of his career" and "a man from another era" [5]. Beatriz's most frequent evaluation words for Witold

are “withered” and “flat”, which not only negate his unique musical presentation method but also represent a stereotypical gaze at his elderly body. However, Witold’s response method is to construct the text of life and positive narratives of old age [4]. He did not respond with silence or withdrawal but actively resisted aging through continuous playing, using music as a weapon. According to Arthur Schopenhauer, music is the most direct manifestation of will [6], and the core of this resistance lies in music becoming the “externalization of will”. Although the novel does not elaborate on Witold’s playing skills, Beatriz’s statement “He undoubtedly plays the piano with his soul”[5] reveals the essence of his performance. This performance is not simple showmanship but a highly individualized spiritual expression. He does not rely on language but uses melody to express the inner self. In an email, he confessed: “I cannot express what’s in my mind in English, so I wrote it in music”[5]. This is a way to continue the vitality of the subject through music. The CD selections Witold sent to Beatriz also confirm this, including nocturnes, a minor sonata, and mazurkas, all of which are highly emotionally charged and structurally regressive pieces by Chopin. Through the changes in scales and harmonies, music can directly represent the alternation of desires and satisfaction[7]. These Chopin pieces all create suspense through leading tones and then release emotions with the return of the tonic. Witold releases, regulates, and reshapes himself within this structure. As he said to Beatriz: “Because Chopin allows us to see ourselves and understand our desires”[5], music becomes the most direct medium for his self-expression. Therefore, for Witold, music is not only a medium for emotional expression but also the externalization of his individual will, and it is an effective weapon against the decline of life.

The end of aging is death, and what music can resist is not only aging but also the loss of life. Witold achieved the “continuity” of his own life through the embodied performance on stage. Henri Bergson divides time into “spatialized time” and “durative time”[10], and music is not only a form of “durative” but is itself an expression of the continuation of life. Every performance of Witold perfectly confirms this “durative”, and all of this points to an ultimate goal - life is continuous and never stops[11]. The deep power of music to resist death is rooted in this form and spirit of presenting eternity in motion. Therefore, the value of music lies not only in its sound reproduction but also in its unique temporality and irreproducibility. Music is an art concerning time, and to understand music, one must acknowledge the inevitable temporal form of music in the auditory sense, that is, instantaneity or one-timeality[12]. The live performance relies on this immediacy and one-off nature, making music a dynamic

and living process. In the continuous movement, each performance carries the flow of time, and music is no longer a mechanical reproduction of Chopin’s works, but a re-creation of the meaning of the works in the present. Theodor Adorno pointed out in his aesthetic criticism that as a medium technology, recording solidifies artistic works into undifferentiated standardized copies, depriving music of its original “aura” and individuality [13]. While in the novel, each “this moment and this place” of Witold’s live performance can reveal more natural emotions of the performer rather than being technical and standardized like the recording, thus preserving the naturalness of musical art. It is precisely in this embodied world of “this moment and this place” that each continuous duration of playing constitutes Witold’s resistance to the passage of life. Each performance is an unrepeatable existential instant, not only giving new meaning to the works, but also enabling the performer to achieve the perpetual existence in music. Richard Poirier pointed out: “The reason why interpretation is curious is because it has such wild self-questioning, even narcissism, and then because it craves public attention, love, and a place in history”[14]. Beatriz’s words confirm this: “You should be proud of yourself, not everyone can be recorded in history, how many people throughout their lives want to be remembered by history but fail”[5]. Through his repeated live performances, Witold pursues a similar realm to Chopin’s - after the death of the physical body, his name and spirit are able to be continued through musical art. This trait makes the performance of Western classical music a highly concentrated, extremely pure, and even approaching the limit, live event[12], becoming what Said described as “even the only once situations or performances that are the core of the musical life can still be recalled by people to return to the time”[12]. Even if those unique situations and performances as the core of the musical life have disappeared, they can still be “revisited” through the memory of the audience, being experienced again on the spiritual level, thus achieving a certain form of eternity. Witold’s performance is both the strong externalization of his individual will and realizes a certain transcendence through the form of music in time. Together, they act on his practice of resisting aging and death.

