

“KOSINSKI’S *THE PAINTED BIRD*”

A.E.M. BAUMANN

– PAGE 1 –

Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*

A.E.M. Baumann

© 2014

As is often the case, happenstance led me to read Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*: the timing of seeing it on some “top-50” variety lists followed by watching over an FB discussion on the book. I have to say I very much enjoyed it, plowing through it in but four days (which is quick for me, considering my fiction reading usually gathers the least attention). It is a *literary* work, one that works not in the mechanical ticking of standard narrative but within the symbolic realm of myth. I would not raise it to the highest level of literature, but I would solidly put it on the second tier. That probably means nothing to anyone but me, so let me say instead that I would love to teach the book, and I am very discriminatory about the books that I might bring into a classroom. I do not care about a work’s popularity or social importance: I care only for its merits as a work of literature, as an attempt at art.

The syntax is mostly direct, generally avoiding complexity in its semantic style. Where the work rises above the norm is in how it drifts from narrative to exposition without ever losing the framework of being within the mind of the child; in how the book sets itself within a mythic world and sustains it through the whole of the book, if the reader at all participates; in how in its depictions of violence and sex it never falls into monotony or banality; and in its philosophical aspects it never devolves into ideology. Plus, its primary theme – that of the individual – is one inevitably attractive to me. The book is unified, envisioned, and well executed. On the

slip cover of my edition (the second) there’s quips by Arthur Miller, Luis Buñuel, and Anaïs Nin. Let me offer the third:

. . . by the great beauty of its style it lifts the entire experience to the philosophic, mythological realms of knowledge.

I stand with that description.

What I want to do below is simply talk about the book, primarily as responses the primary themes you see as regards the book: the violence, the sex, its relationship to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust and such. I’ve spent a bit of time just floating about the web, looking at reviews and commentaries, old and new. If there is one dominating theme it is how much I have found that seems to entirely misread the book; indeed, how often you see comments on the book that seem far more grounded in the history of the book rather than the book itself: that is, a history centered on its being declared a Holocaust text by the likes of Elie Wiesel.

That reading I wholly reject.

The organization is a bit loose because the subjects overlap, and I am not going to try to avoid that overlapping.

The violence and sex:

From observed experience, I believe it a safe presumption that if a person had never read a work like *The Painted Bird*, in terms of its violence and sex, or even if that person were unfamiliar with works written in the episodic nature of *The Painted Bird*, it would be very easy for ever-present and extreme violence and sex to dominate that person’s reading of the text, to get in the way of the reception of the text as a whole. Because of the episodic nature, leaving out of the narration the travels of the boy between villages, the chapters seem written for the primary purpose of the depictions of violence and sex. A chapter ends with the boy – he has no name – escaping one situation; the next chapter begins and he is already in a new one; the chapter establishes the new realm, one which is

often has a philosophic current, then quickly escalates to the climax of the episode, usually a brutal one.

That description is a touch white-walling, but it greatly speaks the design of the book. The boy is mostly spectator (if often, and by necessity, spectator-victim) and interpreter of the world through which he passes. There is no point for any narration of travel from one place to the next; there is no purpose to any story development outside that of the context of the violence and sex; because it is through the violence and sex that Kosinski paints his grand dilemma.

Though, there is a third area to which the book gives time and attention, that which gives the violence and sex ideational depth: spirituality, the various philosophies of the people the boy meets, the philosophies of the individual’s nature in the world that govern the boy’s own, changing interpretations of the world. It is here that the violence and sex come to purpose: for *The Painted Bird* is not historical, is not ethnographic, even though it does have an historical setting, and it is rich in ethnographic detail. *The Painted Bird* is mythic. It is not historical because that verifiability of any of the events in the book is irrelevant to the ideational body of the book except as aids to the greater development. It is not ethnographic in that the purpose of the book is not to describe cultures (or subcultures) of the world of the peasants, except in how they are used to the greater, philosophical explorations. Such is the effect of how the violence and sex is used within the book: as the book works not in the historical but in the mythic, as the contexts of the violence maintain an ideational constancy throughout the book, the “facts” of the various peasant, German, Russian, and urban-Polish cultures falls to the side. In myth, the factual detail is not important. What is important is the general ideation. While factually *The Painted Bird* may occur during the German occupation of Poland in WWII, its mythic modality lies within the eternal now.

