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The critical reception of Jerzy Kosiński's *The Painted Bird* in Poland and in the United States

The “right” to represent the Holocaust in a literary form has almost always been subject to essential restrictions: “After Auschwitz to write a poem is barbaric”, Theodor W. Adorno famously stated (VICE 2000 : 5). The sentence has functioned in Western culture as a form of warning sign, a reminder to writers that there exist certain ethical borderlines one must not trespass. To dispel any possible doubts here, we need to emphasize the fact that Adorno understood the word “poem” in much broader terms, namely as a synecdoche encompassing all possible forms of writing that display a tendency to aestheticize and, inevitably, vulgarize the subject matter. The gesture of the German critic is a message of twofold meaning: it can be perceived as a radicalism that verges upon censorship and aims at pushing the event of Nazi massive murder to the regions of cultural taboo, or as a conviction of a moral nature that, in this particular case, silence is a more fitting form of tribute to the victims than an imperfect verbal description of their suffering. The views of analogical provenance can be detected in Eli Wiesel’s assertion that under no circumstances can the Holocaust be the source of literary inspiration, the two concepts being a “contradiction in terms” (VICE 2000 : 5).

What is the origin of such an ultimate mistrust towards literature? Both Adorno and Wiesel, consciously or not, belong to the main current of orthodox Jewish thought which, forbidding any representation of the Sacred (God), emphasizes the fundamental weakness of human language in its mimetic potential. Not everything can be described in art, not every subject is possible to cope with by an author of fiction or poetry. Placing the Holocaust out of the reach of any descriptive strategies is tantamount to turning it into the Sacred.

If literature is too “weak” to face up to this subject matter, the most suitable form through which it can be represented is survivor testimony. Truly, such an opinion happens to be quite widespread and approved of. Providing unmediated access to the experience of those who managed to avoid extermination, and doing so by means of a language that allegedly does not aspire to generating “aesthetic” impressions can, at least theoretically, guarantee an “adequate” account. Or, if we reason more realistically, it can minimize the distortions and mimetic flaws that always occur in literary discourse. It is at this moment of our reflection, however, that an elemental doubt appears on the horizon. Is it really possible to pigeonhole the myriad fictions written about the Holocaust as abortive, pointless, or even sacrilegious? Can there really be any convincing justification for privileging one national group (i.e. the Jews) and one kind of language (i.e. a nonliterary one) to cultivate the memory of a certain historical event?

Firstly, defining a set of characteristics that would enable one to unequivocally draw a boundary between fiction and non-fiction still baffles many critics. Debate on the problem is endless and unlikely to bring a definite conclusion. Both fiction and non-fiction (autobiography is a good example) make use of narrative – a term associated with verbal discourses, not with the ‘flux of life’. Whatever we write, then, we subjectively impose a narrative coherence on the experience we want to convey to the reader; inescapably, we select and arrange the experience represented, and this is always a series of arbitrary decisions. Discourse and life as such are orders of a different kind; they do not converge easily. Secondly, being an eyewitness does not automatically mean that one is properly equipped to produce an adequate account of the event witnessed. This, of course, is possible, but elevating the known cases (Primo Levi, Jean Améry, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, to name a few) to the status of a general principle would be rather farfetched. On the other hand, the gift that is commonly referred to as “a way with words”, combined with vivid imagination, may together empower one to aptly name an experience that has been accessed only vicariously – but the end result in the form of discourse contains “the spirit of truth” distinctly felt by the reader. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, examined on its veristic (particularly: historical) correctness, turns out to be far from being veristically correct, but this does not mean it fails to present a convincing portrait of an individual entangled in mechanisms of power. By the same token, Ryszard Kapuściński’s *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat* (1978) never ceases to amaze us with its aptness in characterizing the way a historical figure of

an African tyrant is depicted there; this is so even despite the fact that, as was revealed some time after the publication of the book, the dramatization and fictionalization of history in *The Emperor* is something more than a mere “cosmetic” final touch applied by the author to polish the form of his writing. Supporting the “right” to write about the Holocaust in a literary form does not necessarily mean that we play down the exceptional value of survivor testimonies; such an attitude only pinpoints the fact that there are numerous, to a lesser or greater extent controversial, ways of approximating the essence/truth of this traumatic event.

