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Neo-Platonic love in fictional obsessions

Alberto Castelli
Hainan University
lamezzapunta@yahoo.com

Abstract

Twentieth-century novels present sexuality as a source of mystifying pleasure often challenging the conventions of heterosexual relationships by presenting a plot with elderly men captivated by much younger women. Alternatively, we should read those controversial texts as a Neo-Platonic exercise wherein Beauty itself recalls virtue and the more beautiful something is the more it is identifiable with the divine. Consequently, to those who managed to attain, by contemplation, the pure beauty, such contemplation would resemble a revelation of some sort. In the end, much the same way as plants naturally seek out sunlight, man before death reconciles all desires with a longing for God.

Yasunari Kawabata's *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* (1961), J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and García Márquez's *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* (2004) are novels allegedly articulated around a specific characterization of love, more alike a sexual taboo: Old men's sensual obsession with young girls.[1] The widespread criticism is that the women under observation in these novels are silenced and reduced into mere objects of the male gaze, and male sexual obsession. Women are transformed into dehumanized means to an aesthetic end. However, while the objection stands, to dismiss the male characters as mere sensualists would be ignoring the ascetic nature of their search and the penetrating beauty so dramatically impact on their lives. Therefore, I will suggest here a reading that might sound perhaps unsettling, but more adequate to portray what I believe is the writers' sincere intention. After all, it would not be original on my part, or innovative from the writers'

[1] Yasunari Kawabata's text is a novella. To avoid repetitive clarifications within the text, I will refer to all three texts as 'novels' without distinction when I comment on the three texts taken together.

side to display another case of physical concupiscence. Instead, rather than condemning male protagonists as oppressive sexual predators, we should reframe them as victims of a cruel solitude, the inevitability of aging, and the fear of death. Male protagonists have outlived their younger kin; they stand as Hamletian characters whose "dread of something after death" (cfr. *Hamlet* Act III) forces onto them a reflection over life and afterlife. Salvation is still possible; it is a blurred zone between beauty and destruction. Accordingly, in the next few pages, my aim will be to reclassify the novels' narrative rhetoric as a Neo-Platonic experimentation. What the texts express is the conception of beauty, and to some extent of love, as a way of moral and spiritual perfection. Simply put, the narrative stress is not on sexuality, libido, or eroticism, but on the Neo-Platonic discourse of beauty that is conceived as the portal to spiritual immortality. For the protagonists that would be the fulfillment of divine beauty as it goes.

A brief introduction to Neoplatonism

The notion that earthly beauty and love foretell a Divine Beauty and Love is central to the Platonic system which rather naturally later developed in the Christian tradition.[2] What is beauty? Nowhere Plato gives a full account of his aesthetic, and that has given scholars plenty of room to impose meaning on his writing. Socrates, in the *Gorgias,* as part of an argument to prove that it is better to suffer wrong than to do it, describes a beautiful thing as that which either is useful or gives pleasure to the spectator (474c–475a). In *Hippias Major* beauty is beneficial and useful (298a). With this in mind, beauty can be reduced to a common predicate and that is usefulness, and perhaps harmony. But more often, as in the *Republic* and in the *Symposium,* the Beautiful becomes the Good: "All good is beautiful, and beauty is not without measure" (*Timaeus*, 87c. ff). And because the beauty of the world is a reflection of the beauty of its Creator, beauty must be synonymous with truth. Throughout the Western intellectual discourse, from the ancient Greeks well up until contemporaneity, beauty is understood as both spiritual and material, a spiritual attainment tied to the transience of the material element. According to Plato's theorization, the source of beauty is ontological and relative to the gods, hence beauty is

[2] Plato does not provide an analytic elaboration of beauty in any of his writings. My research of Plato's view on beauty and divine is based on two main texts, namely, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus.*

a manifestation of divine intelligence, frequently identified as the hallmark of divinity. In other words, by configuring an association between physical and spiritual beauty, Plato argues that contemplation of physical beauty enables the human mind to comprehend the divine: "And turning his eyes toward the open sea of beauty, he will find in such contemplation the seed of the most fruitful discourse and the loftiest thought" (*Symposium* 210d).[3]

What Plato is openly doing is gifting beauty with transcendental power, lifting the object of beauty beyond its material, hence corruptible form, into a more spiritual dimension, hence incorruptible. Charles Kahn, among others, has recognized the metaphysical dimension of Platonic beauty by arguing that "the emotional storm of physical passion aroused by such beauty contains within itself a metaphysical element, that is to say, an aspiration that transcends the limit of the human condition and that cannot possibly be satisfied in the way that hunger and thirst can be satisfied" (268). Because "more than justice, truth, or even goodness, beauty shows itself most clearly as that which is the most manifest to the senses" (*Phaedrus* 250b–e), beauty becomes the element that at best is capable of transporting us beyond the here and now, evoking the remembrance of our primordial condition and our "true being".[4] Josef Pieper's statement of the issue is representative: "Only the encounter with beauty evokes remembrance and yearning, prompting in the one so touched the desire to get away from the course of all those things that usually absorb the mind" (42). Some seven hundred years after Plato, with the ascendency of Christianity, the Platonic discourse develops into Neo-Platonism. It still has philosophical intentions, but with an evident religious frame, and with the clear intent to associate beauty and the divine.[5] Within beauty, there is an intelligible presence, far beyond our reason but grasped by our intuition that presents the form of beauty as another way to find virtue. The argument had already appeared in Plato when Socrates reveals to the other diners that "There is the life which a human being should live, in the contemplation of beauty itself"

[3] For excerpts from the *Hyppias Major*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Timaeus* I refer to Plato, *Platonis Opera*, ed. Burnet (1903).

[4] My reference to the "true being" is clearly a reference to Plato's Theory of Forms based on which our physical world is simply a reflection, a remembrance so to speak, of timeless, unchangeable ideas (forms) such as truth, justice, goodness, beauty, which we recall and reproduce, as some sort of imitation, when our soul leaves Heaven to become human.

