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ON THE POETICS OF JERZY KOSINSKI'S NOVELS

The question of Jerzy Kosinski's art, while by all means legitimate and significant, calls for a more accurate explanation. First of all, it is the question of whether his art is definable in terms of some general and invariable rules, or perhaps conversely, it escapes generalization and requires the recognition of the fact that each book is idiosyncratic and unique, preventing comparison with anything else. A consequence of accepting the latter stance – which I shall call *nominalistically individualizing* – is the assertion that Kosinski's writing is a thoroughly original phenomenon, having no counterparts or precedents in world literature. Yet, even a cursory glance at Kosinski's novels proves such an evaluation to be exaggerated. It is difficult to point to any features of his writing that have no counterparts or precedents anywhere else, in other genres or other novelists. His art itself, however, abounds in – apart from features individualizing and differentiating Kosinski's novels – recurring traits and characteristics present in and common to more than one novel. One such trait is basing the novels' structure on the protagonist's biography pattern.

This brings us to the question of the type or more general pattern realized in Kosinski's novels. At one end of the continuum, it is asserted that Kosinski operates in terms of a single formula to which all his novels can be reduced. Following R. Ingarden, one could point to the pattern showing through his successive novels, each being an individual instance thereof. If we accept that view, then *The Painted Bird*, having brought the author all the fame, sets up the pattern of success and generates a desire to repeat it, just as a successful Hollywood movie generates numerous sequels and imitations capitalizing on the popularity of the original. *The Painted Bird* was not merely a commercial success or a book that gained its author worldwide reputation. It was an invention – sanctioned by the response it produced – of a semantically

broad and attractive novel formula, providing space for mutual permeation of the most significant 20th century discourses: the historical, ethnic, ethical, existential, ideological and cultural. Even if the individual properties of the novel as such were not innovative, set side by side and combined into a whole, they resulted in a new quality: a significant, ever-lasting piece of writing. *The Painted Bird* – owing to the extreme and drastic nature of presented experiences, parabolic narration and universality of the message to the reader – constitutes the culmination of Kosinski's writing skills. His succeeding works could neither surpass this achievement nor even come close to it. Thus, one could justify the view that Kosinski was in fact the author of only one – one significant – novel.

The question how to evaluate the remaining eight of Kosinski's novels is difficult to answer. It seems partly justified to subject the novels to the matrix novel, although none of them achieved the succinct, compact form *The Painted Bird*, its rapid plot, lucid narration, the suggestiveness of the protagonist as well as the other characters and, finally, the condensed, multi-level, symbolic meanings. This is not possibly, however, as all his novels – from *The Steps* to *The Hermit of the 69th Street* – seem to represent the author's constant search for a new novel formula which would transcend the limits defined by *The Painted Bird*. It is doubtful whether that search was successful. Yet, such skepticism, however well-motivated, must recognize the actual facts. Kosinski's attempts to work out new formulas are evident from the differences between his individual works. It is another question of whether these differences were principal or secondary. It is reasonable to conclude, thereof, that they rule out the possibility of subjecting Kosinski's successive novels to the matrix.

What counts in Kosinski's writing is not only the general and fixed rules, but also the differences which define the departures from those rules and limit the range and scope of their application. It seems reasonable, therefore, to forego the search for one pattern of all Kosinski's novels and instead consider them in terms of *continuum* whose extremes would stand for contradicting values. From the point of view of poetics, *The Painted Bird* would be most suitable for one extreme of the *continuum* and *The Hermit of 69th Street* for the other. The fact that the former opens and the latter closes Kosinski's writings is far less important. What really matters is that *The Painted Bird* represents the narrative extreme, while *The Hermit of 69th Street* – the extreme of metanarration, self-reflection and self-indulgence. In the first case the narration is focused on the protagonist (the Child), and in other on narrator. It has to be added here that a concentration on the differences in the continuum should not be taken so far to blur or ignore the similarities. The contrast between *The Painted Bird* and *The Hermit of 69th Street*, so clear-cut and obvious in many respects becomes less apparent once

the attitude of the narrator and the protagonist towards the author is highlighted. The intended, invented autobiographism, not necessarily reflecting the reality, seems to link these two extremes and make them similar.

