THE FICTION OF JERZY KOSINSKI: THE PERVERSE IN THE MODERN IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT

THE FICTION OF JERZY KOSINSKI:

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By

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The greatest fear of the modern age is the loss or destruction of self. The contemporary man perceives a world in which institutions and societies have failed and in which existence itself is understood as paradoxically founded on nothingness.

In this situation, so Kosinski argues in Art of the Self, (his essay on Steps), "The original sense of 'creative' becomes completely reversed; now the only possible creative act, the independent act of choice and self-enhancement seems to be the destructive act--as in Sade. . . .In perversion, the negation of 'the creative' becomes literal--an acting out of a more fundamental negation. . ."

The perverse, as this study defines it, is the expression of that "fundamental negation" in destructive, anti-creative "acts, practices, or viewpoint(s)." Kosinski's protagonists choose, or are chosen by, the perverse. They adopt an impersonal generalized hatred towards the society and institutions which have failed; they reject the terms of existence by negating their own being and that of others.

Although the Kosinski protagonist chooses the perverse, his original purpose remains the desire to realize his self, his inner life.

So, Kosinski's fiction can be understood as a dialectic between that desire and the choice of the perverse.

The Boy of The Painted Bird desires justice and a community in which he can achieve selfhood but after successive ideologies and societies have failed him, he emerges filled with hate and adopts a code of impersonal revenge. The narrator of Steps, so Kosinski tells us in Art of the Self, is engaged on a "quest in search of inner life"; he wants to rid himself of the "burdens of his past" so that he is free to act "fully in the present. . ."; yet by "transfering" the burdens of his past to successive victims and, ultimately, to the reader of the novel, the narrator attempts to escape the responsibility of his existence, and thus negates it.

In Being There, "Chance" leaves his prelapsarian garden with the expectation of self-discovery: "By looking at him, others could make him be clear, could open him up and unfold him. . ." In this case, Chance, too innocent to choose the perverse, is chosen by it when he becomes the tool of a society that has inverted the meaning of self and creativity.

Jonathan Whalen of The Devil Tree hopes through his love relationship with Karen to realize his many potential selves. In response to the failure of that relationship and the futility of discovering his inner life in a corrupt society, he murders a tedious and foolish couple who have come to symbolize that society, and then descends into madness.

It cannot be definitely assumed that Kosinski's idea of self and inner life is synonymous with what is meant by self-realization, a

term that incorporates humanistic values. But that is strongly implied by the essays. The anger and frustration which the choice of the perverse expresses towards the failure of institutions and an indifferent universe implies a positive desire for meaning, community and justice--a world in which the individual man could achieve inner life and freedom.

If so, the choice of the perverse in the face of that desire constitutes a moral dilemma best described by Camus in The Rebel: The original motive for rebellion--a stance against the established order--is the affirmaton of human dignity and freedom; but when rebellion turns into nihilism (rebellion which knows no limits), it negates its original intent.

For Camus it is still possible to choose rebellion and reject the perverse. But in Kosinski's mythology, the historical moment when one could make the better choice may be past. The choice of the perverse, then, is a last resort, a final defense of self, using the only weapons left--negation. Yet the desire for the better choice remains: The perverse also reveals, in its emotional pathology, the despair and anger of the man who chooses that doctrine while desiring another.

THE FICTION OF JERZY KOSINSKI:

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By

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Introduction

Every age has its own nightmare and fantasy. Expressed in literature these often take the form of apocolyptic visions, and their function, as in the indiviudal psyche, is to resolve the conflict between what is dreaded and what is actually desired by making that which is dreaded "actual" in the imagination.

The Greeks, for example, having established democratic government based on law, and having a more than ordinary awareness of what they had created, feared a lapse back into barbarism, a fear that is expressed and resolved in Aeschylus' Oresteia. Marlowe and Goethe's versions of Faust expresses the fear of future possibilities brought about by the collapse of the medieval order and the advent of the new learning. In both cases, dread arises out of the stress of historical processes.

For the individual psyche, nightmares, dreams, and fantasies are part of the same project--to reconcile wish to fact. When they are embodied in literature they serve the same function for the collective mind of the society in which they appear. If the nightmare expresses fear, the fantasy expresses desire, for in the fantasy--the waking dream--the dreamer is in control, which may explain why the fantasy is more often a rewarding experience than the nightmare. The fantasy resolves the conflict in favor of the self; that is, the fantasy asserts the power and control of the self. The fantasy, by its nature, most resembles comic genres, while the nightmare is kin to naturalistic-tragedy. Because the fantasy is, in principle, freed from the

constraints of real solutions, it is worked out in extreme or radical terms. This extremity reveals, among other things, the intense frustration of the dreamer and the powerful desire to definitively resolve the disparity between wish and fact.

In literature the nightmare and the fantasy often appear together as aspects of the dramatic opposition: in the case of Faust, his rise to the heights is a fantasy of personal power; his fall a nightmare of an outraged order.

The modern nightmare is the loss or destruction of self. The modern man perceives a collapsing universe which offers no external structures which might enable him to define himself; a society overgrown with institutions which define him, but only as a unit of a collective; an intellectual climate in which the dominant philosophy, scientific materialism, at a loss to assign an empirical value to self, cannot account for his existence; an age when culture has physically assailed existence, so that he perceives government, law, and technology as agents of death rather than instruments of life.