[5] For a fuller discussion on the development of Platonism throughout the Middle Ages into Neo-Platonism, see Dillon (2003), and Alexandrakis and Moutafaks (2002). Dated but well detailed is C. J. de Vogel (1953).

(*Symposium* 211d). That is, the activity of contemplating the form of beauty is in itself a virtuous action, it produces true virtue and, Plato will suggest later, it is needed to achieve happiness.[6] More discernibly than in Plato, the Neo-Platonic stance overcomes the tension between transcendental and material, contemplation and life of action, by making beauty the symmetry rather than a vehicle of the divine: "So then the beautiful body comes into being, by sharing in a formative power which comes from the divine forms" (*Enneads* I. VI. 2).[7] For Plotinus (205–270 BC), the father of Neo-Platonism, the world is a wonderful image of the transcendent universe in the mind of God, a reflection or better an imitation of the divine plan.[8] Following the tradition of Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, beauty has not only the power to reflect or recall divine light, divine goodness, and the whole divinity, but also to provoke or inspire love that constitutes the essence of divinity.[9]

The three novels that I am about to analyze have been chosen with a specific ratio. Mid-twentieth-century Japan differs dramatically in structural and cultural terms from late twentieth century South Africa and early twenty-first-

[6] This position has been criticized for its intellectualism according to which people's actions are based on what they consider to be their best interest and for being selfish since it does not integrate concern for the others. However, Plato seems to answer his future critics in the *Republic* with the Cave allegory in which the philosopher, who has freed himself and enjoys happiness in the contemplation of pure Forms, returns to the cave for sharing his knowledge and ruling the ideal city.

[7] The Cave allegory in the *Republic* symbolizes the dichotomy: Where does man belong, in the cave of this world or in the higher realm of truth? With Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* beauty is the element of connection when Prince Myshkin screams: "Beauty will save the world." Plotinus's *Enneads,* sections I.6 and V.8, formulates the Neo-Platonic philosophy of beauty in a more systematic way than Plato and Aristotle. I quote from P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer, *Plotini opera* (1951).

[8] Unmistakably, Plotinus is the most influential Neoplatonist of the Hellenistic period with his systematic equation between beauty and goodness. While Plato had gone as far as to recognize Beauty as one of the ideal Forms, Plotinus developed the Platonic system by identifying Beauty and Truth. His influence in the shaping of the Western civilization is immense, being all at once a source of inspiration for the early Church theologians such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the philosophical background of Renaissance aesthetics, the demiurge of Keats's immortal line "Beauty is truth, truth beauty', that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know," and the intellectual ghost beyond the Romantic-Hegelian identification between beauty, truth and divine.

[9] On the interconnection between Plato and Neo-Platonism, Brendan Thomas Sammon writes: "With Neoplatonism's absorption of a more religious, spiritual dimension, the Platonic distinction between an eternal realm of truly existing beings […] on the one hand, and the generated world (cosmos) of transient beings […] on the other hand, becomes a theological principle" (82).

century Latin America. Japan is about to become a power house, South Africa is oppressed by the implementation of apartheid policy, and Marquez's Colombia is scarred by *guerrilleros* and paramilitary extremist groups. To read the texts with Neo-Platonic lens is to implicitly dissociate the texts from the dominant discourse and argue that love should and would universally ground beauty and desire across different political and cultural contexts. The novels are subject to a Neo-Platonic reading essentially by virtue of the advanced age of the male characters. Why do they refrain from taking what is offered to them? The protagonists (men) observe and describe young women who are meant to sleep in a deep dream (as deep as death), but whose voices we are never allowed to hear. The essence of the narration lies in the silence of the sleeping girls, symbols of beauty that is both physical and spiritual, and in the reaction of the male counterparts. Unconsciously bearers of some sort of Neo-Platonic belief, elderly ordinary individuals sense that the contemplation of beauty is a way to elevate the human spirit so as to fill the gap with the divine element that is within. Otherwise stated, beauty creates a space for meditation in the protagonist and grants him the opportunity to reconcile with himself at the end of his life. Needless to say, the association between beauty and "true being" is fundamental because it is their dialectic to put the subject in touch with that which "truly exists" beyond the shipwreck of human vanity. In the case of the protagonists, due to their advancing years, that would be the bay of the afterlife. A clear capacity for experiencing beauty gives them a better vision of life and death. In Neo-Platonic terms, it goes as a full understanding of their being.

Kawabata's sleeping beauties

Sleeping Beauty is a fairy tale known in numerous versions. Perhaps the most famous version comes with a princess who has been sleeping for a hundred years and is awakened by the kiss of Prince Charming. Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2014) and Yasunari Kawasaba (1899–1972) updated this classic fairy tale although making sure not to wake the sleeping beauty. Kawabata's prose and meaning remain vague, the indefiniteness of more than a few sentences conceals significance and arouses interest. Only at the end, does reality floods in so as to allow the reader the pleasure of an aesthetic experience.[10] Specifically,

[10] Namiko Haruki reports that in a conversation with one of his readers, Kawabata confessed "that he wrote *House of the Sleeping Beauties* without formulating a plot and he confessed that he did not like the novel" (431–432).

a confession is what Kawabata's *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* stands for. Criticism did not wait long before expressing disapproval. Saegusa Kazuko has described the male transgression as evil (100), the story itself has been defined as "extremely perverse" (Nina Cornyetz, 50) because of its transformation of a woman into a passive object of male desire. This is a text that is clearly highly controversial. Seemingly, women are depicted as fragments of human beings submitting passively to the gaze of male lust; hence, the novella runs the risk of being considered as second-rate literature with a clichéd design revolving around perverted male sexual fantasy. However, from perspective alternative to gender analysis, which is too far from my line of research, we can reasonably redeem the protagonist if we stress the Neo-Platonic element within the narrative.[11] The girls under scrutiny do not speak, do not interact with the 'clients', and are not sacrificial victims offering their bodies; "in a literal sense, the women do not give the men anything" (Namiko Haruki, 433). In truth, within the interplay between men and women, a gift is involved and that is beauty. Thus I believe with Haruki that "the superficial understanding – that the girls are mere toys that allow impotent old men to lose themselves in ecstasy – is to be discarded" (434). All considered, we are not facing a depraved male fantasy but a brush with death.