Witold’s performance breaks free from the constraints of technical replication and standardized procedures, embodying a highly individualized and uncompromising artistic attitude. From temporal awareness to style awareness, his performance style also reflects the “late style” feature proposed by Said, being a concentrated manifestation of his rebellion and self-exile through art. His “correctional interpretation” of Chopin[5] did not cater to the aesthetic tastes of the general public. Whether it was professional music critics, serious concert audiences, or

Beatriz as an outsider, none could agree with his “alternative interpretation”[5]. Many people regarded him as “an outsider in the concert circle”[5], but Witold always persisted in himself, resolutely performing without submitting to the aesthetic standards of the times, thereby resisting aging and the gaze of others, and fully expressing the most faithful self. This attitude coincides with the “late style” described by Said. Said believes that the experience of the late style “contains an inharmonious, restless tension, and most importantly, it contains a deliberate, non-creative, and opposing creativity”[8]. Witold, by adhering to his “correctionist” interpretation of Chopin and using an “outdated” performance style to rebel against the trend of the times, is a vivid portrayal of an individual’s late resistance to the aesthetic hegemony of the era. He does not gain recognition by relying on popular styles and pleasant sensations, but rather expresses the self that is not regulated by time and not subjugated by the era in the music, embodying a posture of refusing to be domesticated by time. His “letting the masses down” music is full of individual creativity and presents an outmoded aesthetic: “Many people think Chopin is made of air, and I want to correct their views”[5]. Witold engaged in self-exile in art, no longer attempting to reconcile with the outside world, but choosing to maintain a distance from the era and his own past. This self-exile is a form of rebellion expressed through art, being a distinct manifestation of his late “death-oriented” style. Said believes that as artists approach old age, they neither pursue the imagined calm and maturity nor desire any false praise from the outside world. Their late style is entirely the product of death as a mode of existence, although they do not deny or evade death. The late works are always closely related to the theme of death, and this theme also elevates the language and aesthetic style of the works[9]. This death consciousness not only appears in Witold’s piano performances but also in Coetzee’s late works. Coetzee created *The Pole* in his later years, telling the story of an elderly musician’s adulterous relationship with a middle-aged woman. The words and sentences are filled with rebellious meaning, and Coetzee also uses Witold’s image to present the theme of death, achieving the effect of “living towards death”. Witold resists death through music performance, while Coetzee realizes self-exile through novel creation. The “late style” of both intertwine and merge, jointly presenting the themes of life rebellion and death.

III. RESISTANCE TO IDENTITY DISSOLUTION: MUSICAL EXPRESSION IN IDENTITY RECOGNITION

The significance of music for Witold goes far beyond being a tool for resisting physical aging and the end of life. In his performance practice, music also carries a deeper cultural identity. His dedication to performing Chopin’s music is also based on his insistence on national memory and cultural belonging. Thus, musical expression becomes a profound cultural symbol, serving as an important medium for him to defend his identity in an alien world.

Coetzee’s designation of Witold as a pianist specializing in performing Chopin’s music, rather than other renowned pianists, has a unique and profound connotation. Any artist’s creation cannot exist independently of the era and cultural background in which he or she is situated [15]. After leaving his homeland, Chopin’s works gradually matured due to the influence of the Warsaw Uprising and the loneliness of living abroad, making his romantic art more marked by the imprint of national crisis. His love for his homeland became the most important direction in his creative work, and he became the most talented spokesperson for the liberation of the Polish nation’s ideology[15]. His love for the oppressed homeland was the unchanging ideological content of his art throughout his life, and his music was always closely linked to Polish folk creations[16]. Chopin once summarized the emotional tone of his music with the word “zai”, a Polish word that is difficult to translate and carries multiple complex emotions such as melancholy, sorrow, suppressed anger, and irreparable loss. These emotions are the spiritual soil of his artistic temperament and also the inherent scars of the Polish nation[15]. The national symbolic meaning of music is magnified and complicated by its cross-media expression, and music has transformed into a tool for cultural self-representation.