Now, that said, there is also a far more simpler explanation for the violence and sex: it was Kosinski’s chosen medium, just as, say, Stanislaw Lem’s chosen medium was space travel, and Jane Austen’s

was romantic relationships. There is no literary value judgment that can be made upon such a decision except in how that medium is put to use within the work as a whole. (Wilde comes to mind, here.) For de Sade, also, sex and violence was the chosen ideational medium; but to say Sade’s books are “about” sex or violence is to misunderstand the books, for the sex and violence is but the medium through which Sade created his discourse on society and liberty. So also with Kosinski. The violence and sex is his chosen medium; but, it is put to use to create the continuity between the episodes and to establish the constant that is to be found in every encountered culture/community. For the central theme of *The Painted Bird* is that pointed at by the title: the relationship between the individual and cultural collective. Through the continuity and the inherent absurdity created through the degree of violence (no child could have survived such, not as a matter of will but as a matter of biology), through the resulting transference of the tale from the historical to the mythic, the book becomes not a critique of any one historical culture, but of cultures and communities in general.

The ethnographic aspects:

By happenstance I started reading *The Painted Bird* but a couple of days after having begun reading Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s *Jasmin’s Witch*, an ethnographic and historical examination of the subject of an early nineteenth century poem by Jacques Jasmin, *Françouneto*. Jasmin constructed his poem out of the oral traditions surrounding the tale of the title witch. Ladurie’s book offers a prose translation of the poem, and argues how the poem is not crafted of fiction but is anchored both in the cultural traditions of witchcraft and in the history of the region. (Indeed, Ladurie is able to identify the historical person behind the oral tales that were redacted into *Françouneto*.)

The value of the coincidence appeared while reading in *The Painted Bird* of the philosophy of Olga, a peasant witch and second

caretaker of the boy:

She called me the Black One. From her I learned for the first time that I was possessed by an evil spirit, which crouched in me like a mole in a deep burrow, and of whose presence I was unaware. Such a darkling as I, possessed of this evil spirit, could be recognized by his bewitched black eyes which did not blink when they gazed at bright clear eyes. Hence, Olga declared, I could stare at other people and unknowingly cast a spell over them. (20)

(Page numbers are from the Houghton Mifflin, 1976 2d edition.) It describes the same notion of unwitting and unwilling possession that underlay some of the witchcraft traditions of southern France (and the story of Françoneto) dating back even to the fourteenth century.

To what result on me as a reader?

The peasant beliefs as presented in *The Painted Bird* is very recognizable within old world, European beliefs. As a matter of technique, with the peasant beliefs being so anchored within old world traditions, there is created within the narrative an ideational unity (in the sense of the classic unities): the boy was believably traveling through villages whose beliefs presented a systematic understanding of the world. As such, the books lacked that artificiality of fancy found in works where such beliefs – especially such as the various medical cures – are arbitrarily made up by the author.

Building upon that, there is created in the book a loose progression (i.e., narrative progression, removing from the idea any judgment of cultural improvement). The boy begins his journeys in villages wholly defined by old world belief systems. The opening chapters could be transferred almost untouched into a book that occurred in medieval Europe. If there is interaction between the villages and 1940s technology, it has no real influence upon the villages’ cultural beliefs. As the chapters progress, there slowly appears in the narrative the Catholic church, elements of modern

technology, the German state and army, and Russian communism. Though, never in such a way that such things were not natural to the world of the observing boy, who, it must be remembered, begins the tale in twentieth-century, industrial Polish city. That is to say, never is there the sense that some new element “invades” the world. All is always present within the text; what matters to the reading is not the narrative factuality of any element but how those element – old world beliefs, Catholic catechism, German industry, Russian communism – is understood within the world-view of the various people the boy encounters and then in turn by the boy himself. (Here we see one of the advantages of the protagonist being a child.) The book, as such, escapes history and moves into the mythic, into a realm where there is no clash between railways and fourteenth-century, associative “science.” What “progression” there is as the story moves from the closed realm of Marta’s hut to the far wider realm of the Russian soldiers is seen primarily in the change of world-views: the variations of old world beliefs, Catholic passivity, German action, and the Russian collective.

The effect within the book of this continuity between worlds and beliefs works not only on the grand scale but also to the specific. For example, when we meet Lekh the bird catcher, and read of the demise of the bird painted by Lekh, the whole of the scene is likewise brought into the mythic unity of the book. The scene is not an artificially inserted metaphor: it presents an idea already inherent to the world-systems of the Polish peasants, inherent to their belief systems: and as will be seen, inherent to all cultures, even to the “equality” within the new, Russian state. As such, the antagonism between the individual and culture that is the center of *The Painted Bird* is from the start inherent to the whole of the world through which the boy passes. In turn, through that unity, that antagonism is brought out of the historical and into the mythic.