This study, devoted to the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, examines a particular response to the world as modern man perceives it--the "perverse", the definition of which I take from Kosinski himself--the inversion of the normal human instincts for creativity and pro-creativity. In the perverse response, destruction is valued over creation, hate over love, alienation over community. Since the traditional humanistic values are perverted, or inverted, negation is the essence of the perverse.

The perverse can be an actual response, a course of action that the man adopts. As such it is generically related to modern nihilism and the more radical political philosophies of revolution. For the mass

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of civilized middle-class society, however, it remains, for the time being, only an imaginative solution (a fantasy) to the historical dilemma they feel. So while the nightmare of our age is loss of self and the collapse of external order, the fantasy is a descent into perversity or the choice of perversity. A growing literature--both serious and popular--now incorporates this fantasy: such novels as Norman Mailer's American Dream, James Dickey's Deliverance, or Susan Sontag's Death Kit, continuing, in American fiction, the tradition of Gide, Kafka, Celine, Genet, and Sartre, and earlier of Baudelaire, Rimbaud and the English decadents; such recent American films, as Sam Peckinpah's Strawdogs, Stanley Kubrick's Clockwork Orange based on Anthony Burgess' novel, Jules Feiffer's Little Murders, as well as less distinguished films like Rage and Death-Wish. If there is, in fact, a "literature of the perverse", the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski is central to the genre, for there the fantasy of the perverse response is directly and powerfully expressed with little moral qualification.[1]

[1]Kosinski's works, in these editions, will be cited throughout this study.

The Art of the Self, Essays a Propos Steps, New York: Scientia-Factum, 1968. Also published in Exile, Vol. 1, No. 1, York University: Toronto. [For convenience abbreviated Art in footnotes; Exile edition will be used.]

Being There, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971. [For convenience abbreviated to BT in footnotes.]

"Children of TV," Destination Tomorrow, Jack Carpenter, ed., Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, 1973, pp. 327-328.

The Devil Tree, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973. [For convenience abbreviated to DT in footnotes.]

The Future is Ours, Comrade, Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday, 1960. [Published under the pseudonym Joseph Novak.]

"The Lone Wolf," American Scholar, (Autumn 1972), pp. 513-514, 515-516.

No Third Path, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962. [Published under the pseudonym Joseph Novak.]

Notes of the Author on the Painted Bird, New York, Scientia-Factum, 1965. Also published in Exile, Vol. 1, No. 2, York University:

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The impulse for the perverse arises from the historical situation--the contemporary understanding that human existence and existence in general is founded on "nothingness; and in response to what contemporary man perceives as the progressive failure of institutions and civilization. The choice of the perverse however, is not only ideological, it is profoundly emotional, for it expresses the anger and frustration of contemporary man at his situation as he perceives it.

Although Kosinski's protagonists choose the perverse (or are chosen by it, as in the case of "Chance" in Being There) they desire a kind of "self-realization." In certain ways, this desire seems to enter into Kosinski's own thinking. For example, in the passage from "The Art of the Self, Essay a Propos Steps" where Kosinski defines the perverse, he says:

> . . .now the only possible creative act, the independent act of choice and self-enhancement, seems to be the destructive act--as in Sade.

By "now" Kosinski means, of course, the contemporary world where ". . .the greatest sources of sin are those formerly protective agencies like society and religion." [Ibid.] What one desires, however, as this passage clearly implies is non-perverse creativity, choice and self-enhancement.

Accepting these definitions for the moment, we could understand Kosinski's novels as a dialectic between the desire for self-realization and an impulse for the perverse in a world where self-realization is

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Toronto. [For convenience abbreviated to Notes in footnotes; Exile edition will be used.]

"Packaged Passion," American Scholar, (Spring, 1973), pp. 194-204.

The Painted Bird, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.

Steps, New York: Random House, 1968.

impossible: The Boy of The Painted Bird, subjected to continual brutality and enforced alienation, chooses a code of impersonal revenge. In doing so he adopts the code of the adult world he has experienced. The protagonist of Steps has adopted the perverse before the beginning of the novel and acts out his choice through a series of episodes; the "theme" of the novel, then, is the dynamics of the perverse and, by inference, the ontological conditions that underly them. In Being There the hero Chance, incapable of choice, does not choose the perverse; he is chosen by it. Jonathan Whalen of The Devil Tree embarks on a project of self-realization but is dragged down by the past (itself a symbol of a perverse society) and by the emptiness of contemporary life; in response he chooses the perverse, signalled by the murder of a man and wife who have come to symbolize that emptiness.

Again, if we accept this definition of self-realization, it is clear that there is a fundamental contradiction between that desire and the choice of the perverse. As Camus argues in The Rebel, rebellion--the rejection of the established order begins as an altruistic gesture, an affirmation of the dignity of the individual. But when rebellion turns into nihilism--rebellion which knows no limits--it denies its original humanistic impluse:

> It is possible to say that rebellion, when it develops into destruction, is illogical. Claiming the unity of the human condition, it is a force of life, not death. Its most profound logic is not the logic of destruction; it is the logic of creation. . . .Nihilistic passion, adding to falsehood and injustice, destroys in its fury its original demands and thus deprives rebellion of its most cogent reasons [The Rebel, op. cit., pg. 285].