As far as the plot goes, in a secret club old men pay for the privilege of spending the night with a young virgin who is stark naked and sleeps a dream as deep as death itself. Encouraged by a friend, Eguchi, a 67-year-old man who from time to time feels an unpleasant and lonely emptiness, decides to visit the exclusive house. The place has different definitions: A brothel for "an old man no longer a man" (20), hence implying sexual impotence; for some, it is a place to "remember how it was when they were young" (18) and for others a way "to forget the evil they had done through their lives" (67). At dawn, the gate opens, the guests are seen off by a small woman in her mid-forties, the girls awake without ever knowing who visited them nor what occurred. Eguchi visits the mysterious residence on five different occasions, each time, as he enters the room, the girl is already naked, sleeping, and drugged into somnolence. There

[11] A common, and somewhat superficial, accusation which might be addressed to the present essay as well is that it replicates the problem of the novels, that is the objectification of women to a lustful or aesthetic end. To be clear, I am not being uncritical and celebratory about old men staring at sleeping women, nor am I ignoring these concerns. The aim of scholarship is to investigate reality in its kaleidoscopic essence, to discover meanings, and give names, more or less original, to history. And if important questions arise, research intends to answer them, rather than bat them away as irrelevant or, even worse, disturbing.

are a few awkward rules, for instance, he cannot wake her up, nor wait for her to awake save being accused of having committed a crime (55). Kawabata hints that the body cannot be violated; hence, by depicting a woman *un-wakeable* he makes the body inviolable. Yet, there is more than a body, however beautiful, to be discussed. If we read the "sleeping girls" as the embodiment of Neo-Platonic beauty, then it is the very same idea of female beauty, of femininity that becomes inviolable, and consequently a secret to men. Indeed, Kawabata makes sure that his protagonist knows nothing about his unknown partners, neither their names nor their daily routine. During his first night at the club, with a girl sleeping next to him, Eguchi noted that there was no trace of her clothes, "only his own clothes were in the box. There was no sign of the girl's" (20). Consequently, the reader is incapable of classifying her social dimension. On the other hand, we know the women to be objectively beautiful in the visual description of the male's amazed stare. Following a specific pattern, while caressing her, Eguchi begins recalling his life: The grandchild that smelled of milk, his youth, his bygone lovers. Eventually, he falls asleep, not before having realized that "there seemed to be a sadness in a young girl's body that called up in an old man a longing for death" (59). It is during his last visit that the narrative takes a magic turn of sorts. This time Eguchi has two girls next to him, one of fair appearance and the other dark-skinned. As he is tempted to rape one of the two girls to make her his "last woman," his mother comes back to his mind on her deathbed. Soon after this he has a dream: His mother is alive and greeting him after his honeymoon. He awakes. As he stares at the girls next to him he realizes that one of them is actually dead. The novel ends abruptly with the woman-manager's dismissive words instructing Eguchi to go back to sleep.

There is clearly an intersection between his mother, the first woman in his life, the origin of life, "life itself, muttered Eguchi" (86) and the last one (the sleeping girl) whom he could strangle or rape according to his whim. And the junction is death to which he is both attracted and terrified. De facto, save for the sleeping beauty ("Life was there, most definitely, in her scent, in her touch, in the way she moved" (45)), more than a few elements in the text remind the reader of death. There is the violence of the waves beating against the cliff; a tiny house of a few small rooms sits at the very edge of a precipice. The reader must imagine the little mansion dangerously rocking. The woman managing the inn has neither name nor mercy, and some of Eguchi's most intimate thoughts are rather dark. The tininess of the location, the secrecy of his action, the restriction imposed by the rules are elements that contribute to creating a

sense of suffocation that warns the old Eguchi that death is approaching. But the body of the woman sleeping next to him reminds him of life: "Woman is infinite, thought the old man, with a touch of sadness" (90) and with the words of Brian Phillips: "What they [the inhabitants] perceive is simply the element of their imaginations, the beauty, and not the world itself" (423).

If it is beauty that the reader has to focus on, a recurring image is Eguchi tirelessly caressing the sleeping girl. His first instinct is to touch her skin, as she is deeply sleeping and cannot possibly respond to his advances; he goes on endlessly making the mortal body the map of the universe: "He felt in it the blessings of the universe" (131). The French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas would suggest that unbounded caresses typify the behavior of those who seek an "absence" in the silence of the skin that surrenders to the touch. I reckon Lévinas's theory does not apply to Kawabata's novella. Eguchi is not seeking for an "absent element", the key-point, rather, is the experience of the afterlife. The girls sleeping "a sleep as of the dead" and "a deathlike sleep" (59) constitute living corpses reminding Eguchi of what life was. Being naked does not offer the promise of sexual allure, but the image of a primordial dimension, timeless, ageless, and space-less. Eguchi is not looking for sexual adventures, even less with a prostitute. As far as we know, he never went to a brothel before, why would he start at 90? Additionally, we know that "he was not yet a guest to be trusted" (17) meaning that Eguchi, unlike the other guests, is still sexually active. For a man whose life is rolling fast toward the end, the young body is not a living toy but life itself: "Such life was, perhaps, life to be touched with confidence" (20). Lust is not the engine driving his behavior. Even when the idea of taking advantage of a virgin, while sleeping, crosses his mind, Eguchi is not driven by desire but by revenge against the authority represented by the small woman opening the gate: "He was not yet a guest to be trusted. How would it be, by way of revenge for all the derided and insulted old men who came here, if he were to violate the rule of the house?" (39).

