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JERZY KOSINSKI'S RELATIONSHIP TO LANGUAGE

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Language, not surprisingly, is a capacity of mankind that invites reflection, and the use it is put to frequently serves as an identifying factor. What a writer does with the words at his disposal may well provide clues not only to an understanding of his work but also of his motives. The prose of Henry James, for example, can be distinguished from that of Ernest Hemingway by taking into account such points as order of words and complexity of clauses, and the reasons behind certain usages undoubtedly stem from a personal, individual attitude to life and art. The same may be said of the prose of Jerzy Kosinski. There must be a reason why his words are sparse, cold, distant. This relationship between language and writer has often been dealt with. Hugh Kenner has devoted a book length study to the «fifty-year reshaping of the American language» with reference to writers of the first half of this century [1]. And Tony Tanner surveys the period from 1950 to 1970 and asks «what is the relation of the recent writer to his language?» [2]. Yet he does not even mention Jerzy Kosisnki, who is, I feel, very much aware of the treacherous potential of language.

Kosinski's novels are considered to be examples of minimal art in that they force the reader to create his own situations: «the readers are largely left to themselves and the power of their own imaginations» [3]. This is of course what Kosinski avowedly considers as the goal of his fiction: the awakening of the reader to the violence and horror that surround him is what is at stake - not the reader's enjoyment of the fiction. His own words can best summarize his ideas on this subject:

[1] Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World, The American Modernist Writers,* Marion Boyars, London 1977, p. xvii.

[2] Tony Tanner, *City of Words,* Harper and Row, New York 1971, p. 18.

[3] Paul Bruss, *Victims; Textual Strategies in Recent American Fiction,* Associated University Presses, Inc. 1981, p. 182.

> «The novel confronts the reader arbitrarily, designed to involve and to manipulate him... As my fiction does not impose itself on the reader in an easily detectable, predigested manner, it aims for the impact, for the ethical collision. By engaging my reader, on one hand, in the concrete, visible acts of cunning, violence, assault and disguise (as opposed to the diluted, camouflaged violence of our total environment), my fiction is, on the other, purging his emotions, enraging him, polarising his anger, his moral climate, turning him against such acts (and often against the author as well). In a word, it is generating a uniquely private moral judgement» [4].

What stands out here is the author's desire to force the reader to adopt a specific moral stance, not so much towards the characters he presents, as towards the violence of our world; the violence that he has lived through. And so the author absents himself and refuses to help the reader who must labour for himself at the interpretation of the text. The principles of Reception Theory can be seen to apply to Kosinski's work: «The literary work itself exists merely as what the Polish theorist Roman Ingarden calls a set of 'schemata' or general directions, which the reader must actualize» [5]. Kosinski goes even further, and once he has written the text, he leaves all responsibility to the reader, hoping for a new «critical awareness» [6] from him not only as literary critic with regard to the text, but also as Man with regard to His predicament today. In an interview with Gail Sheehy, Kosinski states explicitly that the purpose of his fiction is to provoke the reader to a greater «awareness of his or her life» [7].

Jerzy Kosinski's novels are full of scenes of nightmarish quality; nightmares however, that we know have been lived through by millions. George Steiner considers that the violence and horror of our century have dehumanised language. And as his Central European origins give him a common ground with Kosinski, I feel that his opinions on language today are pertinent here. His comments on German, the language used to perpetrate the horrors of the concentration camps can surely be applied to most modern languages. For example, «Words were committed to saying things no human mouth should ever have said and no paper made by man should ever have been inscribed with» and, «a language being used to destroy what there is in man of man» [8]. Steiner believes that words have lost their value, they have been «twisted and cheapened» [9] and elsewhere he states that the «instrument available to the modern writer is threatened by restriction from without and decay from within» [10].

[4] Rocco Landesman, «An Interview with Jerzy Kosinski», G. Plimpton, ed. *Writers at Work,* Penguin Books, New York 1981, p. 333.