Is *The Painted Bird* a critique of peasant life in Poland?

My answer is no, and from what I have read about Kosinski I do

“KOSINSKI’S *THE PAINTED BIRD*”

A.E.M. BAUMANN

– PAGE 7 –

not believe he himself intended it to be such. Can condemnation be found by a reader? Yes. The boy begins his journey in villages that are not too different from what one might expect to find in medieval Poland. (“Expect,” there, being the characterizing word.) The far majority of the violence and perversion is enacted by peasants upon peasants, often seen as righteous or at least not out of the ordinary by the peasant community. There are also aspects of the book that can be read as showing a condemnation of peasant culture in favor of “modern” culture. For example, the boy is taken out of an industrial city at the beginning of the story and placed within peasant culture, and at the end he finally escapes the “world” into which he was placed when he finds his voice after answering a telephone – a technology that does not exist in the book until that point. By the basic framework it might be argued that what the boy escapes is peasant culture. Other examples can be had, like that of the story of Laba, the peasant who disappeared for a year and returned with a chest full of contemporary, upper class clothes.

Though, any such argument survives only through taking that element of the book out of the context of the whole of the book. The old world and the new world are the same mythic realm within *The Painted Bird*. That the boy slowly moves from a “past” of old world Poland into a “present” of Russian occupation is not movement *out* of one world into another, but movement through various forms of the same, basic situation: the us-not-them that defines and the violence hidden within every cultural unity. The positively viewed characters in the book are not merely characters but are identified as isolated or self-isolating individuals, be they Leck and Stupid Ludmila, the Catholic priests, the SS officer, or Mitka the Cuckoo (who understands the difference between private, spiritual individualism and the public individuality of the painted bird). They are all the same, and to a great extent the same as the boy, who is through the book caught in a struggling to maintain psychic individuality the threat of the cultural mass: the primary conflict of the book is the boy learning to survive the death that inevitably comes to painted birds. What differentiates the various

individuals are their perceived belief systems: the magic world of Olga, the nature oriented world of Lekh, the power of the SS officer, and finally the stark individualism of Mitka, the Russian sniper.

A key moment in how all cultures become one within *The Painted Bird* is when Mitka is describing the new Russian society to the boy. While he extols the praises of the new society, where everyone is equal, it is still a society where power within the culture is maintained through the painting of others to their demise. Indeed, the identity of modality, even in the attempt-in-narrative at distinction, is maintained explicitly:

Soldiers occasionally sneaked out of the camp and visited the villages to continue trade with the farmers and meet village girls. The command of the regiment did its best to prevent such planned secret contacts with the population. The political officers, the battalion commanders, and even the divisional newsheets warned the soldiers against such individual escapades. They pointed out that some of the wealthier farmers were under the influence of the nationalistic partisans who roamed the forests in an attempt to slow down the victorious march of the Soviet Army and to prevent the approaching triumph of a *government of workers and peasants*. (196-97, my emphasis)

What is new is but the same.

Is *the Painted Bird* a book about Nazism?

The review of *The Painted Bird* in *Commentary* (Neil Compton, “Dream of Violence,” June 1, 1966; read online) speaks such a reading:

At the end of the book, he has learned to distinguish between the mindless, instinctive cruelty of the peasants, and the infinitely more hateful ideological

and technological savagery of the Nazis. Already feeling trapped in the collective conformity of postwar Poland, he is preparing a new flight across the ocean to a freer world in which he may again attempt to become himself.

Under examination, that reading is recognized as manufactured. Within the book peasant culture and Nazi culture are distinguished mostly in the spatial aspect of that the peasants are the here and now of a community and the Germans are always and ambiguously outside. The strongest evidence that might be used for a reading like the above is found the section where the boy perceives that the power embodied in the individuality of the SS officer – and by extension the Germans as a whole – lies in that he perceives them to have willingly embraced the profound Evil of devils of the night. But to say that at this point the boy sees the Germans as an “infinitely more hateful technological savagery” is, again, to pull the moment out of context. For at the point, the boy is *praising* the Germans over the peasants for having *made a choice*, for being *active*:

In a sense I had already been recruited by the powers of Evil and had made a pact with them.