The publication of Jerzy Kosiński's debut novel, *The Painted Bird* (1965), met with quite enthusiastic reactions from both American critics and American readers. The success was all the more spectacular that the author of the book had arrived in the United States only eight years earlier, having a poor command of the English language. *The Painted Bird* tells the story of an unnamed boy, perhaps a Gypsy or a Jew, who, as a result of having lost contact with his parents during the Second World War, wanders alone through East European villages, being constantly exposed to social deviance and the violence of the local peasants, as well as of German and Soviet soldiers. There are at least two reasons why the novel was (and still is) classified as scandalous: not only does it fictionalize the Holocaust (assuming the form of a picaresque tale and drawing heavily upon the aesthetics of surrealism), but it also drips brutality on a scale that shocks even the most understanding and tolerant readers. One cannot exclude the possibility that by resorting to drastic scenes, Kosiński hoped to galvanize the media, which obviously is *some* idea to make people aware of the existence of the book, even if it cannot safeguard its thus gained privileged status in the long term. What is more, *The Painted Bird* was published in 1965, at a time when the Holocaust was still a kind of rarity in American fiction – the first ‘significant’ novel touching upon the subject matter being Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* (1961). So, Kosiński was blazing a new thematic trail in the cultural context in which he was still a ‘guest’.

The initial reviews of *The Painted Bird* were informed by a distinct interpretative polarity – an inkling of the troubles the author was soon to experience on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. For example, while Charles Poore from *The New York Times* emphasized the universal and timeless value of the novel which, in his opinion, accurately depicts the process of gradual metamorphosis from an ultimately humiliated victim into an oppressor, Andrew Field from *The New York Herald Tribune* wrote about it as a semi-auto-

biographical tale, mercilessly portraying the Poles as eager accomplices of the Nazis in their acts of persecuting and exterminating Jews and Gypsies (SLOAN 1996 : 202-203). So appealing to American public opinion was the voice of the second reviewer that it was given national currency – Field's review was immediately reprinted by the *Washington Post*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *Chicago Sun-Times* and others. Peter Prescott from *Chicago News* went so far as to assert that Kosiński's prose was an American counterpart of Anne Frank's *Diary* (SLOAN 1996 : 203).

The publication of the book was also noticed by eminent figures of American culture. The playwright Arthur Miller, basking in the glory of his recent successes, sent Kosiński a letter in which he expressed his enthusiasm for *The Painted Bird*, a work convincingly representing Nazism as the major experience of the 20th century (SLOAN 1996 : 204). Miller underlined the symbolic dimension of the novel and its elliptic method of revealing the essence of an age that capitalized on racism and xenophobia. And that was something the young writer had been waiting for; understandably enough, fragments of the letter were used in the promotional campaign of the book, and even today they often feature as blurbs on its covers.

Elie Wiesel, a former prisoner in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps, accepted the invitation of the co-editor of *The New York Times Book Review* to submit his opinion on Kosiński's novel. In October 1965, a text entitled "*The Painted Bird*. Everybody's Victim" was brimming over with flatteries. Highly appreciating Kosiński's rendition of the Holocaust experience, Wiesel pigeonholed the book as a masterly testimony of the atrocious event: "Written with deep sincerity and sensitivity, this poignant first-person account transcends confession and attains in parts the haunting quality and the tone of a quasi-surrealistic tale" (WIESEL 1998 : 47). What is quite surprising, Wiesel perceived Kosiński as a chronicler rather than an author of fiction. It was the autobiographical character of the narrative that was for him decisive in making the book worth readers' attention; the fairy-tale quality and slightly surrealistic tinge were of secondary importance. Thus, Wiesel's interpretation followed in the footsteps of the previously mentioned mini-exegesis of Andrew Field: "[The chronicler's] purpose then is not to bring forth new grandiloquent ideas or to exercise death or guilt, but simply to bear witness in behalf of himself and of those whose voices can no longer be heard" (WIESEL 1998 : 47). What is more, Wiesel arbitrarily identifies the setting of the novel: "The hero of this novel was six when his agony began. Because of their prewar anti-Nazi activities,

his parents chose to send him away to relative safety in some remote Polish village for the duration of the German occupation” (WIESEL 1998 : 47). Geographical specification here is a malfeasance – the novel does not unequivocally state that the villages were populated by Poles; instead, it vaguely hints of some region in Eastern Europe (KOSIŃSKI 1996 : 31). Kosiński expressed his strong disapproval of the editors’ plans to promote his debut prose as a memoir of a nightmarish childhood and did not give his consent to placing a biographical note about the author on the cover (SLOAN 1998 : 203). He was upset by reviews in which the story of the boy was interpreted as an accusation of the Poles as notorious Nazi collaborators. Nevertheless, he did not refer critically to Wiesel’s (mis)reading.