[5] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory,* Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, p. 77.

[6] Ibidem., p. 79.

[7] Gail Sheehy, «The Psychological Novelist as Portable Man», *Psychology Today,* December 1977, p. 56.

[8] George Steiner, *Language and Silence,* Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1979, p. 142.

[9] Ibidem., p. 19.

[10] Ibidem., p. 47.

Can the writer today then, trust language? I feel it is no longer a question of what he will do with language, or what his relation to it may be. If, as Nabokov, he can play out a love affair with language and fiction, he may consider himself lucky. Kosinski cannot love language, he cannot even love *in* certain languages. Words on the whole deceive him, they let him down and he has at times retreated into silence [11].

The early novels of Jerzy Kosinski betray an extraordinary sense of the fear of language and of communication. This can be seen quite clearly by the author's rejection of dialogue in his novels. There is no dialogue in *The Painted Bird* [12]. Indirect speech is always preferred. We learn what the characters say through the narrator, the Boy with whom we are plunged into the world of nightmare —a world that is in fact our world. The later novels, *Passion Play* [113] and *Pinball* [14] display a much freer use of direct speech, but at no point in Jerzy Kosinski's work do we find a specific function assigned to dialogue. All the characters use the same type of language when they speak. They do not possess an idiolect or even a distinguishing register. The only possible exceptions are to be found in *The Devil Tree* [15] where the author seems to attempt an imitation of the speech of a vagabond [16] and of a negress [17]. Also in the speech of Andrea in *Pinball* the use of slang and vulgarisms points towards characterisation through speech. However it is not sustained. Why does Kosinski avoid giving the reader information about his characters through their own speech, their own words, which would surely tell us as much about them as the recounting of their actions can do? It seems to me that the only valid reason is that Kosinski does not want to tell us *about* his characters. He does not want to betray them, (and thus himself). The characters, as the author, stand aloof. The reader is not meant to get to know them. The state of awareness which Kosinski wishes to provoke in his reader is not to be attained through identification with his characters. Such identification is always avoided. Whether Kosinski has chosen to use the first or the third person, he consciously distances the reader from the inhabitants of his fictitious world.

This is achieved in a variety of ways. The most simple being of course to refuse to give a name to his protagonist. The boy in *The Painted Bird* is simply a boy. No one ever cares for him intensely enough to want to give him a name. In *Steps* [18] the same device is used, and in *Cockpit* [19] Tarden is but one of the

[11] «The psychic pressure was so extreme that when he was nine, he (Jerzy Kosinski) lost his speech in an accident, and from then on, to his other disadvantages in that society was added his inability to communicate verbally». Norman Lavers, *Jerzy Kosinski,* Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1982, p. 3.

[12] Jerzy Kosinski, *The Painted Bird,* Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1965.

[13] Jerzy Kosinski, *Passion Play,,* St. Martin's Press, New York, 1979.

[14] Jerzy Kosinski, *Pinball,* Bantam Books Inc., New York, 1982.

[15] Jerzy Kosinski, *The Devil Tree,* Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York, 1973.

[16] Jerzy Kosinski, *The Devil Tree,* Bantam Books, Inc., New York, 1972, (quotations throughout are from this edition), p. 9.

[17] Ibidem., p. 119.

[18] Jerzy Kosinski, *Steps,* Random House, New York, 1968.

[19] Jerzy Kosinski, *Cockpit,* Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1975.

names of the elusive protagonist, who hides behind different identities as he considers necessary. Even in *Passion Play,* Fabian is not the complete name of the protagonist, but a simplification to avoid the difficulties of pronounciation; that is, the difficulties entailed in naming him [20]. A more complex alienating device is found in Kosinski's use of memory as the thread of the novel. In almost all the novels it is the protagonist's memory that carries us on, forward or backward, as the case may be. We never know more than the protagonist cares to reveal, nor can we tell where he will take us next. We do not share his memories. We are given them in sporadic bursts as it were and the only link between one episode and the next is that of the associations the protagonist makes. We do not feel involved. We are forever on the edge, alien to his real feelings and emotions.