“In a sense,” that is, because he has already been identified, as by Olga, as being possessed without his knowledge or intent.

What I needed now was their assistance for spreading evil. After all, I was still very young; the Evil Ones had reason to believe that I had a future to give to them, that eventually my hatred and appetite for evil would grow like a noxious weed, spreading its seed over many fields.

I felt stronger and more confident. *The time of passivity was over*; the belief in good, the power of prayer, altars, priests, and God had deprived me of my speech. (154, emphasis mine)

He had already tried the Catholic path – the passive path of appealing to God – of reciting prayers so as to gain indulgences: it garnered him nothing. He loses his speech outside a church, when

he is condemned by the peasants and thrown into a cess pool after dropping the missal during a mass. He drops the missal because he is too weak to carry it; too weak because of the tortures of the man who was his current guardian, a man chosen by the priest, the priest is to all appearances willfully blind the sufferings and physical well-being of the boy. So of course, when the Catholic God and church have proven useless, he turns to a philosophy of the opposite: though, not simply the switch from good to evil; he is abandoning a church that to all appearances refuses to act and choosing a path that both asks and offers *action*.

Only those with a sufficiently powerful passion for hatred, greed, revenge or torture to obtain some objective seemed to make a good bargain with the powers of Evil. *Others, confused, uncertain of their aim, lost between curses and prayers, the tavern and the church, struggled through life alone, without help from either God or the Devil.* (152, emphasis mine)

What is developing in the boy is not an proclivity for evil, but a recognition of the power of individuality, a philosophy that permits and praises the power of the one against the blind, chaotic violence of the mass. More on this below.

The Painted Bird is no more a book about Nazism than it is a book about Polish peasants. The German soldiers (not the two officers) treat the boy no differently than to do the peasants. The Russian army, while presented as more civilized or at least less violent – which is appropriate in that they are the liberating army – are yet identified as peasants through their ideology as presented by Mitka and Gavril and the soldiers’ desire to socialize with the local peasants. As said above, every culture in *The Painted Bird*, every community, is but a variation on the same basic situation. Perhaps the only difference between the Germans/Russians and the peasants is that with the latter the painted birds – the German officers and Mitka the war hero – appear to the boy as powerful as opposed to being outcasts. It is in searching for a reason why the SS Officer seemed so individual and yet powerful (and it is to note that the SS

Officer does not participate in the brutality exhibited by the German soldiers) that the boy comes upon the theory of embracing the actions of evil. It is a conclusion set up by the failures of the passive church, not one that creates an historical critique of Nazism.

So, it is a wholly false and forced reading to say that *The Painted Bird* is a *targeted* critique of Nazism. False, because if *The Painted Bird* is a directed critique of anything, it is far more a critique of the Catholic church than of the Nazi state.

What about the Afterward that appears in the second edition?

The afterward is for me of limited use toward the understanding the *The Painted Bird*. That is because the afterward is not so much about the book as it is about the response to the book and the discourse that surrounded the book ten years after its publication. There are but a couple of moments in the afterward that I myself would consider safe to use in relation to the book itself, and those because the ideas presented arose for me in the book independently of the reading of the Afterward. (To say, though the “Afterward” is placed before the text proper in my edition, I did not read it – except for a small portion I read online [i.e., the part about Kosinski’s encounter in his apartment with the two Poles] – until after I had finished the book.) Those moments:

I hoped the confrontation between the defenseless individual and overpowering society, between the child and war, would represent the essential anti-human condition. (xii)

I decided I too would set my work in a mythic domain, in the timeless fictive present, unrestrained by geography or history. (xiii)

Even now, ten years after *The Painted Bird*’s publication, citizens of my former country, where the novel remains banned, still accuse me of

treachery, tragically unaware that by consciously deceiving them, the government continues to feed their prejudices, rendering them victims of the same forces from which my protagonist, the boy, so narrowly escaped. (xix)

They wanted to cast me in the role of spokesman for my generation, especially for those who had survived the war; but for me survival was an individual action that earned the survivor the right to speak only for himself. (xiii)

I normally care little about the author of a work themselves in relation to the work (outside of things like what the author might have been studying at the time and other such points of information). Though, in this case, there might be some value to a moment on Kosinski, as much of the reputation of *The Painted Bird* is based on the book’s reception and not on the book itself.