If we could be certain that Kosinski's fiction is a dialectic between

the desire for self-realization and the impulse towards the perverse, he would be open to the criticism that he fails to see the implications of that choice, or that if he does, he fails to incorporate those implications into his fiction, and by doing so, provide the kind of moral framework that critics find lacking in his fiction.

It is very possible that Kosinski sees the contradiction between the desire for self-realization and the choice of the perverse as a necessary paradox; that is, that the descent into the perverse is the necessary first step towards eventual self-realization. If so, such a philosophy resembles Romatic creeds of redemption through sin as in Dostoevsky. And like the earlier Romantic creeds, it has its dangers--the saint who emerges from depravity, like Dimitri of The Brothers Karamazov, is a rare being. Finally, even if Kosinski is not pointing towards eventual redemption in the humanistic sense, he may at least suggest that the moral dilemma is part of the mystery of all human action and understanding.

Another dimension of Kosinski's work is directly related to both the question of self and the moral ambiguities of contemporary life: Kosinski's work seems heavily influenced by the existential writers, particularly Heidegger and Sartre. I do not mean by this merely that Kosinski's fiction reflects the historical tone or ethical tone of modern life--although that is true--but rather that his fiction appears to incorporate very specific, technical and systematic ontological ideas, so much so that at least two of his novels, Steps and Being There appear to be based on a philosophic substructure. Kosinski's essays on The Painted Bird and Steps reinforce this interpretation.

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Existential ontology is particularly relevant to the problem of self and self-realization because the method of that ontology is phenomenological; that is, it begins with an analysis of perception; i.e., the experience of mind perceiving phenomenae. Because existential ontology is experience centered, it leads directly to a consideration of the self in the midst of the world--what Heidegger means by dasein (being-there) and what Sartre means by being-in-the-world.

If, in fact, Kosinski does view the desire for self-realization and the impulse for perverse as the opposite legs of a paradox, existential ontology confirms that the paradox may be unresolvable. The very nature of existence is a paradox: the self comes into existence as an act of negation.

While we will find that existential ontology will be helpful in understanding many of Kosinski's ideas, this does not mean that they are always compatible or that Kosinski is engaging in didactic repetition. For example, although Kosinski alludes to Sartre often in Art of the Self, he takes pains to differentiate his own idea of love from that of Sartre's, and altogether it seems an improvement. In the same essay he refers to Camus' arguments against murder but apparently rejects Camus' similar argument against suicide when he (Kosinski) says of man: ". . .to die in one's own time is to affirm that dignity."

It is not easy to say what the existential writers would think of Kosinski's morality--Kosinski does not show himself clearly on this point. Even in the essays, his attitudes are veiled in ambiguities and contradicitons. At some points he seems to endorse the actions of his protagonists--especially the protagonist of Steps--at other times

he seems to condemn them, sometimes in the same breath. It is easier to say what the existentialists would say about the moral condition protagonists. As I suggested earlier, Camus would judge the choice of the perverse morally inconsistent with a desire for integrity and freedom. Similarly, Sartre would judge it as a retreat from responsible freedom, and therefore, "inauthentic."

Whether Kosinski would agree with these evaluations is inconclusive, and this returns us to what I believe is the central problem in Kosinski's work: the ambiguity of his own stance.

My own opinion is that Kosinski writes from the position of a moral dilemma similar at least to the one I have outlined here: The contemporary man desires a kind of "self-realization"; his desire is frustrated or "turned aside" by the collapse of external values, by the failure of institutions and society, by the perception, or conviction, that nothingness lies at the core of being; in response he chooses the perverse; but in doing so he negates his original impulse; this is the dilemma.

Undoubtedly, it is a personal one for Kosinski which might explain the ambiguities he displays in both his fiction and in his essays when he comes close to implications of the perverse.

It would be unreasonable to expect Kosinski to resolve this dilemma; however, he could make it apparent; that is, make it the thematic heart of his fiction. I think his failure to do this may be his single large fault as a writer.

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The method of this study is not, in any important way, biographical. Nonetheless, a biography is somewhat obligatory in a study devoted to the work of one man; and there are always insights to be had. Kosinski's biography presents special problems. Although he has recently shown a desire to set the record straight in regard to facts about his life, he has not done so in the past. As a result, speculation, rumor, and assumption have filled the gaps. In this respect I am no better off than other writers. I have pieced together what follows from the sources which seem to me the most authoritative and dependable.[3] Naturally I have my own speculations and I have done my best to separate them from facts.

Kosinski, himself, denies that his work is autobiographical. He presents, in Notes of the Author, an extensive analysis of the aesthetic process by which the author transforms his experience and memories into fiction. Part of this process is alienation from the remembered experience: ". . .the writer comes to stand outside the experience he intends to mirror in his book." As for the relationship between the actual and the fictive event, Kosinski says this:

[3]The biographical information in this section was compiled from the following selected sources:

Cleveland Amory, "Trade Winds," Saturday Review, April 17, 1971 [Interview].