However, the Chopin national music that Witold wanted to express was not understood by the “West”, and even led to misinterpretation and exclusion. As a Spaniard from Western Europe, Beatriz’s character setting is not only Witold’s “lover”, but also a key role in the novel to reveal the barriers of cultural understanding and the unequal discourse power. Her misinterpretation of Witold’s music and Chopin’s music reflects how Western centrism constructs “Eastern Europe” as an object otherized through everyday language, aesthetic taste, and knowledge power. Beatriz believes that “the love for Chopin she has is able to bring her to an ancient country villa in the distant Polish plain, where the summer is coming to an end, the breeze blows through the curtains, and the room is filled with the fragrance of roses”[5]. She tends to understand Chopin’s works as “tranquil and quiet” music, while ignoring the

national tragedy and historical trauma contained within. When Witold sent CDs to her twice, her reaction was either dislike or confusion. She was only interested in Chopin's mazurkas, because these pieces have a lively rhythm and lively melody, suitable for entertainment rather than contemplation. Her association was only "How strange: I can't think of him dancing"[5], completely ignoring the national spirit behind the mazurkas: "The patriotic spirit of Chopin's mazurkas lies in its deep-rooted connection with folk art, national dances, and the life scenarios of Poland; it expresses 'the soul of the people'"[16]. In this selective listening, the complex cultural memories unique to Eastern Europe are submerged as simple exoticism, and the political significance of the cultural expression is completely erased. Such misinterpretation is not an accidental individual expression; it reflects a similar logic in Said's "Orientalism" proposition. "Eastern Europe" was constructed in the Enlightenment era as "the Eastern part of Europe", a semi-Orientalized discourse structure[17]. The non-Western cultural entities were shaped as politically disengaged objects, not only resulting from the misinterpretation of music itself, but also reflecting the neglect of Witold as a representative of the Polish nation. The superficial conflicts in cultural exchanges were actually the hidden symbolic representation of the cultural identity crisis.

Misinterpretation also contained a certain degree of listening intention. Witold was more frequently encountered with a deeper rejection. He was denied in the music criticism circle, marginalized in performance opportunities, and rejected in personal relationships. From the London music reviews to the Barcelona performance, and to Beatriz's various responses to him, it was the systematic rejection of "the voice of Eastern Europe" by the Western mainstream society. After Witold's performance in London, he did not receive cheers but criticism and derogatory music reviews. They believed that "Witold's tough percussion-style interpretation of Chopin's works was long outdated"[5]. This criticism did not focus on technical or interpretational reasonable disputes, but rather denied his overall performance value in an almost arrogant tone. In the European music criticism system, the German-Austrian tradition had long occupied the orthodox position, and the judgment order in the standards had unconsciously formed a centering on Western European aesthetics. The novel also specifically mentions "The performer invited to the concert circle next month is the tenor Thomas Kociv, who will perform Handel, Pergolesi, and Philip Glass"[5]. They respectively come from Germany, Italy, and the United States. Moreover, Beatriz deliberately ridiculed: "Perhaps Thomas Kociv will become the true pole that can connect with her,

overshadowing that fake Pole (Polish person)"[5]. Beatriz used a pun to mock Witold, suggesting that he was inferior in music, emotion, and attractiveness to "the real pole" Kociv. Originally, "pole" signified Witold's cultural identity as a Pole, but in her words, it was emptied out and entered the superficial emotional domain. Language here became an invisible tool of cultural exclusion, through this pun-like word game, she completed another weakening and exclusion of Witold's cultural identity. Similar rejections also occurred in the interaction between Witold and the performance institutions. The organizers of the Barcelona performance were "not willing" to invite Witold from Poland; Witold sent a letter, hoping that the concert circle would invite him, but was politely refused by Beatriz. The lack of performance opportunities not only meant economic and professional difficulties, but also a symbolic cultural rejection, which was a concrete manifestation of the systematic rejection of Eastern European music by the Western mainstream society. Moreover, Beatriz's personal attitude more detailedly demonstrated how this rejection permeated into daily cultural interactions. On the one hand, she showed curiosity about Witold, but on the other hand, she constantly revealed subtle rejection and indifference in details. "I don't plan to go to Valldemossa to listen to a Pole playing the piano"[5], "I'm not curious about Poland at all"[5]. Such indifference left Witold with no place to express himself in reality, and his cultural identity lost its space to exist in life, with no place to take refuge. This cultural misreading and exclusion together constituted the external resistance to Witold's identity expression. However, in the face of this external resistance, Witold still expressed his holding and reaffirmation of his self-identity and cultural foundation through music, through the national melodies of Chopin. Apart from misinterpretation and rejection, Coetzee also endeavored to highlight the "exile" identity shared by Witold, Chopin, and himself. Although these three "exiles" belonged to different eras, they all demonstrated a profound sense of "rootlessness" in terms of cultural identity. Chopin's exile to Paris was a response to the national disaster; Coetzee's migration from South Africa to Australia was a rebellion against racial policies; but Witold embodied a more contemporary "active exile" identity. He did not merely flee passively, but actively left the globalized world, refusing assimilation and attempting to re-establish the possibility of resistance through cultural mobility. In front of Beatriz, he repeatedly played Chopin's music, not for showy performance skills, but as an "organ" for transmitting identity through memories. Said, when discussing the fate of exiles, pointed out: "Exile is one of the most tragic destinies... but it is also an indispensable experience for intellectuals"[18]. Exiles have a "historical, dual perspective"; "exilic