Kosinski was a complex individual to be sure, and very possibly suffered from some form of mild mental disorder. (In flipping about online I read mention of the possibility of borderline personality disorder, which may fit.) He was very much a performer, as evidenced in the fictional accounts of his life that he presented to those around him. As such – and you have to keep in mind this is a fluid response from gliding around the web – it would not at all surprise me if Kosinski, in the aftermath of the publication of *The Painted Bird*, was as much if not more *captured* by the fame and notoriety – and the discourse – as he was active participant in or controller thereof. As such, I believe it is safest to recognize Kosinski’s participation in the status of *The Painted Bird* as a Holocaust text as two-sided, if not internally conflicted: Kosinski was willing to accept the benefits of the discourse, but at the same rejected much of the basis of that discourse. Thus the moments from the *Afterward*, above, particularly that last, which I offer again, a moment (like the others, above) that is about the book but is also corrective to certain readings of the book.

They wanted to cast me in the role of spokesman for my generation, especially for those who had survived the war; but for me survival was an individual action that earned the survivor the right to speak only for himself. (xiii)

When the boy is being returned to his home city by the Russian soldiers, he sees survivors of the camps:

Here and there nurses directed emaciated people in striped clothes; the soldiers looked at them in sudden silence – those were the people saved from the furnaces who were returning to life from the concentration camps.

I clutched Yury’s hand and looked into the gray faces of these people, with their feverishly burning eyes shining like pieces of broken glass in the ashes of a dying fire. (209)

Three things. One, how it echoes – or, considering the times of writing, prescients – the idea above, that survival is an *individual* event, not a cultural event. Two, its relation to this moment, concerning the boy’s existence in the school/orphanage while his parents were being sought, a situation as violent as that of the peasant villages; though also a situation in inverse to that of the villages, as there there was no community, there was only individuals forced to live together. The moment describes how the boy no longer backed down from threats and fights, but faced them:

But the truth was that I could not run away even when I wanted to. [. . .] The memory of all my successful escapes did not seem to help much. A mysterious mechanism bound me to the ground. I would stop and wait for my assailants.

All the time I thought of Mitka’s teachings: a man should never let himself be mistreated, for he would then lose his self-respect and his life would become meaningless. What would preserve his self-respect and determine his worth was his ability to

take revenge on those who wronged him.

[. . .] Only the conviction that one was as strong as the enemy and that one could pay him back double, enabled people to survive, Mitka said. (213-14)

A Holocaust reading might be one that says that when the boy “clutched Yuri’s hand” at the sight of the camp survivors, he was reacting in horror to the atrocities of the Nazis. But, again, that is taking the moment out of context and forcing a reading upon it. For one, the book to that point has been a litany of horrors both viewed by and visited upon the boy. There is no reason to suppose that seeing another victim is somehow something new or beyond what has already filled the book. This goes to the effect of the episodic, concentrated nature of the narrative. By this point, violence is violence is violence. But it also ignores that to which the boy is reacting, and the world-view through which he is interpreting what he sees. The focus of the description, the reason the boy clutches the hand of the soldier, is because he sees the “feverishly burning eyes shining like pieces of broken glass in the ashes of a dying fire.” And what is the world view through which that is interpreted? Again:

Only the conviction that one was as strong as the enemy and that one could pay him back double, enabled people to survive, Mitka said.

He clutches the soldiers hand in response to strength of the will to vengeance he sees glowing in the dying fires of the grey faces. The book emphasizes: survival is an *individual* event. It is, as was seen in the story of Mitka, a *private* affair. But is this commentary on this *historical* reality of the camp survivors? Again, *no*. This is the world as seen and interpreted through the eyes of the boy, as guided by the world-view of the boy at that time of the book: that is, a world-view of strength based on vengeance. It is no surprise, then, that the boy survives the trials of the violence that defines the school community by way of the strength of standing his ground. Just as he tried Catholic passivity, old world magic, and even taste-tested

the embracing of evil, now he tries survival through inward strength.

Though, also, it should thus be no surprise that this world-view, too, is abandoned when the boy answers the phone, regains his voice, and finally climbs out of the belly of the whale.

Three: But, then, none of this should be surprising since the primary theme of the book is that of the inherent antagonism between culture and the individual.

Wait, did you just say “belly of the whale”?

Yes. For I hold that *The Painted Bird* can be read in line with the mythic journey of the hero as described by Joseph Campbell, with the psychic Night Sea Crossing as described by Carl Jung. If I were to teach this book, this would be the avenue I would take, not only in theme but in style construction. But I here leave that discussion at but that comment, and at what is and has been said to that end in passing.