Instead, he is in pursuit of a primordial experience: "He felt for a breast, and held it softly in his hand. There was in the touch a strange flicker of something, as if this were the breast of Eguchi's own mother before she had him inside her" (36). As Eguchi is looking for a pre-Oedipal experience he is clearly seeking transcendence. Sharif Mebed has observed that Eguchi's visit to the secret hotel comes with a nostalgic bliss "including memories of his wife in her younger days, his daughters, and the woman he knew in extramarital affairs" (94) but in ultimate analysis, Eguchi's nostalgia is not for life as it was but for life as it will be. Putting the matter in another way, to an unconscious level, touching the

nudity of a virgin triggers in the old man a desire for a return to paradise from which, in Platonic and Christian terms, man was separated at the moment of creation.

Paradoxically as it might sound, we can identify the brothel with a limbo, a space where men go to sleep waiting for the final night: "To die on a night like this, with a young girl's skin to warm him -that would be paradise for an old man" (81). Somewhere along the line, in his final dream, Eguchi has some vague memories of the house from which his mother is welcoming his return; he is "wondering whether it was the right house, he hesitated to go inside" (96). If we tried to decode the allegory, Eguchi's mother is beckoning him back home, the original home that in Greek philosophy is the hyperuranion in which the gods reside and ideas exist in their pure forms. In Christian theology, the original home is the Garden of Eden that Eguchi describes with "flowers like red dahlias blooming and waving in such profusion that they almost buried the house" (96).

After having said that, it would be a mistake to consider the old Eguchi as a sort of vampiric figure that by lusting after breathing corpses intends to suck the elixir of eternal youth. He very candidly confesses that "he felt that he had not in all his sixty-seven years spent another night so clean" (35), hence underscoring once more the pre-Oedipal, to some extent pre-corruption dimension he is longing for. In this vein, the young virgins, (as much as his mother) appear as a redemptive Eve: While the people who arrive have "a sadness far deeper that he had imagined" (43) they leave the house with "a happiness not of this world" (44). The Neo-Platonic ideal is perhaps even more vivid in Kawabata's text than Márquez's as the old Eguchi, on each of his five visits, sleeps altogether with five different women. That is to say that the young girls are interchangeable insomuch as they all represent an ideal of spiritual beauty. The final scene, cruel in some aspects, in which one of the young girls dies, soon to be replaced by another one, "Go on back to sleep," the proprietress of the house ordered, "There is the other girl" (98), it is meant specifically to reinforce the idea that the sleeping girl does not represent an individual per se, but individuality evoking immortality. Indeed, it is when he realizes that the sleeping beauty is "a Buddha of sorts" (67), an incarnation of a Buddha, only then Eguchi allows remorse and sadness to stream freely; languidly, he must accept that "he had not been the old man he was now" (66). Eguchi is finally coming to terms with his life.

Márquez's sleeping whore

With *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, Gabriel García Márquez pays tribute to Kawabata.[12] He does so with an equally brief account, in which a brothel is the setting of the unequal confrontation between youth and old age. Once again, it is my understanding that the abusive reality of a seemingly uncomfortable plot hides a more complex dynamic. To be sure, the obvious reading of a morally reprehensible action, which is in Oviedo's words "outrageous, because it ignores all the moral and legal norms considered acceptable today" (15), can leave space for a deeper insight into life and death.[13] This is not a novel in which the reader battles with pedophilia, neither the title nor the opening sentence reflect what the text is about. On the contrary, it has an aesthetic value, not only imaginative. It is the chronicle of a memory, the narrator's first-last love (present) set against the context of a life of sexual exploitations (past). And perhaps a confession, "to ease my conscience" (2), just before the final hour. [14] The protagonist, a nameless writer and journalist, is "ugly, shy and anachronistic" (2); a man who, unlike Eguchi, has always paid for sex, a type of womanizer who has stopped counting his women after 514. Turning ninety, he decides to give himself a night of passion with an adolescent virgin. The girl, nicknamed Delgadina, (Spanish for 'fragile') is fourteen-years-old, about to turn fifteen and she is sleeping. We do not know much about her, yet Márquez gives us more details about the sleeping beauty, than Kawabata ever did. She works long hours in a shirt factory sewing buttons; her cheap make-up, poorly-crafted costume jewellery, and her shabby clothing reveal the whole extent of her poverty:

> An etamine dress with a butterfly print, cheap yellow panties, and fiber sandals. On top of the clothing were an inexpensive bracelet and a very fine chain with a medal of the Virgin. On the edge of

[12] This is not the only text in which Marquez refers to Kawabata. Kawabata's *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* is also the source for Marquez's *Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane* (1982), again the tale of an older man under the spell of a beautiful young woman asleep beside him on a plane.

[13] Among the reactions that the novel has generated worldwide, Jeremy L. Cass noticed that in Iran the novel was released with a modified title, *Memories of My Melancholy Sweetheart,* and in Mexico protests were mounted over the film adaptation on the grounds that it "would glorify the sexual exploitation of children" (115).

[14] Unless otherwise stated, translations from Spanish are mine.