Henry Allen, Washington Post, August 30, 1971 [Interview].

Contemporary Authors, Volumes 17/18, Gale Research Company, Detroit, Michigan.

Current Biography, March 1974.

Publishers' Weekly, "Authors and Editors," Vol. 199, No. 17, (April 26, 1971) [Interview].

Paris Review, No. 54, Summer 1972, "The Art of Fiction XLVI," by George A. Plimpton and Rocco Landesman, pp. 183-207 [Interview].

> As an actor playing Hamlet is neither Hamlet nor merely an actor, but rather, an actor as Hamlet, so is a fictive event neither an actual event, nor totally a created fiction with no base in experience; it is an event as fiction [Notes, pg. 85].

In transmuting the event into fiction, the artist uses mental patterns, "molds" which simplify, shape and give them (events) an acceptable emotional clarity. "The remembered event becomes a fiction, a structure made to accommodate certain feelings."

In fact, there are strong parallels between Kosinski's life and his fiction.

Jerzy Nikodem Kosinski was born on June 14, 1933 in Lodtz, Poland, the son of Mieczylaw and Elzbeita (Liniecka) Kosinski.

Although Kosinski was born in Poland, he describes his parents as "Russian." Presumably they were Russians emigrated to Poland.

Kosinski, who rarely discusses his early life, made an exception in his interview with Cleveland Armory. Here we learn that his mother was a concert pianist who was not allowed to perform in public (not allowed by whom is never explained), and that his father was a classics scholar by avocation:

> Take my father. He was born in Russia. He saw the Revolution of 1905, then World War I, then he escaped from Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution, and then he lived through the Second World War. So if anyone had a reason to be fed up, he had. And he withdrew from the Twentieth Century altogether. He studied Ancient Greece, and the origin of the European languages. It was his escape device. He did have one narrow field of commerical excellence, though. He was an expert in the manufacture of felt. I have a similar way to survive, photographic

> chemistry. If I have twenty minutes' warning, I can go to work on it and support myself [Amory, Saturday Review, op. cit.].

Kosinski's early life parallels the experience of the Boy of The Painted Bird. Like his protagonist, Kosinski was separated from his parents when the Nazis took Poland. His parents sent him to live with a foster mother in Eastern Poland, but she died two months after the six-year-old Kosinski arrived. For the next three years he wandered through this remote area and learned to survive. The peasants, on one occasion, tried to drown him and he has retained a fear of water ever since, although he is reportedly an avid swimmer. And, like his protagonist, Kosinski lost his voice and lived as a mute for a period of time. At the end of the war, Kosinski was re-united with his parents. Later he began what was to become a distinguished academic career.

In Poland, Kosinski studied at the University of Lodtz where he received an M.A. in history in 1953 and an M.A. in political science in 1955. From 1950 to 1956 he was employed as a ski instructor, during the winter seasons, in Zakopane, an experience which probably furnished the materials for the end of The Painted Bird as well as several episodes of Steps. In Warsaw, from 1955 to 1957, Kosinski studied sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences. In addition, he studied photographic chemistry as a minor subject. The safety and isolation of the darkroom became an actual haven for him from the pressures of collective life in Poland, and finally, in his own words, a "metaphor."

> The photographic darkroom emerged as a perfect metaphor for my life. It was the one place I could lock myself in (rather than being locked in) and legally not admit anyone else. For me it became a kind of temple [Paris Review, op. cit.].

While Kosinski studied sociology (from 1955-57), he also held the position of assistant professor of sociology at the Institute of the History of Culture at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. This position made it possible for him to travel to Russia where he studied 19th century history at Lononosov University in 1957, shortly before he came to the United States.

The experience in Russia provided the material for the two non-fiction works Kosinski later wrote in the U.S. under the pseudonym, Joseph Novak. In these books one sees the rudiments of his fictional style; more important,one recognizes characters and stories which later appear in his novels. For example, the episode in The Painted Bird from which the novel takes its name is taken from an anecdote related to Kosinski by Varia, a Russian girl Kosinski meets in Moscow:

> I remember how once a group of us kids caught a sparrow in a trap. He struggled with all his might--tiny heart thumping desperately--but I held on tight. We then painted him purple and I must admit he actually looked much better--more proud and unusual. After the paint had dried we let him go to rejoin his flock. We thought he would be admired for his beautiful and unusual coloring, become a model to all the gray sparrows in the vicinity, and they would make him their king. He rose high and was quickly surrounded by his companions. For a few moments their chirping grew much louder and the--a small object began plummeting earthward. We ran to the place where it fell. In a mud puddle lay our purple sparrow--dead. His blood mingling with the paint. . . .The water was rapidly turning a brownish-red. He had been killed by the other sparrows, by their hate for color and their instinct of belonging to a gray flock. Then, for the first time, I understood. . . [No Third Path, op. cit., pp. 106-7].