What of the relationship between *The Painted Bird* and Holocaust literature?

This comes from *The Holocaust Industry* by Norman G. Finkelstein, a critical look at the whole of Holocaust discourse. (This is from online reading; I am not myself familiar with the book as a whole.)

In the *New York Time Book Review*, Elie Wiesel acclaimed *The Painted Bird* as “one of the best” indictments of the Nazi era, “written with deep sincerity and sensitivity.” Cynthia Ozick later gushed that she “immediately” recognized Kosinski’s authenticity as “a Jewish survivor and witness to the Holocaust.” Long after Kosinski was exposed as a consummate literary hoaxer, Wiesel continued to heap encomiums on his “remarkable body of work.”

The Painted Bird became a basic Holocaust text. It was a best-seller and award-winner, translated into numerous languages, and required reading in high school and college classes. Doing the Holocaust circuit, Kosinski dubbed himself a “cut-rate Elie Wiesel.” (Those unable to afford Wiesel’s speaking fee – “silence” doesn’t come cheap – turned to him.) (56)

Now, I do not agree with all the points of Finkelstein’s short discussion on *The Painted Bird*: the short discussion is centered on the work as “the first major Holocaust hoax.” The issue should be obvious: how can it be a Holocaust *hoax* if it is not specifically about the Holocaust? Nor do I agree that the book is an indictment of the Nazi era, as neither is the book specifically about Nazism. Now, I admit my research is unfortunately limited to that which I am finding online. But in that research it seems a rather obvious current that there was great energy being spent in labeling *The Painted Bird* as a Holocaust book, a substantial amount of energy in turning it into an indictment of Nazism; and that those energies came not from Kosinski but from other persons, like Wiesel. How can *The Painted Bird* be a Holocaust hoax if it was never claimed to be about the Holocaust, if, indeed, the Holocaust is but a trivial part of the book.

Here is where Kosinski’s false claims as to his experiences during the war come in. Yes, Kosinski made claims that the book was based on actual experiences. No, Kosinski was not turned into a wandering orphan during the war. However, the ethnographic detail in the book does speak some familiarity with old world belief. As well, the war itself – as a historical event – plays a minor role in the book: it is but backdrop to the mythic realm through which boy wanders. Again, the far majority of the violence and perversity in the book is perpetrated and worked *by peasants*. If you removed all the peasant oriented violence from the book – and it would be hard to keep the violence of the German soldiers since the distinction made between the soldiers and the officers establishes the soldiers

as but another kind of peasantry – there would be very little violence in the book at all. Which is a nonsense argument to be sure, but revealing the nonsensical result it reveals also the essentiality of the connection between the violence *and the peasants*; in turn, then, through the literary transference of the book from the historic to the mythic/philosophical, the mythic style of the book, we see the essential next step, the *removal of the connection* between the violence and the peasants as a historical or ethnographically identifiable group. In the end, the autobiographic question becomes irrelevant to the final nature of the book as written. So also, though, does the historical. If there was a “hoax” being operated as regards *The Painted Bird*, it was being operated not by Kosinski but by Wiesel and those other who would have *The Painted Bird* be a Holocaust document – which is explicitly to say to have *The Painted Bird* be intentionally, directly, *exclusively*, a Holocaust text, exclusively about the Jewish experience during the war.

Stepping away from the argument through modality, the idea cannot be supported by the internal elements of the book itself if any attention is given. Let me offer some pieces of evidence. First, both the Germans and the Jews play only a trivial role in the book. When the Jews do appear, they do appear (that is, up until the boy’s return to his home city), it is more in the nature of that “other world,” that world beyond the small limits of the peasant community, which not so much borders upon but exists “beyond the mountains,” as it were. At first, the Germans and the war – indeed, it cannot be beyond bounds to say the twentieth century – exists primarily as but outposts outside the realm of the peasant village or railroad lines passing nearby. In terms of the mythic – and even the stylistic mechanisms of fantasy and science fiction apply here – the outposts are alien places set beyond the known world, places to which the villagers must travel so as to encounter. The rail lines are like alien technology, beyond the knowledge of the peasant world, strange in their being and in their leading out of and leading forward to the unknown outside. They also have a tinge of that strangeness one finds in horror: the path that comes out of the

mists and leads back into the mists. They are of the world, but it is a world beyond village.