When the art of novel-writing becomes the object of analysis, then arise the question what phenomena it concerns or should concern above all. In adapting theory to a particular case the following areas of interest should be delineated: 1) the narrator and narration, 2) the protagonist and the story, 3) the epic distance, 4) the attitude of the narrator towards the protagonist and the author, 5) relationship between the form and the reader. The list is not may be complete in the case of Kosinski's art, but still, the above areas provide an insight into some of its important aspects which is exactly the aim of remarks being made here.

The narrator and the narration are most important clues of Kosinski's novels, though it is controversial question of – as it will be demonstrated later – whether they are really most important. It is only in *The Hermit of 69th Street* that the narrator and narration become an issue themselves, in the remaining novels – and so to some extent also in *The Hermit of 69th Street* – either the protagonist (*The Painted Bird*, *Steps*, *The Devil Tree*, *Cockpit*) acts the narrator or narrator himself, while telling about the protagonist in third person, represents his point of view (*Blind Date*, *Passion Play*, *Pinball*). *Being There*, however, is a special case in which a classic third person omniscient narrator appears, yet the literary status of this book is dubious, since it may be regarded as a screenplay-made-into-novel. It is worth noting that the pursuit of personalization – apart from consequences in the way the story is told and the world presented – assumes additional functions and meanings.

It becomes the vehicle for the autobiographism of the storyline so strongly marked and suggested by Kosinski as well as autobiographism of the narrator itself, its course, culmination and Kosinski's writing skills and verbosity, as in case of *The Hermit of 69th Street*. The description of these techniques could easily constitute as a separate paper. It is worth emphasizing that the similarity between the narrator acting as the protagonist or the protagonist presented in the third person and the author himself is usually, in Kosinski's writing, simulated and bears all the characteristics of literary mystification. The protagonist's stories in *The Painted Bird* (the Child), *Steps* (the narrator's ego and the protagonist in one person), *The Devil Tree* (J. J. Whalen), *Blind Date* (Levanter), *Cockpit* (Tarden) or *Passion Play* (Fabian) suggest a link with some generally known events from the author's biography. Yey, the Existence of a direct connection between them and the author is dubious, as the application of the autobiographical clues to *The Painted Bird* has proved. Considering the

problem from the point of view of poetics, it is the literary and textual simulation of autobiographism and not autobiographism itself that is crucial here.

One of the functions it performs in Kosinski's prose is to *defictionalize* the literary fiction and to create the illusion of verism and so-called personal documentary. It imposes on the reader such a reading strategy that tells him to relate or refer the events in the novel to extraliterary reality as well as to interpret and consider them in terms different from those of the narrative, fictional, esthetic and conventional literary games. The author is certainly the nearest and the most immediate extraliterary reality of the novel. Couching the plot in his biography, if we assume it is suggestive enough, marks the narration as true, experiential and factual. On the other hand defictionalizing results in making the narration and the narrator more credible – tricks as old and familiar as the novel itself.

The autobiographical elements and suggestion in Kosinski's are indicative of some deeper meaning. They reflect a few of the properties of contemporary literary culture and adapt to the demands of civilization. The novel, therefore, acquires gradually, though irrevocably, all the characteristics of commercial product and meets the needs of the market, as well as the consumer profile of the post-industrial and post-modernist societies. The market demands equate the literary, aesthetic and spiritual value of work, however old-fashioned it may sound, with its financial success and popularity with readers – which is usually connected with publicity of the writer's name and his personal life. Success requires adjusting literary product to the contemporary consumer profile defined by the so-called 'mass-reader'. His habits and preferences are not groundless. They are shaped and influenced by the everyday contact with the mass-media and popular culture. Kosinski's connections with this culture and his attitude towards it account for the autobiographical simulation and many other features of his works.