Kosinski's departure from Poland at the close of 1957 makes a story bizarre enough for any of his fiction. To evade a suspicious Polish bureaucracy and their restrictive immigration policy, Kosinski

invented a fictitious "Chase Manhattan" grant for study in the U.S. To recommend him for permission to leave Poland. Kosinski also invented four professors, each with his own stationary, signature, telephone voice, etc.: "It involved two years of planning and some bureaucratic fraud, and the penalty for capture was approximately 12 to 15 years in prison. . .if I had been caught, I would have removed myself, one way or another." [Publishers' Weekly, op. cit.]. According to Kosinski, he carried a cyanide capsule in his pocket during this period as his insurance against a Polish prison.

On several occasions Kosinski has gone out of his way to emphasize that the United States was really his third choice:

> I aimed at three countries: At Argentina, at Brazil and at the United States, in that order. The first two would not take me because I had a Marxist background. . . .Essentially, I aimed at large, new societies, and I felt that I could in some way therefore disregard environment and be disregarded, be left alone [Publishers' Weekly, op. cit.].

In any case, Kosinski arrived in the U.S. at the age of 24 with his clothing and little money. He did not speak English. There followed various odd jobs--paint-scraper on excursion-line boats, truck driver, chauffeur, and photographer--a transition which furnishes the basis for several episodes of Steps. But by July 1958, Kosinsky had arranged for a real grant--from the Ford Foundation (1958-1960). He studied at both the New School for Social Research (New York) and Columbia University where he was enrolled in a doctoral program in sociology. While studying at Columbia, Kosinski was engaged in learning English and writing his two nonfiction works. Explaining his use of a pseudonym for those works, Kosinski says:

> My former experience had taught me that when you are a student you are not supposed to write books, you are supposed to read them [Publishers' Weekly, op. cit.].

Kosinski developed a remarkable way to get criticism of his first attempts at English prose. He would call a New York long distance operator and ask her if she would mind listening to what he had written and offer suggestions. Not only were the operators willing, they would often call back to hear more of his writing.

Kosinski now writes only in English. The newness of the language has special importance for him. It represents an escape from the restrictions and impediments of the European tradition, as well as a means of distancing himself from the memories of his own past--presumably so that remembered event can be transmuted to fictive event:

> Once you begin to write in another language, you discover how much freer you are, because the new language disconnects you, and requires from you--because you do not know all the cliches yet--some of your own. . . .One is removed from one's Pavlovian restraints, so to speak. The new language has brought for you a new evocative power; it can evoke your imaginary states but not your traumatic states. . . .when I am approached by someone who speaks to me suddenly in Polish: My whole manner changes. I get more rigid, my neck is stiffer, I am more European. [Interview with Publishers' Weekly].

His marriage to Mary Hayward Weir in January 1962 was the result of a relationship that began when she sent him a fan letter after the publication of The Future is Ours, Comrade. Kosinski's involvement with Mary Weir and the Weir family is suggestive and fascinating. Mary Hayward was ninteen years old when in 1941 she became the third wife of Ernest Weir, then sixty-six, a Pittsburgh industrialist and founder of the National Steel Corporation.

Weir died in 1975. When Mary Weir married Kosinski in 1962 he was

twenty nine, she was forty. Together they travelled throughout the world and cruised the Mediterranean on her yacht. Of this period Kosinski recalls, ". . .I was broke from spending all my own money on tips." [Washington Post, op. cit.] Mary Weir committed suicide in 1968. There were no children, possibly because of Kosinski's attitude towards that subject which he expressed in the Paris Review interview: ". . .my orbit does not make provision for the giving of life."

Although two of his books, No Third Path (1962) and The Painted Bird (1965) bear warm inscriptions to Mary Weir, Kosinski's only published reference to their relationship is made with the cold eye of the practicing sociologist:

> . . .a wealthy, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant who grounded me very definitely in purely American experience. [Paris Review, op. cit.].

His involvement with Mary Weir and the corporate world to which she introduced Kosinski provides the groundwork for his most recent novel, The Devil Tree. The characters also bear a close resemblance to the Weir family. The description of Whalen Sr. comes almost verbatim from an unusual and admiring article which Kosinski wrote about Ernest Weir.[4] Jonathan's mother, like Mary Weir, travels around the world with

[4]Jerzy Kosinski, "The Lone Wolf," American Scholar, (Autumn, 1972) pp. 513-514, 516-519. In the passage I am thinking of, Kosinski describes Weir this way:

> ". . .when he was fifteen he was employed at three dollars a week in the Braddock Wire Company, doing work, as Weir recalled, that nobody else wanted to do. In 1901 he became chief clerk of the Monongahela Tin Plate Mills and a few years later, at the age of twenty-eight, was named the general manager of Monessen Mills. . . .Weir was an avid reader of nineteenth century English novels. Perhaps it was from them that he acquired a sense of destiny."

Compared to these passages from The Devil Tree:

a scholar-lover (Kosinski, perhaps?) and later commits suicide. Whether or not Jonathan, the protagonist, is modelled after Ernest and Mary Weir's actual son (David M. Weir II) is purely speculative. It is likely, however, that the character of Jonathan is a combination of an actual family member and Kosinski himself. In any case, it is clear that The Devil Tree, like Kosinski's other work is more a "transmutation" of remembered event to fictive event than pure imagination.