The alleged document-like quality of Kosiński’s prose did not go unnoticed among the Polish community in the United States. On 7th November 1965 the correspondent for *Polska Agencja Prasowa* with the United Nations, Wiesław Górnicki, published a short review of the book in the Polish weekly *Ameryka-Echo*, claiming that Poles are depicted there as sexual deviants, and the only character gaining genuine liking is an SS officer. Upon the realization that Górnicki’s hostility stemmed from his personal grudge against Kosiński, the editorial team of the weekly hastened to run an apology and more favorable comments about the novel (SLOAN 1998 : 205). Emigrant circles in Great Britain and France did not remain indifferent, either. *Dziennik Polski* from London attacked the novel for its unjust treatment of Poles and its far too sympathetic words about the Soviet soldiers. The leading Polish-émigré literary-political journal *Kultura* from Paris reacted in a similar spirit: “Kosiński’s bent for pornography and unnatural bestiality cannot become a humanistic expression of the time of contempt. The story is set during World War II, at a time when Jews and Poles were being eliminated in a most cruel way. To judge the events from the book version would mean to admit that German barbarity was a mere trifle when compared with the deeds committed by peasants” (CZAJKOWSKA 1966 : 221). On the other hand, however, there appeared reviews in London and Rome displaying more balanced, even favorable, opinions about the novel (CHMIELOWIEC 1966 : 1; WIT 1968 : 216-217).

Reactions to Kosiński’s book in Poland appeared relatively quickly, in 1966, which is surprising, as *The Painted Bird* had not yet been translated into Polish and for the next twenty two years would be banned. The novel was simply unobtainable, and readers in Poland had no chance to verify the critical comments officially issued by the regime authorities. The first person

to raise a point on Kosiński's publication was again Górnicki. And again his review from *Polityka* aggressively lambasted the book as a "vicious libel on the Polish nation and the Polish state" (SLOAN 1998 : 216). The Warsaw weekly *Forum* struck an original note by juxtaposing Kosiński with Joseph Goebbels and U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy. The reviewer lengthily examined Kosiński's scandalous idea of depicting a German soldier as a compassionate and decent human being. And that, in his opinion, amounted to supporting the Nazi because the author clearly demonstrated that "they [the German soldiers] were simply the tamers of wild subhumans, the pacifiers of a primal and primitive jungle" (SLOAN 1998 : 216).

The 5th issue of the 1966 *Twórczość*, an opinion-forming monthly journal published in Poland, contained a short but nevertheless strikingly different reaction to *The Painted Bird*.

While reviewing the February edition of *Les Temps Modernes*, Jerzy Lisowski rather enthusiastically wrote about the fragments of Kosiński's novel published in the French monthly. The book is characterized by a "certain peculiarity of baroque visions", a bestseller in the United States steadily gaining in popularity in Europe, reports the well-known critic, and its author is, to put it mildly, a "writer through and through" (SLOAN 1966 : 153). In the 7th issue of *Twórczość* of the same year (i.e. only two months later) there appeared a telling correction of the previously printed warm words. Lisowski informed his readers that he had just had an opportunity to read the *whole* book and had changed his mind:

Well, recently I have received the volume and read it from cover to cover. It is simply, please excuse me for using such a gross word, commercial crap. The word is gross but not too gross, because one can only talk about the book using excremental categories. Its becoming a bestseller was possible only in such a place as America where one can batten on the ignorance, lack of refinement, and psychopathological decline of moral standards on the part of readers who have been raised on comic strips.

(LISOWSKI 1966 : 139 – my translation)

How to account for Lisowski's behavior? Admittedly, his initial, selective reading could have led to hasty judgments, and the fact that later on he familiarized himself with the whole book entitled him to reformulate his final assessment. However, it is quite meaningful that the overabundance of cruelty in Kosiński's novel was stressed in the first review; one cannot help getting the impression that the Polish critic resorted to self-criticism as

a result of the pressure of official propaganda. Moreover, the second review was something more than merely a criticism of a book, it was pregnant with contempt directed at the “psychopathological” American readers. Lisowski as if realized *post factum* that under no circumstances could literature produced within such a corrupted and low culture be of any significance to him or to anybody in Poland.