> the sink, a handbag with a lipstick, a compact of rouge, a key, and some loose coins. Everything so cheap and shabby with use that I couldn't imagine anyone as poor as she was. (14)

Allegedly, Márquez structures his tale mimicking Kawabata's. By the time the old client arrives, Delgadina is heavily sedated and never wakes up. This is precisely where the narration takes a different path from Kawabata's. The old Eguchi produces a realistic, almost dehumanizing report of each one of the sleeping beauties: "Her right hand and wrist were at the edge of the quilt. Her left arm seemed to stretch diagonally under the quilt. Her right thumb was half hidden under her cheek. The fingers on the pillow beside her face were slightly curved in the softness of sleep" (*The House of the Sleeping Beauties,* 18). Márquez's old protagonist instead is evidently more subjective offering a vivid, full portrait of the only one he loved:

> Her hair had been curled, and she wore natural polish on the nails of her fingers and toes, but her molasses-colored skin looked rough and mistreated. […] The best part of her body were her large, silent-stepping feet with toes as long and sensitive as fingers. She was drenched in phosphorescent perspiration despite the fan. (13)

This is not surprising if we consider that in Kawabata's story beauty is objectified in the body of the sleeping beauties, while in Márquez we have an additional element that would be love. When the driver warns the old scholar about the dangers he might incur by going to the whorehouse, claiming that "they kill in that house," the old scholar empathically replies: "If it's for love it doesn't matter" (34). Therefore, the narration, as much as the relationship, nolens volens becomes personal, certainly more intimate than Eguchi's experience ever was. Delgadina's innocent beauty is such that the old writer arranges standing appointments in the brothel to watch her sleep during his ninetieth year. He decorates the room with art and books taken from his own house. He hangs a painting and drawings, replaces the old fan and radio with new ones, he brings objects of daily use such as toothbrushes and soap. I read the decoration scene as his attempt to create an existential dimension in which the visual, but not the physical, has crafted a sentimental code between two strangers. He fantasizes of a life with her, creates imaginary dialogues, but he does not seem interested in her reality or her voice: "I preferred her asleep" (43); nor does he want to know her real name: "Don't tell me ... for me she's

Delgadina" (37). Given that, Jeremy L. Cass understands the relationship in terms of gender dynamics: "The man never converses with the woman. The silent, voiceless female provides García Márquez with a thematic medium that exposes the one-sidedness of the gender dialectic and as such exemplifies yet another manifestation of power and abuse in his fiction" (127).

However, I do not see Delgadina being the object of victimization from the side of an unscrupulous lustful average man. She is instead an embodiment of beauty, beauty itself devoid of her mortal body; consequently, the old journalist is not prevented from romanticizing, fantasizing freely, unchecked by reality. Inside the brothel's room, decorated with a taste of the past, reality is suspended, and this authorizes him to create (or re-create) her according to his wish. Who is then Delgadina? We are allowed to picture the young girl as desperate since she is willing to sell her virginity. Cass's statement of the problem is representative of much of literary criticism on the topic of gender and power: "Delgadina is placed under the objectifying gaze of a whiter, richer man – convoluted dialectics of race, class, and gender relegate the adolescent girl to a victimized existence despite the obsessive peculiarities of the old man's odd brothel routine" (120–1). Again, I find this reading wanting. In Delgadina's case, considering her historical background and her lack of education, we could assume that she would have ended up being a prostitute in Rosa Carbarcas's brothel (the brothel-keeper), had it not been for the old protagonist who not only does not exploit her but also, based on the novel's happy ending, will prevent her from being exploited by others.

Through the narrator's imagination, Márquez toys with the ideal of perfect, hence divine, femininity. The power hierarchy that places the man who pays in a position of power is turned upside down by the sympathy that her fragility, physical and social, inspires in him. This is the moment he begins writing love letters in the journal's weekly column and the storyline becomes a romantic tale. He develops obsessive behaviors as when hearing of a traffic accident in which a bike rider was involved, he runs to the hospital searching for her: "It was enough to see her feet to know that she was not" (49). He is suffering a tremendous emotional trauma, worried for what might happen to her and for what might become of her, so I explain his disapproval when, after a few days of absence, he notices her physical and aesthetic changes. He assumes that she has lost her virginity. His destructive reaction reinforces the idea that he wants her to remain as close as possible to his ideal. He is training her artistic and good taste; he gives her rudimentary education as when he teaches her writing and reading. He tries to persuade her to listen to Mozart before sleeping, but

she wants to fall asleep listening to popular boleros. Detail this last one that clarifies that she is not as passive as Kawabata's sleeping girls: Like them, she does not let him penetrate her body, but unlike them she lets him penetrate her soul.[15] Insightfully, Francisca González Flores has already noticed that: "The ideal woman is admired, sung, built and rebuilt, but always (as the lady of chivalric romance) sexually untouchable" (341). And the old scholar must share the same notion as his more or less imaginary construction helps him to love without desire: "A sense of liberation I hadn't known before in my life, and free at last of a servitude that had kept me enslaved since the age of thirteen" (12). We need to read the old protagonist's sense of liberation as a discovery: "Sex is the consolation you have when you can't have love" (38) and, in his case, love becomes contemplation.

Recently, Brendan Thomas Sammon has recalled how in the *Symposium,* Socrates is able to recognize the apparent contradiction, "if a thing is desired, it cannot be possessed, and if possessed, it cannot be desired" (26). In the economy of Márquez's tale, lust, urged by the approach of death, leaves space for a certain form of sensual contemplation, in which the sleeping beauty allows a celebration of the sense of sight from the male perspective. Likewise, from a Neoplatonic viewpoint, by conserving the sleeping girl's virginity, she is no longer a prostitute but a dim reflection of the more primordial desire to unite with God. "But if the whole is beautiful the parts must be beautiful too; a beautiful whole can certainly not be composed of ugly parts; all the parts must have beauty" (*Enneads*, I. VI. 1). Beauty, according to Plotinus, penetrates beyond the physical appearance, and it is reflective in a sense that it has an active cause that beautifies and multiplies itself infecting its container.[16] On this account, the old man's love and Delgadina's beauty foretell a condition beyond the confines of

[15] Feminist critics would disagree on this point, remarking that the narrator by creating his own version of the girl is simultaneously denying her an identity of her own creation. Maria Tatar, for one, argues that "Feminists have targeted Sleeping Beauty as the most passive and repellent fairy-tale heroine of all, and many have done their best to make the story go away" (142). Tatar's scrutiny easily applies to Márquez's upgraded version of the original classic fairy tale. However, as this manuscript explains, I believe that to read the text only in terms of gender dynamics is to misjudge its significance. We should not take the novella at face value but in its metaphorical implication. Hence, the old man's bittersweet glance becomes a sign that transcends gender and worldly existence.