In 1966 Kosinski published his first novel, The Painted Bird, which was a critical and, moreover, a commercial success. A series of prizes, grants, and academic positions followed. The Painted Bird won Le Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger in France (1966). In 1967 Kosinski was awarded a Guggenheim for creative writing. In 1968 he was appointed a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University, Middletown Connecticut, and in the same year, he published Steps for which he won the National Book Award in 1969. Following his stay at Wesleyan, Kosinski taught at Princeton University as writer in residence (1969-70), and then at Yale (1970-73) from which he is now on a leave of absence. In 1970, he won an Award in Literature from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts in Letters; in the same year he was awarded the John Golden Fellowship in Playwriting. He published Being There, his third novel in 1971 and The Devil Tree, his fourth, in 1974. He has recently completed a fifth novel, Cockpit, which will be published in the fall of 1975.

". . .Sumner Whalen got his first job as an office boy with an aluminum company at four dollars and eighty-five cents a week. Advancing rapidly to positions of increasing responsibility, Mr. Whalen became a plant manager at the age of twenty three. . . .(He). . .read Dickens for inspiration and listened to Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor at least once a day." [The Devil Tree, pg. 130].

The best picture of Kosinski's personal life comes from the Henry Allen interview which is now dated (1971). At that time Kosinski was living near the Yale University campus in New Haven. He had not remarried at that time, but his companion for several years had been Katherine von Frauhofer, (Kiki) with whom he shared the small apartment Allen described. Allen's interview suggested an austere kind of life, shorn of any extraneous matters, and a singular personality.

Currently Kosinski spends most of his time in New York, where from all outward appearances he is deeply involved in a large scope of activities. He is president of the American center of P.E.N. an international association of writers, director of the International League for the Rights of Man, Member of the Board, The National Writers Club. Unlike most other writers of his stature, he does not disdain the unions and professional organizations peopled by less prestigious talents; for example he holds membership in the American Association of University Professors, The Authors League and The American Translators Association.

He is also personally involved in a publishing venture, Scientia-Factum which specializes in philosophical essays, among which are Kosinski's own on the The Painted Bird and Steps.

Kosinski as a personality strongly resembles his fictional protagonists. What he shares with them is a prediclection for the bizarre, a willingness--perhaps a compulsion to seek it out, to interpose himself in strange situations and the lives of strangers, a desire and talent to manipulate, and an overriding pre-occupation with privacy, secrecy and instant mobility--a kind of contemporary "paranoia."

Several of the episodes in his biography illustrate these traits--his method of escape from Poland, for example, especially his claim that he carried a capsule of cyanide with him during that time. Another incident observed by Henry Allen during his interview of Kosinski illustrates the same tendencies:

> In a restaurant. . .Kosinski is disgusted by a fat man who engorges half the menu. Kosinski hates fat--eating, in fact--and can sit in a restaurant hissing to Kiki: 'Look at that one, she must weigh 300 pounds. And that one, my God, he must weigh. . ."
>
> He consistently overestimates their weights by at least 100 pounds. He gives none of them more than 10 years to live.
>
> Anyhow, he observes the fat man eating everything but the tablecloth, only to have fetched to him a giant chocolate cake. It's the crumb that breaks the camel's back. Kosinski summons his waiter, orders another cake carried to the man's table. The fat man is delighted. Kosinski joins in a pas de deux of smiles and waves, then watches him eat it.
>
> When the fat man has patted the last crumb into his mouth Kosinski stops at his table.
>
> The fat man glows with gratitude. No one, it seems, has ever in his life done such a thing for him. 'You are very fat,' Kosinski replies, it will kill you. I bought you the cake simply to see if you would eat it. And because I might see you die before my eyes.' [Washington Post, op. cit.]

Aside from authorial eccentricity, this anecdote reveals an edge of cruelty and suggests the manipulative qualities of the narrator of Steps. It is interesting in this regard that Kosinski mentions that his students have accused him of manipulation, although his purposes, Kosinski maintains, are moralistic:

> When you confront someone directly, as I often do my students, they become very upset, and once in awhile violent. They claim I am manipulating them. But you aim at the primary truth: Why do you get up in the morning? Why don't you kill yourself? What sense is there in doing what you are doing? [Publishers' Weekly].

A penchant for manipulation would also explain, in a sense, Kosinski's theory of the relationship between author and reader. He intends, so he explains in Art of the Self, to "subvert" the reader, to seduce and entrap him into an aesthetic experience no doubt for the same reasons that he "manipulates" his students--to "aim at the primary truth" that will ultimately undermine his ideas of the world. As we will see in Chapter 2, this credo explains the design of Steps.

In the Paris Review interview, Kosinski discusses his "paranoia." He mentions the darkroom which he describes as a "metaphor for my life," and adds, "The darkroom remains even today my device for escape from the ideologies of political terror."

At the time of that interview, Kosinski had discovered another use for his darkroom. Shortly before he had learned that his eyesight was in danger. Anticipating the possibility that he would go blind, Kosinski began to practice dictating to a tape recorder in the darkroom;

> While dictating in darkness I noticed I developed a new kind of freedom--the tape recorder prose seems to be looser, less controlled than the typewriter prose of Steps, for instance, or Being There. . . .All I wanted to do was to permit my 'vision,' born in a darkroom, this inner vision, to reach the tape recorder.