In truth, the only “German” soldiers that have more than a passing action with a village are the Kalmuks, who are really peasants in German uniforms, who fall upon villages with the same peasant-sourced violence the boy has witnessed time and again through the book.

Indeed the two encounters with Germans mostly go against the grain of what would be found within a genre of Holocaust books. In each encounter, while the boy may be threatened or physically abused by German soldiers (that is, more undifferentiable peasants, if peasants from the land beyond the mists), he is rescued by German officers and released by those officers back into the world. In the first, the officer pretends to be taking the boy into the woods so as to shoot him and burn his body, but releases him when out of view. (To note, the officer fakes burning a body after the boy is gone, an act that has a curious parallel to the assassination of the peasants by Mitka, an act of individuality that is kept secret from the members of the community.) In the second instance, the scene is of an SS officer releasing the boy – a dark-haired, dark-skinned boy in a land of light-haired, light-skinned people – into the care of a *Catholic* priest: it is a very non-Holocaust scene, if not one explicitly contrary to core, Holocaust imagery, which seeks always to “indict” the Nazi army – and particularly the SS – as an homogenous group: something difficult to do with an emblem of Holocaust is acting completely out of character, is acting *like an individual*. Of course, the core of *The Painted Bird* is the indictment of “the group” in the abstract.

I cannot help but bring up here the Ralph Fiennes character in *Schindler’s List*, which is in my experience typical of Holocaust texts. It is used to create an moral indictment of a group through the psychotic actions of an individual. It is the opposite of the individual as portrayed in *The Painted Bird*: that of a person in engagement with the world on a mythic/philosophical level, a person who has risen above the ignorance and ignobility of community. *12 Years a*

Slave operates through the same thematics. I ask, can it be argued that *The Painted Bird* is a turn-around indictment of such texts, in revealing that the attempt to create an indictment against one culture to the exclusion of another culture depends on the identification of the culture with the psychotic and the dissociation of the culture with the possibility of non-psychotic individuality. That is, what *The Painted Bird* is presenting is that such an indictment must and can only be made upon *all cultures*. Remove the presumption of indictment from *Schindler’s List* and *12 Years a Slave* and you have little more than hyperbolic sadism, a de Sade text divorced from its philosophy, and the Fiennes character quickly becomes a clown.)

On the simplest level, the book cannot even be said to be specifically about anti-Semitism, as the boy is far more often painted as being a *gypsy* than he is as being a Jew, the former carrying a far greater magical threat than the latter. The book never permits the boy to identify himself or be solidly identified as being either Gypsy or Jew. Indeed, the closest the book comes to giving a source to the boy’s looks lies in (1) that the boy sees his own biological traits in the picture of Stalin, who is identified as being Georgian, coupled with (2) that when the boy finds his parents, his father – from whom he gets his darker tones, his mother being the lighter color of the local population – speaks Russian:

He spoke to me in Russian and I noted that his speech was as fluent and beautiful as Gavril’s. (225)

Indeed, it might be argued, though it is a soft argument at best, the reason the boy and his parents seem to quickly find financial and domestic stability may be that his father is indeed Russian in origin and thus has privileges of heritage over other Poles. This is the opening to the final chapter:

I was too thin and not growing. The doctors advised mountain air and a lot of exercise. The teachers said that the city was not a good place for me. In the fall my father took a job in the hills, in the western part of the country, and we left the city. (233)

Again, it is at best a hinting within the text, and I question if even putting it forward gives it more strength than it merits, but it might be said that the family was able to re-establish itself remarkably quickly, relatively speaking, in a war-decimated country. Is access to advising doctors, plural, and the ability to at will “take a job in the hills,” something I would expect in immediate-post-war Poland? Not that that moment on its own carries much weight, but in conjunction with that the father spoke elegant Russian, there may be something to be found there.

In sum of the point, though, it seems to me that the identification of *The Painted Bird* as Holocaust literature is a spurious one, or perhaps, depending on how one sees the culture of Holocaust literature, a politically motivated one. I do not believe the book itself can sustain such an identification at all. It is a mythic tale that happens to be but *chronologically* set in Poland during world war two.