Baffled by such a ‘schizophrenic’ reception of his debut novel in his native land, Kosiński entered into correspondence with Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, at the time the editor-in-chief of *Twórczość*, demanding an explanation. In 1969, Iwaszkiewicz published a *Letter to Jerzy Kosiński* in which he explained his position on the issue: “It was not me who wrote about you in *Twórczość*, but being the editor of the journal I feel fully responsible for everything that appears on its pages. *Excremental crap* is, I agree, a rather strong opinion. Well, I cannot do anything else but to take this crap upon myself” (IWASZKIEWICZ 1969 : 163-164). The author of *Glory and Vainglory* went on to admit that he himself had demanded from Lisowski to change the position on Kosiński’s book. Iwaszkiewicz’s *Letter* has numerous ironic undertones, as if turning a blind eye to the addressee’s unwise excesses. Today such a form of literary criticism appears utterly inept, and this is so not only because both Lisowski and Iwaszkiewicz condemned the book, but because their judgments were not strengthened by a matter-of-fact analysis. What is even worse, they made use of *excremental* rhetoric in a prestigious journal that purported to shape and refine Polish literary tastes.

The reactions to *The Painted Bird* in the United States and in Poland initially constituted two separate ‘currents’ of opinions, which later began to merge and follow the same direction. Intended as – and, at least officially, advertised as – literary fiction, the novel develops a certain method of representing historical reality; it touches on problems that are painful, difficult, and controversial, but does so by deliberately taking a circuitous path. Although authorial motive is always worth considering prior to passing a verdict on the value of a given literary text, in this case more often than not the critics took the path of least resistance – to the point, let us add, of being biased. In the fragments of reviews cited above we can notice an irresistible proclivity towards re-classifying the genre of the book either into autobiography or historical document.

There were at least two reasons for doing so. In America it was done to highlight another written proof for the prevalent stereotype of Poles as a nation discriminating against the Jews, or, perhaps, to demonstrate that

Kosiński's having the status of survivor was a sufficient justification for accepting his writing about the Holocaust as by no means misrepresenting the historical events. His testimony was obviously embroidered by the addition of 'literary' elements, but the additive of fiction was negligible. Thus, the author did not violate the 'commandments' formulated by Adorno or Wiesel. As an example of the most representative American interpretations of Kosiński's novel, we may quote a fragment of Robert Coles's review published in 1967:

The sad facts of history make Hitler and Stalin mere successors to a long line of tyrants and exploiters whose benighted rule has kept countries like Poland incredibly backward for centuries. In 1782, a French nobleman and priest, Hubert Vautrin, came back to Lorraine after five years in Poland and Lithuania, full of somber and disheartening experiences and observations. In 1807, he published *L'Observateur en Pologne*, a book very much like de Tocqueville's *Democratie en Amérique*. Much of what the boy in *The Painted Bird* comes to experience is described by Vautrin: the coarse, violent men; the fearful, superstitious women; the extreme poverty, the extreme ignorance, the extreme suspiciousness; and side by side, the isolated centres of wealth and privilege shared by the nobility and, of all people, the bishops of the Church. (...) It is safe to say that the Eastern Europe of *The Painted Bird* would not surprise Vautrin."

(COLES 1967 : 53)

Poles are seen by Coles as constitutionally corrupted, a wild and primitive nation; their country as a squalid backwater of European civilization. And Kosiński is simply one of numerous writers to document this.

In Poland the alleged autobiographical character of *The Painted Bird* was perceived as the coldly calculated strategy of a cynical man who advertised his confabulations under the aegis of a memoir in order to achieve commercial success and, at the same time, to humiliate his native land. What is more, as a recognized artist of Polish origin, Kosiński was simply a *problem* for the communistic regime in the 1960s. The Polish reception of his novel tended either to hint at the presence of some kind of conspiracy aiming at the reputation of the People's Republic of Poland, or to emphasize the author's ingratitude towards the Poles as well as his greed for money.

Kosiński himself, it has to be noted, was by no means an 'angelic' figure; his mythomania and unquenchable thirst to be at the centre of attention are legendary. Compulsive lying, an urge to shock those who happened to be around him at a given moment, and the habit of putting on various masks

were his staple repertoire in creating the image of an outrageous individual. As demonstrated in Joanna Siedlecka's *Czarny ptasior* (1994) and James Park Sloan's *Jerzy Kosinski – Biography* (1996), Kosiński invented the story of a 'small Jurek' who became separated from his parents during World War II; he also lied, claiming that as a result of his traumatic experiences in Nazi occupied Poland he became mute. Nevertheless, one has to be careful while trying to draw any definite conclusions from knowledge of such behavior. Siedlecka and Sloan did impressive work talking to people who knew the Kosiński family and to those who provided them shelter and assistance in the 1940s. On no account can the reliability of the collected evidence be questioned. Yet what raises doubts is the rather obsessive tendency of both authors to trace and identify exact parallels between the supposedly true reports of what 'small Jurek' witnessed and experienced and what Jerzy Kosiński, an American writer of fiction, included in his book. The man lied – this can be proved; but is it possible to prove that the literature created by him lies as well? How, if at all, can literature 'lie'?