intellectuals respond not to the conventional logic, but with boldness and fearlessness; they represent change, progress, rather than stagnation"[19]. They do not accept reality as natural, but constantly question "conventional" in their art, and continuously tell the truth to power in their expressions. Witold's refusal to play music to please the audience, and his repeated performance of Chopin's "zai" sound, precisely embody this aesthetic spirit. And Coetzee's portrayal of Witold's failure and silence, yet his insistence on performing, is a continuation of his consistent "exile-style literature", that is, resisting silence through aesthetic means, resisting oblivion with an understood voice, and realizing the metaphorical situation of exile seen by late Said from Adorno, who had also experienced exile, a posture of "remaining outside the mainstream, not adapting, and refusing incorporation"[19]. The writing of the identity of exiles also conceals Coetzee's self-reflection. As a white South African writer, after winning the Nobel Prize, he chose to migrate to Australia, which was both an active departure from the racial political context and a self-exile-like posture like Witold's. In the global literary system, he was also in a position of "no place to belong". Witold's persistent performance of Chopin to preserve cultural memory, and Coetzee's insistence on "non-mainstream" music writing to defend the critical nature of literature, both in different fields, yet exhibit similar resistance logic. This makes the musical writing in *The Pole* not only about the artistic expression of the characters, but also reflects Coetzee's deep reflection on exile, identity, and resistance. Although Witold was repeatedly misunderstood and rejected in *The Pole*, his performance never returned to the narrow nationalist position; instead, it demonstrated an open and inclusive attitude. In a solo music concert, in addition to playing Chopin's preludes, he also chose the sonatas of the Austrian composer Haydn and a set of dances by the Polish modern composer Lutosławski. This arrangement of the program is a highly symbolic artistic choice - Haydn, who represents Austria, was historically one of the aggressors and partitioners of Poland, while Lutosławski symbolizes the spirit of contemporary Polish cultural resistance. Witold did not use historical opposition as the exclusion criterion for the selection of pieces, but allowed these three sounds, which should have been placed in opposing positions, to be juxtaposed and resonated in one performance. What he practiced was not only the contrapuntal spirit of "granting each voice equal speaking rights" as described by Said[20], but also a rebuttal to the deeply rooted binary opposition logic of culture. Through establishing artistic dialogue, he challenged the stereotypical Western perception of the Polish national identity. What he pursued was a universal language that could transcend borders, classes, and prejudices, allowing

different historical memories and cultural identities to be "heard" in resonance. This is precisely the true spiritual heritage of Chopin's music, not striving for a certain voice to gain a dominant position, but rather striving to create the possibility of equal voices for all historical voices, transcending narrow nationalism and achieving the ultimate ideal of "harmony for all under heaven".

The ethnic symbolic significance of music has been further magnified. Its function in the novel goes far beyond aesthetics and lyricism; it is a political cultural self-representation tool. This way of interpreting politics from music, Said calls it the deviant element of music, that is, "describing the overall picture of political and social intervention, incidental connection, and deviant crossover in music"[12], which also corresponds to the "contrapuntal reading method" he advocated for revealing the political ideology in aesthetic texts[20]. Witold's interpretation of Chopin's music is not only the awakening of memories of the homeland, but also the resistance stance of the exiled in the mainstream aesthetic context of the West. His performance itself constitutes a kind of sound politics, an artistic response to the historical trauma and cultural identity of Poland. Therefore, the musical text in the novel should be regarded as a cultural event that requires contrapuntal interpretation. It is both the audible expression of Polish identity and a correction of Western aesthetic hegemony. This "interpreting politics from music" approach not only demonstrates the complexity of music carrying history, but also echoes the deep relationship between aesthetics and politics emphasized by Said.