[16] I have used the word 'reflecting' rather than 'symmetrical' to avoid linguistic confusion. Famously, Plotinus rejects the conventional view that wants beauty to be the effect of symmetry. If that were true, then beauty would be found only in compounds, it would be an aggregate of parts; instead, Plotinus argues, beauty can be found also in non-sensible, non-composite things

earthly experience, pointing to a paradisiacal natural resting place. After all the location of Rosa Cabarcas' 'shop', "in the back courtyard, where the forest of fruit trees began" (13), identifies the place with the Garden of Eden. As already for Kawabata, the reference to heaven provides a momentary escape, a space for a redefinition of male protagonists who want to free themselves from a reality that reminds them constantly of death.

Slowly, the virgin-child becomes witness of the old man's reflection about love, aging, and death. If the narrative has a crepuscular tone, that is because the desire for revenge against life is replaced by a protagonist who, because of love, has stopped feeling life as a failure. Hence, on the eve of his ninety-first birthday, the narrator has a vision (not a dream): In the family house, on top of the stairs, his dead mother pronounces the same blessing she gave him two hours before her death when he was a young boy. Sensing the arrival of death, he calls Rosa Cabarcas asking to be joined once and for all with Delgadina: "It was, at last, real life, with my heart safe and condemned to die of happy love in the joyful agony of any day after my hundredth birthday" (64). I read these last few lines as the protagonist finally coming to terms with death through Delgadina's beauty. The "joyful agony" he feels can hardly be put into words; it is the fight that propels one to be united with beauty, to receive it into oneself, to become part of it, hence, Neo-Platonism would say, to comply with the divine plan. As he lies down next to her, bells are ringing in the distance. Death is so close that he can hear the sobbing of someone who died in that very same room one century before. Everything becomes final: "I put out the light with my last breath" and "[I] counted the twelve strokes of midnight with my twelve final tears" (64). As the rooster crowed after Peter's three denials in the night in which Christ was betrayed, here roosters too begin to crow, as a reminder to emphasize that all is ready for the nameless man's trespass.

Coetzee's sleeping barbarian

J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) is mostly a political allegory of South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century, yet due to the absence

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such as virtues, laws, or human intelligence. An interesting analysis, although dated, is John P. Anton (1964); more recent and wider in scope is Smith (2011).

of historical and geographical settings, no direct reference is recognizable.[17] The anonymous life of an elderly magistrate assigned to a remote border town of the Empire is shaken by rumors about the arrival of the barbarians. Internal security service (the Third Bureau) begins capture and torture barbarian prisoners, meanwhile, the magistrate takes as a companion a young barbarian girl left crippled, and partially blind, by tortures inflicted on her. Eventually, he ventures into the barbarian territory to hand her over to her own people; on his return, he is imprisoned for treason and subsequently tortured. The novel ends with the barbarians "who live in tents and never wash and cannot read or write" (143) successfully crushing the imperial army. Meanwhile, the magistrate is back to his office, waiting for the arrival of the barbarians. While the political and historical dimension of the text has been thoroughly studied,[18] there is an aspect that has been overlooked and that is the significance of the relationship between the once powerful magistrate and the girl sleeping next to him.

Tracking the path already seen in the previous two novels, the two protagonists are strangers to each other. Similar to the other "sleeping girls", the girl in Coetzee's text has no name, she does not say much about her life, yet unlike Marquez's old journalist, the magistrate does not make up his own story about her, in this way remaining loyal to her silence. The magistrate being sixty-seven, and not ninety, is willing to wait for a time length that Márquez's protagonist does not have. She does not ask questions; he never bothers to learn her tongue (72), whereas she has some elementary knowledge of his. While in Márquez and Kawasaba the protagonists share the same language, Coetzee places his characters as far as possible from each other by transforming the idiom into a meaningless sound. Since the two main characters speak different languages, the magistrate is incapable of classifying her in any typology of women he has already met; she becomes a sheer stranger, "the other" in Lacanian terms, the person to whom the individual turns in order to achieve an identity different from those the Empire imposes on its subjects. She is twenty and not beautiful with "her legs […] short and sturdy, her calves strong" (30) and "the clear jaw, the high cheekbones, the wide mouth" (42). Coetzee concludes

[17] Coetzee began writing the novel when he was still living in the USA (1965–1971). My guess is that the American involvement in the Vietnam War (1955–1975) must have shaped his imagination, waiting for an enemy that lives in hiding. However, Coetzee's return to South Africa surely offered new elements to characterize the fictional Empire, for instance Nelson Mandela's life imprisonment (1960) and the system of racial segregation better known as *apartheid.*

[18] Among others, see Michael Valdez Moses (1993) and Maria Boletsi (2007).

the description by saying that she smells of smoke and fish. We have to imagine her bearing the deformities resulting from the tortures inflicted on her by state agents. There are scars all over her body, marks left on her eyelids, burns; the ankles are broken, "large, puffy, shapeless, the skin scarred purple" (29), her feet are broad "the toes stubby, the nails crusted with dirt" (28). In this vein, she is a woman rather different from the ethereal beauty I previously discussed. Such a description is not so much a celebration of inelegance but an indication of beauty as expressed in Plotinus. According to Plotinus, we can recognize physical beauty because it echoes some original form of beauty that resides in our memory. However, the beauty of a soul is considered of higher value, for it is ethereal and therefore closer to the original form (that is, source) of beauty:

> The soul, then, when it is purified, becomes a form, and an expressed principle, and entirely incorporeal and intellectual and wholly divine, which is the source of beauty and of all things that have an affinity to it. Soul then, being borne up to Intellect, becomes even more beautiful. (*Enneads* I. VI. 6)