Kosiński did his best to shape the reception of *The Painted Bird* and that is why in 1965 he wrote an essay "Notes of the Author on *The Painted Bird*", printed at his own expense and routinely sent to all potential reviewers of the novel. He did not intend the book to display strong claims to factual accuracy, and he did so, in all probability, to avoid theoretically possible lawsuits for slander if his brutal portrayal of peasantry should be associated with the people he knew (and who, in turn, knew him) in Poland. Emphasizing the novel's fictionality, he states that it "could be the author's vision of himself as a child, a *vision*, not an examination, or a revisitation of the childhood," and, more importantly, that "[t]he locale and the setting are likewise metaphorical" (KOSIŃSKI 1995 : 207). The essay's labored discourse, drawing upon the psychoanalytical theories of C.G. Jung, somewhat situates Kosiński as a 'philosophical' novelist in the tradition of Gombrowicz or Sartre. Granted, it offers a rather sophisticated justification of his work and can be treated as a preventive measure against any would-be accusations of falsifying the facts about Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust years; but it is also an attempt at demarcating the field of free artistic expression. And although writers cannot claim the privilege to have the last word on their books, their voices should not be ignored.

Kosiński's artistic method is grounded in his fundamental recognition that there exists an unbridgeable gulf between the real and the represented, and that a close correspondence (in a veristic sense) between the

two domains is unattainable. The real object of art is the subjective reality of the artist. Adequate description of this subjective reality is feasible only by resorting to the language of symbols. So, from the authorial perspective, *The Painted Bird* defies all the interpretations informed by a provisionally political angle. For Maria Janion, the novel is a ‘symbolic and mythical’ work; and its “deepest meanings should not be linked with any biographical facts” (JANION 2007 : 213).

In one of the key fragments of Kosiński’s cruel tale, the boy-protagonist witnesses an exceptionally poignant ‘ritual.’ His peasant ‘guardian’, Lekh, takes out a previously caught wild bird from a cage, hands it in to the boy and paints its wings, head, and breast in various gaudy colors. The imprisoned animal begins to twitter desperately, attracting the attention of a flock of the same species. Now the setting is ready for a spectacle:

When a sufficient number of birds gathered above our heads, Lekh would give me a sign to release the prisoner. It would soar, happy and free, a spot of rainbow against the backdrop of clouds, and then plunge into the waiting brown flock. For an instant the birds were confounded. The painted bird circled from one end of the flock to the other, vainly trying to convince its kin that it was one of them. But, dazzled by its brilliant colors, they flew around it unconvinced. The painted bird would be forced farther and farther away as it zealously tried to enter the ranks of the flock. We saw soon afterwards how one bird after another would peel off in a fierce attack. Shortly the many-hued shape lost its place in the sky and dropped to the ground. When we finally found the painted bird it was usually dead. Lekh keenly examined the number of blows which the bird had received. Blood seeped through its colored wings, diluting the paint and soiling Lekh’s hands.

(KOSIŃSKI 1996 : 82-83)

This is a major theme of Kosiński’s novel: the exploration of the tension between the individual and the collective. The world depicted is full of terror, and acts of violence are not the exception but the rule. The governing metaphor illustrates the all-too-familiar mechanism of eliminating those who for some reason do not fit in.

Ironically, the stigma of being “painted” affected the book itself. In Poland, it was almost univocally condemned in the 1960s; the translation of Tomasz Mirkowicz triggered its spectacular – albeit short-lasting – career in the late 1980s and early 1990s; and with the publication of Siedlecka’s and Sloan’s revelations about the author’s lies, it again started receiving bad press. In the USA it has consistently been read as a form of autobiography and, at

the same time, as another written account pointing at Polish anti-Semitism. Since its publication *The Painted Bird* has been differently 'painted' by each generation of readers; it has been 'used' for different ideological purposes. Kosiński's apt metaphor has acquired an unexpected meaning.

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