IV. RESISTING ART ALIENATION: MUSICAL EXPRESSION WITHIN INDUSTRIAL LOGIC

Music, as a symbol of identity and cultural memory, has not received the due understanding and respect in the real society. Witold's performance practice in the Western context has often been misinterpreted, ignored and rejected, which also reveals the systematic alienation of art in the modern social structure. Music is no longer a purely aesthetic practice but has increasingly become an appendage under the logic of commodity and consumption mechanism. Witold's persistence is thus not only a response to the disintegration of identity, but also a resistance against the manipulation of the cultural industry and the trend of art commodification.

In *The Pole*, the art represented by music has been marginalized, profoundly reflecting the transformation of the overall values of modern society. In modern society, people's focus has shifted away from art and towards "practical" fields such as economic development. Just as Max Weber proposed "instrumental rationality", which

means following the logic of efficiency and emphasizing “fact-based judgment”, through rational “calculation”, to find the optimal solution for means and maximize benefits [21]. The cold attitude towards art is first reflected in the value orientation of proponents of “practical disciplines”, such as Beatriz. When Witold invited Beatriz to a concert in Brazil, her focus was on examining Brazilian agriculture, and she specifically mentioned her eldest son, who worked as a chemical researcher in an agricultural company. Her husband’s identity as a banker symbolizes the core area of modern rationality and economic interests, “never participating in the activities of the concert circle”[5], also indicating his disdain for the art domain. Secondly, the marginalization of music is also reflected in the objective fact of the reduction of art spaces and funds. The Felipe Pedrell Music Academy “is located in an unremarkable building in the old city”[5], Witold’s “performance venue is an old monastery with poor sound transmission”[5], “the funds allocated by the government to the music circle are about to be cut in half, so they also have to reduce the number of performances from ten a year to six”[5]. Under the pressure of modern rationalization, cultural life has declined. With “old audiences being unable to function properly and fewer people attending events”, Adorno’s statement that “modern music quietly died away, even without a echo”[22] has been verified. All these reveal the marginalized situation of art within the framework of modern rationalization. Art is no longer regarded as a means for self-actualization and spiritual elevation, but has become an “useless thing” disconnected from utility.

Music not only needs to give way to “practical disciplines”, but the remaining part of the music art has also become completely different, being alienated and commodified. Concerts have become a “commodity”, their existence and form more consider profit and market demand rather than pure artistic creation and cultural exchange. Before the 18th century, music was a spontaneous and self-oriented artistic state, without music stores or packaging companies for music products, music was purely an activity based on self-survival value[23]. However, the production of music now submits to the production logic of Adorno’s “cultural industry”, “subjected to countless social selection processes and constrained by theories such as industry, fixed agents, festival arrangements, and other groups. Everything enters the preferences of the audience, their needs are completely dragged along”[24]. The novel begins by introducing that “concerts are handled by the board”[5], music activities are no longer for artistic expression, but have become a commercial activity pursued by market operation and profit. The attitude of Margarita, who represents the board, further reveals the phenomenon of music

commodification, she is indifferent to music and considers everything as a commercial process. At this point, the “music festival” has become an alienated structure, where highly specialized musicians, barbers, and lighting technicians maintain a distance from the public through this structure. The public, on the other hand, “consumes” rather than “appreciates” the music[25].