Thus the very structure of the novels prevents a real knowledge of the characters, and there is no dialogue to help us [21]. An analysis of the style of the early novels will also show that the author is intent on avoiding emotive language. Unevocative, brief, and simple sentences, coordination rather than subordination and a limited vocabulary indicate a desire to distance the events from the reader, to prevent identification with what is going on. Kosinski gives the reader the brute, bare facts, and it is up to the reader to decipher them and to adopt a moral attitude to the facts of life. This is of course, asking a lot of anyone:

> «If (my fiction is demanding on the reader) so is life. After all, life is not only demanding, but like a novel, also ends... I think literature is the last surviving awakener, the last form of art which still requires a profound effort from within» [22].

So Kosinski does not shroud his meaning in intricate patterns. There is no need to search for a «figure in the carpet». The figure is conspicuous, not obscured by language. When we consider Kosinski's later novels, where a certain complexity of imagery and rhythm become more and more apparent, we are undoubtedly tempted to put the sparsity of the style of his early novels down to his as yet imperfect mastery of the English tongue. The more complex style however, is perfectly in accord with the changing attitudes of the protagonist. In an interview first published in 1972, Kosinski says,

> «But I constantly attempt to make the language of my fiction as unobtrusive as possible, almost transparent, so that the reader would be drawn right away into each dramatic incident» [25].

He stresses here the importance of content, or rather, of each individual action, as opposed to form, or language, indirectly betraying his fear of words.

20 Jerzy Kosinski, *Passion Play,* ed. cit., p. 204.

21 *Steps* is a partial exception. The italicised passages appear to be excerpts from a conversation that the protagonist carries on with his lover. It is from these excerpts that the reader can form a reasonably clear picture of the protagonist.

22 Gail Sheehy, op. cit., p. 329.

23 Rocco Landesman, op. cit., p. 329.

It is in *The Painted Bird* that this fear is made manifest when the young protagonist is struck dumb. As a child robbed of the faculty of speech he inspires pity and is less of a burden or a curse than he was as a fast-speaking city boy. He tells us that «my fast speech was some sort of infirmity... and my city talk, was full of hard consonants which rattled like machine-gun fire» [24]. The Boy, deriving his innocence from his still vivid memories of a happy bourgeois home, where articulacy was a virtue, indeed, the principal means of having his wishes granted, is not afraid of speech in the first episodes. Gradually, he becomes aware of the fact that not only his looks differentiate him from the peasants among whom he has suddenly found himself, but also his speech. The peasants distrust speech intuitively and «spare words as one spares salt» [25] and regard the Boy as a gypsy, a Jew, a vampire, an incarnation of evil, in short, a premonition of terror and hell. And so, later on, when the Boy turns for help to an unknown farmer, he tries «to imitate the local dialect» [26] knowing full well that his own speech would betray him as intrinsically different —and therefore unwanted.

Once the Boy has lost his faculty of speech he is suspected of pretence. Makar suspected that «I only pretended to be mute to avoid betraying my Gypsy speech» [27] and it is in order not to arouse suspicion that the Boy rejects, initially, the company of The Silent One in the orphanage [28]. The Boy's words when he realizes that he can speak again show clearly how he feels. He stresses the fact that now he can do with speech as he likes, «confirming to myself again and again that speech was now *mine*» [29] Not only was it not going to escape him again, but it was his property, and he could do with it as he would. Use it or not, modify it at will, harness it to his needs so that it would never betray him again.