When the interviewer asks Kosinski what he does with the manuscript, Kosinski replies,

> I put them away in a bank vault. I am secretive. I close things. I lock them. I have fifteen different places where my things are hidden. Some of the bank vaults where I send the drafts are almost bigger than my apartment. I

> am always afraid that some societal force will go after me, and will try to penetrate not only my apartment--let them do it!--but my inner life, which is reflected in my writing and in my letters.

The desire for instant mobility, for secrecy, is further illustrated by an incident recorded by Cleveland Amory in his interview. Kosinski had earlier explained to Amory and his assistant that he had developed the ability to hide, or "disappear" in his own apartment any time he chose:

> Before saying goodbye to Mr. Kosinski, we demanded a first-hand look at his disappearance act. Miss von Fraunhofer ushered us down the hall, while Mr. Kosinski hid. Then we came back. We looked everywhere very carefully--in the closets, under the sofa, behind every cabinet, even in the darkroom. There was no question, the author of Being There wasn't there. We gave up.
>
> At that point, out came Mr. Kosinski. 'Once,' he told us, 'I hid for a whole weekend. I came out only for food and work. People were in and out too, but they never found me.'

Of all the published anecdotes about Kosinski, this strikes me as the most revealing. One has a glimpse here of the child that Kosinski was, a child for whom the ability to hide was more than a parlor game. For the adult, as well as the child, his display of that skill reminds the community around him (and himself) that he remains marginal, that he is beyond their power to touch him.

iv

The criticism on Kosinski is not extensive. At present only one full length study is devoted to his work, an unpublished dissertation by David Lipani.[5] Two other unpublished dissertations include chapters

[5]David J. Lipani,"Jerzy Kosinski: A Study of His Novels,"Bowling Green State University, 1973.

on Kosinski.[6] Articles in scholarly journals and literary reviews number a little less than a dozen. Book reviews, of course, are copious and spand a wide range of quality. It would be difficult, and probably unenlightening, to group what is available according to a "school" or "approach." The Kosinski canon is simply not large enough, nor are the number of critics who have written about it. Kosinski himself, in his two essays (Notes of the Author and the Art of the Self) remains his own most intelligent critic.

The most problematic area for Kosinski's critics and reviewers is that of the moral implications of his fiction.

While critics admire Kosinski's work, they have misgivings about it. They want to know: Is Kosinski promoting amorality, nihilism, the perverse? Is he talking about collective (social) guilt or is this immaterial? Does he hope for some kind of personal or social redemption? All of this is disturbing to most critics who are--despite their frequent claims of intellectual toughness and pragmatism--nonetheless solidly within the liberal tradition.

There are those who find no relief in Kosinski's dark view and fault him for it. Geoffrey Wolff, for example, writing a review of Steps in The New Leader [October 7, 1968, pp. 18-19] devotes himself to the moral issue: Conceding that the novelist has no obligation to

[6]Robert E. Goldren,"Violence and Art in Postwar American Literature: A Study of O'Connor, Kosinski, Hawkes, and Pynchon," The University of Rochester, 1972. Also see, Sharon Rosenbaum Weinstein, "Comedy and Nightmare: The Fiction of John Hawkes, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Jerzy Kosinski, and Ralph Ellison,"University of Utah, 1971.

represent the external world truly, Wolff concludes that, nonetheless, the reader has the right to judge the internal truth of the fictional world the writer has created. On these grounds, Wolff concludes that Kosinski is irresponsible--". . .power abused is power abandoned, in art if not in life."

Others express the hope that Kosinski is expressing something more than the dark vision that seems to dominate his novels; but usually they are uncertain as to what it could be. Irving Howe [op. cit.] remarks that,

> . . .one must also remind oneself that the kind of aesthetic discipline that goes into a book like Steps is made possible only by an urgent moral passion, even if for the moment unclear or invisible.

The desire to find that moral position and the humanistic bias of most critics leads some to untenable conclusions--Daniel Cahill for example. ["Jerzy Kosinski: Retreat from Violence," Twentieth Century Literature, 18, April, 1972]. After a lengthy exposition of the dark vision of Steps, Cahill then says:

> If one accepts the novel as the sole document for interpretation, the moral evaluation of man is an unrelieved blackness. . . .Convinced that Jerzy Kosinski is both a serious and a profound writer, one searches the novels for signs of this affirmative spirit, the belief that man can retreat from a violent devitalization.

The fallacy here is obvious: seriousness and profundity in a writer are synonymous with Cahill's desire for humanistic assurances. In this frame of mind a critic will sieze on the slenderest hope as Cahill does:

> It is only when one turns to the epigraph of Steps[7] (taken from the sacred book, The Bhagavad Gita) that one can discern a glimmer of the author's intent. . . .The moral equipose which Kosinski seeks is the ascendent step, a direction opposite from that which he fictionalizes, a new world in which the control, peace, and happiness of The Bhagavad Gita is restored to the life of man.

But for the protagonist of Steps, control is the manifestation of a spiritual disease, as Howard Harper correctly argues [Contemporary Literature, 12, Spring, 1971, pp. 213-214]. Therefore, the epigraph on which Cahill hangs his hopeful argument is, in large part ironic, or at best, paradoxical; the control described by The Bagavad Gita is different in quality from the control exercised by the protagonist of Steps.