This culture demands to referring the product to the life of its producer. The practical application of this requirement, however, turns out to be a multi-faceted problem. The conditions of the market and the mass consumption make this 'life' become yet another product faked for the sake of the average – most susceptible – reader, reflecting his interests, tastes as well as the values and behavioral patterns accepted by him. According to the logic of the popular culture, the best solution is to build an adequately faked biographical motive into the structure of the novel, as Kosinski does it. The result is twofold: if a book, such as *The Painted Bird*, is an artistic achievement and represents universal experiences, then it earns the author recognition and success. If, however, the novel is mediocre, such as *Blind Date* or *Pinball*, the author's name is a nobilitation for *kitsch*. A mechanism of transfer, so common for pop culture, is at work here: shifting the value of the name onto the product or vice versa –

the success of the product onto the name. Thanks to the success of *The Painted Bird*, the Child becomes Kosinski, just as Hamlet became Shakespeare, while *Steps* won the National Book Award although it was a duplication of *The Painted Bird*. Kosinski's writing was determined by this initial success. The promotion, the transformation of the writer's individuality into a superstar, and the market itself became the actual co-authors of Kosinski's novels.

Even if the description of the above-mentioned mechanism is faithful, it still does not provide a full explanation why particular works possess unique characteristics and why they differ from one another. The same applies to their connections with the media and pop culture. They clarify the general rules and the writing genre, but not its uniqueness and individual features manifested mainly by the protagonists.

The closeness between the narrator and the protagonist is indicative of a unique character of the latter, mainly exemplified by a strong affinity with the author, and the intellectual capability. One could risk saying that the protagonist of Kosinski's novels, to some extent, attempts to assume the role of an intellectual (that does not hold, naturally, for poor Chance of *Being There*) which affects his position in the world depicted – his actions, his place in this world and his attitude to it. Naturally, Kosinski's protagonists, due to the clear fictionalization of his novels written as if they were meant for easy screen adaptation are, as the contemporary narratology defines it, for the most part, actants, e.g. active characters, performers, participants or witnesses of the events in the novel. They usually have clear, easily recognizable counterparts in extraliterary reality (which is particularly conspicuous in *Blind Date* as well as in *The Devil Tree*, *Cockpit*, *Pinball* or *Hermit of 69th Street*). This might mean that, for Kosinski, the plot itself serves as a mere pretext. The events tend to be exemplary and parabolic while the protagonists' actions and attitudes usually go beyond the literal sense. Both are often equivalent to some intellectual, emotional and persuasive content. The protagonist's significance – as a 'doer', participant or witness of an event – lies in the fact that it is he who ponders over the consequences of the event and/or reveals its hidden meaning.

The fact that Kosinski provides the protagonist with intellectual capabilities, e.g. his faculty of understanding, sensing and commenting on the outside world, as well as his deeds equals that of the author himself, makes it all possible and literarily plausible. It comes as no surprise when the protagonist (cf. J. J. Whalen in *The Devil Tree*) is at the same time the narrator. But when the narrator and the protagonist are separated, as was the case in the *Passion Play*, Fabian's broad intellectual horizons are justified in the novel by the fact that apart from

playing polo, he writes books on ethics and sport and delivers sophisticated lectures on university campus. He, like other protagonists of Kosinski's novels, possesses a consciousness far above the average, capacities for an in-depth analysis and a self-portrait, wide wordily experience, intelligence, a sense of the aesthetic and an enquiring mind. It is these features that determine his attitude to life, the world and his own 'self'. They justify his use of the language of modern psychology, sociology and philosophical anthropology to name and define all kinds of situations he encounters. Kosinski's novels are in fact narratives which have a hidden essayic function. They can be read as a description, however ironic or sarcastic, of contemporary civilization, society, customs and the individual's existence.