Kosinski's next novel, *Steps* also shows how necessary it is in life to dominate language. The protagonist learns to manipulate the language of bureocracy in order to make good his escape from the totalitarian country of his birth. On reaching «freedom» however, he finds that again language betrays him. His supposed knowledge of a certain East European language only brings him trouble [30] and he reverts, this time consciously, to silence, «As a silent, gesturing spastic I was not a threat to the callers» [31]. Not only is betrayal of self now impossible. The secrets of others are also safe. And so a woman can release her passions and amotions and not fear betrayal when she is with the «silent, gesturing» protagonist [32].

[24] Jerzy Kosinski, *The Painted Bird,* Pocket Books, New York, 1970, (quotations throughout are from this edition), p. 73.

[25] Ibidem., p. 72.

[26] Ibidem., p. 82.

[27] Ibidem., p. 127.

[28] Ibidem., p. 197.

[29] Ibidem., p. 213.

[30] Jerzy Kosinski, *Steps,* Bantam Books, Inc., New York,, 1969, (quotations throughout are fromn this edition) p. 123.

[31] Ibidem., p. 138.

[32] Ibidem., p. 142.

Words possess an inherent power which can destroy or raise the judicious speaker. Levanter of *Blind Date* feels exhilarated by the feeling of power over the lives of others that his use of fluent Russian gives him [33]. On the other hand, it is Russian that destroys his lovemaking with the actress [34]. And it is the «mute telephone wires» in *Steps* that are symbolic of the destruction of man's power over other men [35].

In *The Devil Tree* we become more and more conscious of a distrust of language. The protagonist, Jonathan Whalen Jr. alienates himself from society and is unable to fit in and «belong» because of the attitude he adopts towards others. His words reveal his real emotions. He shows he is deeply hurt by his fellow-patients rejection of him by his petulant tone when he says: «Why should I want them to understand me?» [36] and yet at the same time he is extremely careful to «tailor (my) reminiscences to the person I'm talking to» [37]. He is aware of the treacherous quality of language which can betray «the real thoughts and impulses» [38].

The only safeguard against the treachery of language is silence. And ultimate silence is death. Jonathan Whalen cannot recover the «unspoken words» [39] of his father which are lost forever, as is the language of the people of the Hermit Islands who have died without leaving a written record of their speech [40]. Speech would have betrayed them, just as, if Mr. Whalen Sr. had spoken, he would have betrayed himself to his son. And language itself is a very limited affair. Not only is it incapable of expressing all possible concepts [41] but also as a tool for communication and in the establishing of relationships with others it is highly unsatisfactory. In *Cookpit* Tarden does not dare speak intimately with a woman he could love [42]; and let us not forget that the woman in *Steps* who heard out the protagonist's confession committed suicide [43]. Intimacy through words is impossible. Words are inevitably ineffectual, inadequate. The protagonist of *Passion Play* in his relationship with Stella, also reverts to silence, «Silence was their sound... a vocabulary of such variety and plenitude that it restored the dominion of a power usurped by speech» [44]. Both protagonists of *Pinball* require the silence of a secluded refuge in order to maintain the equilibrium of their lives [45].

33 Jerzy Kosinski, *Blind Date,* Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1977, (quotations throughout are from Bantam Books Inc., New York, 1978), p. 23.

34 Ibidem., p. 66.

35 Jerzy Kosinski, *Steps,* ed. cit., p. 136.

36 Jerzy Kosinski, *The Devil Tree,* ed. cit., p. 99.

37 Ibidem., p. 30.

38 Ibidem., p. 32.

39 Ibidem., p. 24.

40 Ibidem., p. 118.

41 Ibidem., p. 160.

42 Jerzy Kosinski, *Cockpit,* Bantam Books, Inc., New York, 1976, (quotations throughout are from this edition), p. 1.

43 «I read the suicide as, at least, a positive act» Norman Lavers, op. cit., p. 75.