We need to believe then that the magistrate has seen through her broken body. He must have presumed the divine source of her suffering, and he discovered her essence (soul) divinely beautiful. Furthermore, there is an element that makes the comparison with Márquez's and Kawasaba's novels possible and relevant. Similarly to Márquez's and Kawasaba's males, the magistrate does not want to take her. The text insinuates some form of asceticism in which the body, the carnal is denied: "I have just come from the bed of a woman for whom, in the years I have known her, I have not for a moment had to interrogate my desire" (43). A few pages after this sentence, we see the magistrate considering his manhood as an additional nuisance: "Sometimes my sex seemed to me another being entirely, a stupid animal living parasitically upon me, swelling and dwindling according to autonomous appetites" (45). He explores her body, but does not master it. He is not a sensualist as embarrassingly he rejects more than once her sexual advances (55) and instead spends night after night massaging her temples and forehead, bathing her, washing her feet as if it was an aesthetic experience: "Running my fingers between her toes […] I lose myself in the rhythm of what I am doing. I lose awareness of the girl herself" (28). And time becomes timeless, desire is replaced by an ascetic rapture in which her body to be mended is a vehicle toward salvation. In other words, he is capable of an ecstatic flight into the realm of transcendence.

Again there is in this ritual action a clear intent to recall salvation in a Neo-Platonic perception. Plotinus claims that if beauty is not evident then the observer has to act like a sculptor "making a statue that is supposed to be beautiful, who removes a part here and polishes a part there so that he makes the latter smooth and the former just right until he has given the statue a beautiful face" (*Enneads* I. VI. 9). In the same way, the magistrate cleans the little barbarian girl, he works on the things that are dark, making them bright, until an unspecified divine splendor shines on him: "The beautiful, by its very nature, is somehow attractive to everyone looking at it" (St. Gregory *237*). One might object that a few days before their farewell, there is a sexual intercourse between the two, thus the notion of Neo-Platonism is not applicable. But it is she forcing herself onto him after, perhaps, having been aroused by the presence of young men around the campfire. The magistrate, on the other hand, understands sexuality at large as a perfunctory performance: "I rub my cheek against hers. My hand finds her breast; her own hand closes over it" (151). Accordingly, he asks the Empire's herbalist "to kill off his desires" (150) his sexual desire being no more than an irritation to him. Regarding the magistrate and his relation to the body, I agree with Brian May: "[His] episodes of intense, ecstatic pleasure in bodily sensation, signify a desire to transcend the body and its world of material and temporal things" (405). The magistrate is not interested in the body per se; he shudders with revulsion (42) at the thought of it. In its place, it is a higher experience of contemplation he is searching for. At night he bends over her, breathing in her breath careful not to spill the candle's wax, then he lies next to her, "waiting for a flush of blood that never truly comes" (33). He bestows on the whole process inexplicable attentions and patiently observes her young healthy body, always naked, always sleeping. He knows the girl's body to be not just a site of joy, he struggles to understand his promiscuity and her detachment and yet "until the marks on this girl body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (31). But he is incapable of decoding its secret, "I hunt back and forth seeking entry" (43) except that the body is "without aperture, without entry" (42). She "seems beyond comprehension" (42), as the mystery of faith.

As a modern Saint Augustine, he becomes an unhappy consciousness, split between the utter contingency of his living and a self-reconciling truth. Augustine wants to stop lusting after women and unconditionally love God, but incapable of doing so. He is torn in two directions, the physical need for a mutable world and his longing for a transcendent reality. Likewise, the magistrate is an emblem of humankind, once aware of his Augustian-double nature he

becomes an unhappy consciousness in which every gain is a loss and every joy a suffering: "Angry with myself for wanting and not wanting her" (33). This is the moment the text shifts from being a Neo-Platonic quest to becoming a Christian allegory. The magistrate, painfully, realizes that there are other ways to be humans, "Never before have I had the feeling of not living my own life on my own terms" (40), thus, devoid of stereotypes and social obligations, he enters, unsullied and naked, the Eden of his own creation: "I find myself moving about unthinkingly in this nakedness, sometimes staying to bask in the fire after the girl has gone to sleep, or sitting in a chair reading" (31). From this perspective, the body of the little barbarian girl, which takes life only in his chamber, is not only the tool to escape worldly existence, but it is also the closest example he has of the experience of Christ.

As she is serving on him, in a spirit of emulation and reciprocity, he pours water into a basin and begins washing her feet. The scene is highly symbolic rather than erotically charged. Christ washed the feet of his disciples, as a suffering servant, as a sign of humility, and symbolically, to wash away the stain of sin. The magistrate's washing of the woman's feet has a double emphasis; he obtains to be both the Christ who acts, as well as the one purified by the tortured object of his aesthetic desire. He is washing her feet, but it is his soul that he is cleansing. And because no human act of purification is complete and permanent the washing is repeated until he is healed.

There is more to it than healing process. The old magistrate needs to convince himself that death is not annihilation, "I truly believe I am not afraid of death" (94), he states to himself. He tries to walk his path to forgiveness by saving her, "I feed her, shelter her" (30), hence complying with the Gospel's request: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35). Somewhere along the line, her body, broken and scarred, comes to resemble the tortured body of Christ on the cross sacrificed for the salvation of mankind. Completing the correspondence, the girl's body is a symbol of its own, it no longer stands as a token of pain but as a promise of redemption, at least for him. As a result of the agony she suffered, Coetzee makes her almost blind thus incapable of reciprocating his gaze. When he wants to know more about her she shakes her head. Coetzee has his protagonist spell a prayer of sorts, "Don't make a mystery of it, pain is only pain" (32). But she is silent; she gives no signs to have heard his words, the chamber resounds with the same stillness that Jesus of Nazareth must have felt when in the garden of Gethsemane, He asked for a salvation that could not arrive as yet. Ultimately, the irreducible figure of the