The music event is regarded as a process and product, rather than an expression of emotions and thoughts. The commercialization of music has led to the degradation of hearing, and the audience in this environment becomes “blind” and “unautonomous”. Adorno, in his paper “On the Fetishistic Features of Music and the Degradation of Hearing”, mentioned: “This is the already degraded, suppressed in its infancy contemporary hearing. They listen atomically, this ability does not have much in common with the concepts of traditional aesthetics, and is similar to football matches and driving”[26]. Industrialization, mechanization, and commercial production have made the audience reject the ability to autonomously understand music, and more inclined to waste their leisure time for music entertainment and relaxation. They refuse to use their minds and to think autonomously[23]. Beatriz’s aesthetic choice vividly reflects Adorno’s criticized “negative audience” trait. She prefers “music with singing and dancing”, which is usually mechanical and thoughtless, more in line with the market’s demand for rapid consumption. And her rejection of “up-and-down, dramatic works” and “works with philosophical speculation”[5] reflects the auditory degradation in the cultural industry criticized by Adorno, that is, the audience has given up the deep understanding and thinking of music and instead pursued easy, recreational, and entertainment-oriented musical forms. The emergence of “negative audiences” is not only a phenomenon of cultural consumption, but also a part of social control. Under the drive of industrialization and commercialization, culture and art are simplified as a means of entertainment and relaxation, causing the audience to lose their perception and thinking ability of music.

The emergence of “negative audiences” proves Adorno’s cultural industrial theory that individuals are passively accepted, that is, the “audience idiot theory”[27], which ignores the subjective initiative of individuals. However, the Birmingham School pays great attention to the agency shown by the audience when facing the cultural industry, such as Stuart Hall who believes that the audience can decode the information released by the publisher in their own way[28], which gives Witold the hope of resistance. Witold’s “correctional interpretation” can be regarded as an “encoding” practice. He intentionally avoids the romanticized, feminized image of Chopin promoted by the cultural industry and instead encodes in a voice that is

more in line with historical reality. However, the “decoding” result of the audience for Witold’s transmitted information presents a highly divided situation. A few critics adopt a negotiated position, that is, the audience partially accepts the dominant encoding of the information, but combines their own experience and viewpoints to propose reservations or corrections. To a certain extent, they recognize the historical depth in Witold’s performance, but criticize that it is “too rational and lacks emotional appeal”[5], adopting a hesitant attitude to partially accept. While the majority of the audience adopt an oppositional position, directly rejecting his performance style, regarding it as “hard and obscure” “unconforming to emotional expectations”[5], and even feeling uncomfortable. Almost no one enters the dominant position expected by Witold and truly understands the historical truth he intends to express. In “encoding”, Witold upholds the resistance will of the individual, while the audience in “decoding” constantly ignores his efforts with entertainment ears. This failure of communication reflects Adorno’s criticism of the logic of the cultural industry: the sound of serious music is destined to be misinterpreted, undermined, or even suppressed. The isolation of Witold is not accidental but rather a systematic suppression of his resistance through music in the consumer society structure. This also indicates that Witold’s practice is not a complete denial of Adorno’s proposition of “individual passivity”, but rather a complex response in reality to his resistance. An individual can code and resist, but such resistance is often lonely, marginalized, and not understood. His performance is a challenge to the aesthetic norms of the cultural industry, but this persistence does not bring immediate transformative effects.

In addition to active coding, Witold’s “correctional interpretation” of Chopin’s music is also a fundamental resistance to the logic of the cultural industry. He does not view the performance as a commercialized display of virtuosity, but rather reinterprets Chopin’s works through personalized analysis to achieve the re-creation of individual aesthetics. Under the logic of the cultural industry, “the more the music is objectified, the more romantic it is for the alienated ears”[26]. Standardized cultural products constantly stimulate the senses of the masses, bringing immediate pleasure experiences, and works that cater to the tastes of the masses are often more likely to trigger collective frenzy. While Witold’s serious music interpretation is a rigorous performance, it inevitably encounters the rejection of mainstream audiences. His “percussive” performance style seems stiff, obscure, and even perplexing to the masses, but truly critical art should not be easily understood or accepted. Witold’s alternative interpretation breaks the aesthetic