44 Jerzy Kosinski, *Passion Play,* ed. cit., p. 165.

45 Jerzy Kosinski, *Pinball,* ed. cit., p. 6 and p. 138.

I have not as yet mentioned Kosinski's novel *Being There*[46]. This piece is not easily put together with the longer novels and yet the treatment of language is certainly consistent. It is seen quite clearly as an inadequate tool of communication in the scene where Chance is talking with the Russian ambassador[47]. Literal and figurative use of language can permit the flow of conversation, but if the speakers are unaware of the use to which language is being put, comprehension cannot ensue. The same happens when Chance talks with the President. Chace's opinions on the «bad season on The Street»[48] refer exclusively to his real experience of seasons in a garden. He fails to catch the President's allusion to the economic situation of the country. What is amazing, and a source of ironic comedy in the novel is the President's failure to recognize Chance's simplistic statements for what they are. Literal speech on one exclusive topic may yet make Chance President of the nation. This is a supreme instance of the manipulation through language of mankind and Kosinski is claiming that our lack of awareness exposes us to just this sort of manipulation at every moment of our lives.

Another example of the manipulative use of language is to be found in *Steps* when the protagonist tells his lover about a friend who designed concentration camps. He did it matter-of-factly; a job that had to be done, similar in a way to designing a maternity hospital, different only in that here more people came than left, whereas there, more leave than enter... The protagonist explains that the extermination of certain elements dangerous to humanity is necessary. Extermination is not, of course, homicide[49].

The conclusions are clear. Language is inadequate as a medium for communication and it can betray the speaker even when he feels safest. That this is expressed in Kosinski's novels by his protagonists, I have shown. To what extent can we consider this is also the author's own view of language? If simply, we identify Kosinski with his protagonists, the answer is obvious. However, are we justified in doing so? The temptation is great, mainly because the author himself has adopted such an ambivalent attitude to all queries related to the autobiographical elements of his novels. Though I do not feel that the episodes of his novels should be linked to actual experiences in his life, I do feel that autobiography plays a part in Kosinski's writing, Norman Lavers puts this extremely well when he states that in *Blind Date,* more than in the earlier novels, «the idea of the protagonist being a disguise for Kosinski, and the actions of the novel representing Kosinski's spiritual autobiography are much more clearly evident»[50].

I have insisted that Kosinski avoids the identification of the reader with the protagonist. This could be linked to a barely supressed desire to write autobiography, and also to a more conscious fear that the protagonists will betray his inner

[46] Jerzy Kosinski, *Being There,* Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York, 1971.

[47] Jerzy Kosinski, *Being There,* Bantam Books, Inc., New York, 1972, (quotations throughout are from this edition), p. 74.

[48] Ibidem., p. 45.

[49] Jerzy Kosinski, *Steps,* ed. cit., p. 63.

[50] Norman Lavers, op. cit., p. 116.

secrets. The protagonists' fear of language, and recognition that it is potentially treacherous is reflected in Kosinski's decision to be a photographer in his youth, as opposed to being a writer. He explains in an interview that this decision was taken consciously, since photography is a means of «visual expression» [51] which can avoid the traps set by politics. In other interviews, Kosinski states quite clearly that he finds both Polish and Russian, the languages of his childhood, inhibiting, whereas he feels «freer to express himself in English which he acquired through a deliberate effort as an adult [52].

It seems acceptable then, to affirm that Kosinski does fear language, that he does, at the very least, recognize its limitations as a medium for communication. He considers it to be an imperfect tool at best, and on occasion, the means of betrayal. In spite of this, Kosinski continues to write, using words to express himself. But he is careful with them. He does not play with words in his first novels, nor use them in complicated ways. His words never mean more than they appear to, and when, as in the later novels, he does attempt to make the language reflect the actions, this is done mainly by rhythm, by a patterning of intonation reminiscent more of music than of words.

Thus the sparse, direct style of Kosinski's novels can be accounted for not only by the possible lack of confidence in a newly acquired foreign language, but also by his fear of language.

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[51] Rocco Landesman, op. cit., p. 316.

[52] Gail Sheehy, op. cit., p. 56.