girl stands before the magistrate in her full transcendental significance: First, just as Christ is father and brother of all humanity, "she was no longer fully human, sister to us all" (81). And then as a redeemer for those who believed. She too bestows the destiny of an eschatological second coming: "I imagine her trotting through the open gate at the head of a troop of horseman […] Then everything will be on a new footing" (152). By now fully aware, insomuch as a Christian martyr willing to suffer the drama of the Cross, he reenacts the girl's role by becoming a prisoner. In chain and deprived of liberty, this is, perhaps, the closest the magistrate gets to experiencing God. By allowing himself to become a victim of tortures, in the same cell where once she was held, he finds in those tortures a significance that is not barbarian: "The gloomy fear of the past days has lost its force. Perhaps this escapade has not been futile if I can recover, however dimly, a spirit of outrage" (101). As he reaches the Golgotha of his life, the real barbarian (the imperial army) has been defeated. There are children building a snowman in the last scene, raising the reader's expectation for the protagonist's final message. But the magistrate is not the new Adam, at least not yet. The concluding lines make it clear: "This is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (156). "The road may lead nowhere" highlights the anxiety, the uncertainty of his choice, every moment shattered between contingency and transcendence.

Conclusion

The novels I have analyzed are obviously troubling; if we approach them without prejudice, they suggest different keys of reading but similar motifs. On the surface, the fictional characters are claiming the right of one to turn one's existence around, regardless of one's age. In the battle against nothingness, life wins over death, and love becomes the carrier of divine spirituality. The premise in the three texts scrutinized is comparable; what distinguishes them is precisely the attitude of the elderly men toward the physical proximity of youth and the temporal proximity of death.

The magistrate in Coetzee's novel would say that "what old men seek is to recover their youth in the arms of young women" (128), but if it was about the inability of coping with aging then the tale would be rather pathetic and even quite common. With the image of the sleeping woman, I believe, we

should stress the transcendental value of beauty, rediscover its metaphysical function in the spirit of Western tradition that wants Beauty, Truth, and Goodness irremediably intertwined and revealing of a spiritual/divine dimension that is conventionally denied to us. Elaine Scarry in *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) notices an equally emblematic scene in Dante's *La Vita Nuova*. When the poet comes face-to-face with his beloved Beatrice, the effect of her beauty is to make him tremble. As she passes by, he is petrified. When Odysseus is shipwrecked on the shore of the island of Scheria, Homer sings the intense beauty of Nausicaa. As Odysseus sees her on the beach, his mind is filled with an unprecedented thought: "Never in all my life have I seen such another [...] I am amazed as I look upon you" (76). Hence, he stands motionless, he feels inadequate, seemingly incapacitated by her beauty. If the gaze becomes the speaking eye of a relation of power, then it is surely Dante and Odysseus who are deferential and Beatrice and Nausicaa who are dignified. Those are convincing examples of the power and effect that beauty can have. In Scarry's words, beauty produces a 'radical decentering', a transformation at the very roots of our sensibility, suddenly "we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us" (112). Likewise, the sleeping women embody the image of the first Eve; young and immortal, naked in the Garden of Eden she has neither sin nor shame. In fact, Eve was not aware of her nudity. Their silence moves them away from a social, economic, geographical and temporal specificity (Flores 342), placing them within undetermined coordinates and, therefore, transforming them into ideals of beauty over which the male characters are powerless as much as Dante and Odysseus were. Hence, beauty is the texts' leitmotiv, not youth. Beauty as an object of contemplation, which elevates the observer beyond himself, yet it is best characterized by its ambiguous, equivocal content taking shape in prostitutes and dirty barbarians. The theoretical framework of such a view is to be found within the Neo-Platonic discourse, later recalled by the Renaissance. That is, beauty is part of the eternal-greater order which takes material form in the transient-lesser order in which we live. The infinite is trapped in the finite, in our case, the body of a woman. On the other hand, the male protagonists remain as paralyzed before their partner's primordial beauty which they consider, although inexpressible, the source and final horizon of all human love. I cannot but perceive in the males' attitude, in what they say but above all in what they do not say, Saint Augustine's epiphany after his conversion:

> Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee! For behold Thou were within me, and I outside; and I sought Thee outside and in my unloveliness fell upon those lovely things that Thou hast made. Thou were with me and I was not with Thee. (298)

Same condition applies to the old men, at last at peace. Perhaps, as Socrates suggests, beauty has a particular form of usefulness insofar as all things that are beautiful, whether bodies or virtues, share the fact that they benefit the one affected by their beauty (*Hippias Major* 296d4–296e5). Following the reasoning, it is Plotinus who tells us what the benefit of beauty is: "And that which is beyond this we call the nature of the Good, and it has the Beautiful set forth before it" (*Enneads* I. VI. 9). By which he means that the Beautiful and the Good are not the same, but we need beauty to reach the final goal that is the Good. Hence, the beauty of the sleeping girls has been the device that has brought spiritual change into a life otherwise devoid of meaning. It seems to me that at the core of these novels there is an attempt from the authors to stimulate the reader to search for alternative ways to approach reality, human beings, and our "selves", less in corporeal terms and more spiritual, so as to admit the possibility of salvation, more in spiritual terms than corporeal. Neo-Platonism crystallizes all the physical instincts of human love into spiritual inclinations because love in man is God-given, a cosmic necessity due to which human beings are pulled by an "irresistible search upwards toward a perfection which is both spiritual and intellectual" (Jayne 227). The most painful paradox of the spiritual life that our protagonists have suffered, is that only by turning away from immediate fulfillment of their longings (physical possession) are they able to eventually approach the object of their deepest desires (the woman). In the end, we have to understand the novels as a sort of affirmation of the humanity that at first was being denied to the protagonists. The authors are not redeemed because the female protagonists do not actively sacrifice anything to their male counterparts, but because the male protagonists choose to wrestle with the complexities of beauty and desire in face of the reality of death.

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