J. P. Sartre once wrote that to name is to show and to show is to change and that a writer provides society with *unwanted awareness* because he reveals the undesirable. In comparison with Sartre, Kosinski appears to be a relatively conservative writer, whose aim was certainly not to introduce any major changes. As a producer of – let me use his own term – a *sex supermarket*, he apparently did not much appreciate this unwanted awareness and did not intend to awaken it in the reader. One could even go as far to say that the writer served the reader with exactly what he had secretly desired to see. Kosinski constructed the scenes in his novels as equivalents of desire, substitutes for gratifying them, fictional release of pent-up hatred, suppressed cruelty, insatiable lust for sex, power, wealth, revenge and violence. In *Blind Date*, the protagonist does not hesitate to have an incestuous intercourse with his own mother. Despite such an opportunistic aestheticism and social conformism, Kosinski's novels remain ambiguous which makes the 'pleasure of reading', as R. Barthes once advocated, suspicious and at the same time it brings together the Jewish-American-Polish writer with his French antagonist. It is so because Kosinski exposes the very misconduct of exposure in contemporary literature and civilization, although he himself undoubtedly becomes a victim of his own demasking conceit since he is also a part of the world he depicts and he must obey its rules.

The visit of Fabian and his friend Vanessa, characters of *Passion Play*, to the *Dream Exchange* make apparent the ambiguity connected with Kosinski's exposing activity. The public exhibition of intimacy and nudity is guided by the grandiose ideals of freedom, whose threshold remains, according to the narrator close to Fabian, a *total freedom from oneself*. The ambiguity of the events presented in the *Dream Exchange*, just as many other situations in Kosinski's writing consists in the fact that these inhibitions of the self do not include the disempowering desire of being seen and turning intimacy into an exciting public spectacle. For the author the definition of freedom seems to be primarily set in the negative, as a

liberation from something, yet practically, in the conceptual field and the area of the novelist technique, it boils down to searching and providing the reader with sophisticated *forms of excitement*. The scene described above is one of the innumerable examples of just that. The ambiguity of the episode is not nullified by the fact that the narrator and the protagonist demonstrate a skeptical distance towards the event.

The situations cited above show that the attitude of the protagonist or narrator is not limited to that of an exploratory approach to the depicted world and the extratextual reality. They both figure in this world as experimenters and manipulators. They experience their leniency and resistance, their limits. This in turn proves that – despite their apparent conservative outlook – Kosinski's novels reflect transgressive tendencies, although they seem superficial and flat, subject to the market rules and commercial success. Their actual, not intended scope is limited to sensual stimuli, replacing them with new ones, more and more exciting. If you allow for the fact that Kosinski puts the sensual transgressions within intellectual framework adding a bit of skepticism, irony and sarcasm, then the analysed *pop novels* certainly do not stop being market products, but they are meant to cater for the elite, to satisfy the most demanding. Kosinski's philosophical intellect extracts from them the supervalue of a luxury reserved for the chosen. This is exactly what adds to the ambiguity of the author's writing. His novels achieve the status of either *the pop culture for the elite* or *the elite culture for the mass reader*. This ambiguity by no means can be removed from Kosinski's writing since it is what defines the specific and unique character of his books.

The difficulty of the recognition and evaluation of his novels comes from the fact that either of these two aspects is taken into consideration at one time, whereas they co-exist. The poetics of Kosinski's novels is marked by the combination of popular and intellectual writing. Such a misalliance gives rise to others, but for the lack of space here we will not attempt their detailed description. One should also point to some other characteristics of this writing, but their closer analysis would require a separate paper.

In terms of literary tradition and culture, Kosinski's art is determined by various trends of the European novel of the 19th and 20th centuries – one could mention here the naturalism of Reymont's *Peasants*, of Balzac, Zola, Dostoyevski and Kafka's parabolic novels, French existentialist, the narrative paraphrases of the theatre of absurd and cruelly, etc. Apart from these, his writing is influenced by the American counter-culture and pop-culture and some themes from the Americanised Jewish thought such as the concept of 'preciousness of one's existence' taken from A. J. Heschel. To enumerate all of the influence he underwent and traditions he referred to is pointless, since the author himself listed them in *The Hermit of*

69th Street and in the collection of sketches the *Passing by*. The question of what has emerged from such a variety and what kind of alloy has been obtained in the literary melting pot seems relevant in terms of posing research problems.