Kosinski himself seems to have spoken against the blank identification of *The Painted Bird* as a Holocaust book. (I remind you how, to me, it seems Kosinski became caught in the web of the discourse on *The Painted Bird*.) This also comes from *The Holocaust Industry*:

To his credit, Kosinski did undergo a kind of deathbed conversion. In the few years between his exposure and his suicide, Kosinski deplored the Holocaust industry’s exclusion of non-Jewish victims. “Many North American Jews tend to perceive it as Shoah, as an exclusively Jewish disaster. . . . But at least half of the world’s Romanies (unfairly called Gypsies), some 2.5 million Polish Catholics, millions of Soviet citizens and various nationalities, were also victims of this genocide. . . .” He also paid tribute to the “bravery of the Poles” who “sheltered” him “during the Holocaust” despite his so-called Semitic “looks.” (Jerzy Kosinski, *Passing By* [New York: 1992], 165-6, 178-9) Angrily asked at a Holocaust

conference what the Poles did to save Jews, Kosinski snapped back: “What did the Jews do to save the Poles?” (57 n37, insertion in the quotation)

In closing:

There is much said about Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*, and to me much of it is sourced not in the book but in what people wanted to make out of the book, a discourse in which Kosinski may have been an internally conflicted participant. I have not read enough to make a statement to that end beyond that from my observing from a distance. Though further investigation is warranted, my interests lie only in the book itself as a literary work. Reading the book, it seems to me that many of the statements and arguments made about *The Painted Bird*, especially as concerning Nazism and the Holocaust, are ungrounded. That is, they cannot be supported by the book itself.

Indeed, it seems to me that such is a loss for the book. Because for *The Painted Bird* to be, say, a Holocaust text, it would have to be – it would have to be read as – something *less than* what it is, literarily speaking. It would have to be diminished, removed out of the symbolic and anchored within the nomic. But, then, that is the usual approach of cultural entities to an aesthetic text: it removes from it its symbolic energies by covering it over with a cultural skin, a definitional reading that fits the governing ideology.

But then, I believe it is no small thing that the boy in *The Painted Bird* makes his final escape from the belly of the whale when he rediscovers his voice. This is the final passage of the book:

I opened my mouth and strained. Sounds crawled up my throat. Tense and concentrated I started to arrange them into syllables and words. I distinctly heard them jumping out of me one after another, like peas from a split pod. I put the receiver aside, hardly believing it possible. I began to recite words and sentences, snatches of Mitka’s songs. The voice lost in a faraway village church had found me again

and filled the whole room. I spoke loudly and incessantly like the peasants and then like the city folk, as fast as I could, enraptured by the sounds that were heavy with meaning, as wet snow is heavy with water, convincing myself again and again and again that speech was now mind and that it did not intend to escape through the door which opened onto the balcony. (234)

He is saved because he recovered his speech, because his speech *would not leave him*, would not leave him without that one great tool and marker of individuality. Like a the hero emerging from the belly of the whale he does not cast aside his experiences, but they become part of him, his peasant experiences melding with his urban origins, the beauty of the individual that was Mitka the Cuckoo with the songs that speak of the surrounding world. Mitka is the key character in the boy’s journeys, the archetypal wise man who gives the boy the magical gifts necessary to survive the journey to its end – and as such Mitka’s vengeance-based philosophy no more has utility for the boy, the journey being over. More importantly, is the scene of Mitka enacting his revenge upon the villagers who attacked his fellow soldiers. Of that scene the most important aspects are (1) that he shares the moment with the boy, even though the boy can offer no real service to the act; and (2) they as a duo share the act with no one else. Thus, in a core, the nature of the central conflict of *The Painted Bird*: the inherent antagonism between community and individual. What marks Mitka and the boy as individuals cannot be shared with the community, not without risking retribution, violence, *being painted*. (Yes, Mitka is painted as a hero, but between the lines he realizes the nature of that painting, and how quickly it can be turned against him, or, simply, painted over.) Though, there is yet that they are individuals, and as individuals what is it they can share with each other? *Their speech*, their speaking *to each other* – the boy finds his voice via a *telephone*, not in public. Through individual speech, individuals share their philosophies of life; they aid each other in their journeys. (It is not for naught that it is primarily the

outsiders who offer the boy their knowledge.) Without their speech (with Mitka, without the ability to take revenge, without that symbol, that magic item that is *his* rifle) they would be but peasants.

Bringing in again the sentence from the Afterward:

They wanted to cast me in the role of spokesman for my generation, especially for those who had survived the war; but for me survival was an individual action that earned the survivor the right to speak only for himself. (xiii)

The right to speak only for himself: which by necessity means also *the ability to speak only for himself* – and how can something be of value if it is common? It is no wonder, then, that such a speech is beyond the understanding of genre, of community, of culture.