expectations of the cultural industry, thus maintaining the resistance of art. However, despite Coetzee’s attempt to resist the homogenizing logic of the cultural industry through Witold’s image, he still arranges the plot where the protagonist sends CDs in the novel. CDs, as a typical product of the cultural industry with standardized replication, circulation, and distribution, seemingly represent a compromise and dependence on the cultural commodity mechanism. But this is not the case. Witold’s behavior is not motivated by commercial dissemination, nor does it rely on any mainstream channels. Rather, it is more like a private and individualized transmission. He sends the recording not for market exposure, but out of a desire for understanding, and this transmission is made in the gap of the industrial logic. Therefore, this is not an active participation in the commodity circulation system, but borrowing the shell of industrial media to retain a pure artistic transmission at its periphery. This paradoxical action precisely reveals the limitation of the cultural industry structure on individual voices, and precisely within this paradox, the complexity of artistic resistance is manifested. On the one hand, it attempts to reject the logic of the cultural industry and maintain the autonomy of art; on the other hand, in the contemporary media expression system, individual artistic expression almost cannot completely escape the industrial technology system. CDs, recordings, circulation - these are themselves part of the existence of modern art. Therefore, Witold’s behavior, although resistant, is inevitably dependent on industrial mechanisms. This resistance form of being marginalized in the process of persistence, misunderstood in the expression, and consumed in the act of sending further reveals the difficult position of art in the cultural industry system. Even so, Witold still chooses to persist in expressing through the means he can master, even if it is destined to receive no response, it constitutes a dignified non-marketized expression. From an overall perspective, Witold’s musical expression exists only in a narrow marginal space and is difficult to truly influence the aesthetic direction of the mainstream society. Therefore, under the control of commercial logic, this non-conformist performance will ultimately only be a private expression that cannot form wider dissemination and response. His persistence is more like a doomed counterflow, although it has strength, it ultimately cannot change the entire cultural environment. In *The Pole*, Coetzee, through Witold’s perseverance, not only affirms the pessimistic conclusion that resistance within the system is mostly futile, but also simultaneously showcases an alternative kind of courage known as persisting in the face of certain futility. This also reflects Coetzee’s aesthetic intention and the tragic sentiment presented in the text, because the value of resistance lies precisely in the process rather than the

outcome. If resistance is ultimately regarded as successful, it will be assimilated into the heroic narrative, while failure retains the complexity and tension of resistance.

V. CONCLUSION

In *The Pole*, Coetzee does not merely present the story of a stubborn old man. Instead, through the prism of music, he reflects on the multiple predicaments faced by individual lives, cultural identities, and artistic values in modern society. Witold, through his musical practice, not only responds to aging and death, but also resists the dissolution of cultural identities and the alienation of art. He transforms the performance into an existential narrative that resists the passage of time, persistently performing Chopin in the Western context, maintaining the cultural memory of Eastern European voices, and refusing the trend of commercialization, insisting on the individual expression of serious music. These three resistances coalesce into resistive musical practice in Witold. Music, as a manifestation of the will of the body, a powerful expression of national voice, and an aesthetic tool against industrialization logic, interweaves individual ethics, cultural politics, and artistic forms, completing a rare event-based resistance practice in Coetzee's novels.

Coetzee's novel creation has always been closely linked to music, and the uniqueness of *The Pole* lies in its breaking through the form dimension of music writing in previous works, giving music an unprecedented event-based resistance mission. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, he uses Bach's "polyphonic" structure to create a multi-voice text experiment, achieving a form dialogue between music and words; in *Dusklands*, he juxtaposes the Vietnam War and South African notes through "counterpoint" to serve the narrative structure with musical thinking; and in *The Pole*, music first appears as an event rather than a form, through the image of the musician Witold, concretely presenting the ethical identity and social critical power that music carries in the late capitalist society. Against this backdrop, *The Pole* not only inherits Coetzee's original intention of using literature to intervene in reality and reflect on the times, but also constitutes a turning point in his musical writing lineage. This "turning point" not only means that music in Coetzee's novels shifts from a formal metaphor to a practical event, but also marks the deepening of his late thoughts. Coetzee extends his critical focus from the aesthetic level to the cultural marginalization under globalization, the existential anxiety in an aging society, and the erosion of art by the consumerist system. Therefore, *The Pole* is not only a turning point in his musical novel writing, but also an important window for understanding Coetzee's late style. In an era when serious art is marginalized by the market, Coetzee raises a

fundamental question: Are we still capable of persisting in those "outdated" artistic forms? When fast-paced, emotionally shallow entertainment products replace profound, resonant art works, when fast food culture and algorithmic logic constantly undermine the depth of human spirit, *The Pole* does not propose nostalgia for art, but rather an ethical warning for contemporary society. Coetzee points the music's predicament to the social structure, pushes the ethical reflection back to the readers' life context, and ultimately reaches our hearts: In this era, are we still willing to listen attentively?

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