If the alloy is to be measured with generosity, then one could conclude that this variety of traditions and cultures produced *literary anthropology* whose essence is a penetrating, disillusioned and in fact pessimistic picture of the modern man and his social, as well as civilizational environment. The symbol of a painted bird – a creature willing to join its flock but which gets spurned and killed by the group because it looks different – may seem too glaring and extreme to account for the anthropology's complexity and entirety but it well corresponds to its style, the perception of the world of an individual and relationships between people. Man is viewed horizontally – as philosophers would put it – in the immanence of his own life, whose fundamental experience is a feeling of incongruity and discontinuity, which can only be satisfied in the hedonistic, punctual present. Man cannot look deep down his self-awareness, because it is empty. His ego has evaporated completely or has been torn into pieces of conflicting sensations. His superego has lost control of him. Man cannot resort to ethics since ethics has been rejected – desire and satisfaction have become the ultimate criteria of his actions. He cannot rely on anyone else since, as it is in the case of Fabian in *Passion*, they become a TV substitute for him. 'I cannot say', reflects J. J. Whalen in *The Devil Tree*, 'whether self-awareness is the source of energy or impotence. My true ego is antisocial [...]'. Another question, however, is posed here: can antisocial ego at all be true? Is the word 'ego' still applicable in this case? Kosinski's literary anthropology indicates the return of the contemporary man to the jungle. But his jungle – unlike Kipling's – is the big, overcrowded city he has himself created in order to obtain comfort and superiority over nature.

It is *myth* that has become the excuse for the world which has repudiated transcendence other than bidding for more and more of excitement, desire, ever-increasing production, more and more accessible abundant and sophisticated consumption. Naturally, what is meant here is the myth which the above 'bidding' domesticates, justifies, changes into an ideal and transforms into a norm, that is, in short – it elevates it. One should, however, distinguish between an objective myth which defines the world as a whole and man as part of it and mythologies which reverse this relation and bring all *esse* down to *esse percipi*. This very case, even if not as clear and unequivocal as the above introduction might suggest, is presented by Kosinski. **The personal narration of his novels serves as a way of presenting the world in the subjective view of the narrator or the protagonist. That subjectivity is in**

turn a prerequisite for the very existence of this world and its emergence in the form of a picture. It should be noted, however, that this picture can be shaped neither by that world, which is intrinsically a derivative of the subjectivity, nor by the obscure, indistinct subjectivity. The picture can be only created by the myth – extra-individual and intersubjective – to which both the writer and his literary production contribute.

While myth is usually a complex construct, the principles of constructing its components are fairly simple. They are created by values which have become all too obvious and fossilized. Thus they lost their flexible, accidental, alternative and derivative character, so typical for all values. They ceased to be the subject of reflections, instead, they have turned into their established norms, cast-iron frames within which the reflections take place and develop. Kosinski's novels, usually constructed around the comic-strip pattern, bring back to life mythical heroes and themes, which are the staples of the contemporary Western world. They include Fabian, the lonely cowboy and 'rider through life', J. J. Whalen, the unhappy millionaire, overwhelmed by his wealth, the former agent Tarden – almost invisible and elusive, yet Jehova-style omnipotent and vengeful, George Levanter of *Blind Date* – superior to all ethical norms and remorse and finally quite an array of porn-style Don Juans whose potency probably exceeds Heracles' most daring feats. The Child roaming the unspeakably cruel yet Andersenian, fairy tale-like world of savagery and war also belongs to the above group. The identification of the author with the Child is also a method of mythicization. It puts Jerzy Kosinski among mythical figures created by him, and at the same time unfortunately among the victims of this myth. The victims help to realize that myths are more than mere fiction.