A similar bias--a desire to mitigate Kosinski's black vision--appears to animate David Lipani's study ["Jerzy Kosinski: A Study of His Novels,"Bowling Green, 1973]. Lipani argues that the main thrust of Kosinski's life and work is the concern for the liberty of the self which is threatened by totalitarian government and authoritarian society. Therefore, Lipani focuses on what is in fact a central issue in Kosinski's fiction--the idea of self:

> The evolution and the machinations of self, the endeavor to ascertain and establish one's identity, the individual conscience in conflict with mass norms: this is the core of the Kosinski canon. . . .In his fiction Kosinski probes the victim/oppressor relationship, the power of love, hate,

[7]For the uncontrolled there is no wisdom, nor for the uncontrolled is there the power of concentration; and for him without concentration there is no peace. And for the unpeaceful, how can there be happiness?

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> fear, vengeance, and the workings of power itself; he dramatizes the sense of alienation, the failure of institutions to guide conduct and faith; he studies fierce individuality, the innate desire for freedom and survival, and the almost magical ability to metamorphize for self-preservation. Self is the focus here, and that absorption with self issues clearly from the incidents related to Kosinski's nonfiction [Lipani, op. cit., pp. 26-27].

Lipani's interpretation is appealing for several reasons. It is cogent; it lends to Kosinski a moral perspective--even an optimism; and it fits the biographical information. I think, however, it is less successful with the fiction and essays because it presupposes that Kosinski's idea of self is always synonymous with that of the humanistic tradition. To understand just how deficient Lipani's interpretation is, we have only to consider that the "freer"--the more unrestricted and uncontrolled--Kosinski's protagonists become, the more they engage in destructive (anti-humanistic) behavior.

This brief survey suggests some of the difficulties that critics have encountered with the moral implications of Kosinski's fiction. One of my concerns in this study is to clarify, at least, the nature of the problem. I intend to show that a moral dilemma lies at the heart of Kosinski's work: On the one hand contemporary man desires a coherent sensible world and self-realization. On the other hand, he perceives a world which is fragmented and absurd in which he is a cipher. One response to the frustration which arises from this situation is the choice of the perverse--the turning aside of the normal creative instincts into the destructive and anti-creative which contradicts his original desire. The dilemma, then, is not only moral and historical, it is intensely emotional, for it results in a response so

passionate that it borders on the pathological. The anatomy of this kind of choice--the choice of the perverse--is the subject of The Painted Bird.

Chapter 1 The Painted Bird

For most readers and reviewers the Boy of The Painted Bird is a sympathetic hero. For one thing he is young, and Kosinski represents him as an "innocent" narrator at least initially. For another, his innocence stands in contrast to the brutality of the peasants of the region. So, the reader might easily condemn the peasants, the Nazis, indeed all of the adults who, by inference, contribute to the Boy's degradation. For the same reasons the book is often taken for an apology for the Boy and an indictment of the others; or it is taken as an essentially anti-war novel. Therefore it might surprise many readers and critics when Kosinski, in his own essay on the novel, asserts that the Boy is a "negative hero":

> It seems, therefore, that all the adults in this book are positive heroes, because they did not kill the boy. . . .(they) contributed to the survival of the Boy during the war, when he was among strangers whom death threatened for sheltering or aiding him in any way. . . .So much about positive heroism. This book has, however, also a negative hero.
>
> He is the Boy.
>
> Of all the characters he alone hates consciously, continuously, and most deeply; he desires and thirsts to hate others for all that had happened to him in this world [Notes, VII, p. 99].

The truth of this is apparent when we take a hard look at what the boy has become when he emerges at the end of the novel. He is filled with hate; he has adopted a peculiar morality of vengeance in which the object of revenge is impersonal; he engages in vicious and destructive

acts. Therefore, Kosinski's definition of the perverse, which he later applied to the protagonist of Steps, applies equally to the Boy of The Painted Bird.

> The original sense of 'creative' becomes completely reversed; now the only possible creative act, the independent act of choice and self-enhancement, seems to be the destructive act--as in Sade [Art, p. 54].

Nor is the Boy's choice of the perverse as a mode of life a temporary phenomenon, restricted only to a critical period of his experience. Despite the apparently "positive" conclusion of the novel, a matter I will discuss later, Kosinski himself describes the Boy's future this way:

> For this world he feels only boundless contempt and hate; and the shadow of this contempt will lengthen as the Boy grows. . . .[Notes, VII, p. 101].

This observation might furnish a prelude to Steps, Kosinski's next novel, where, in fact, the adult narrator acts out the perversity which the Boy has chosen.

The Painted Bird, then, shows how of a perverse (a "negative") hero evolves. "Evolves" applies in this case because the Boy's experience, especially his responses to that experience, show a progression along definite lines. As we will see, he first adopts the outlook and morality of primitivism, then Christianity, then Anti-Christianity, or Satanism, then Marxism (political scientific materialism), and finally the perverse, a form of nihilism. Thus, the Boy's experience corresponds to the historical experience of Western man; his situation to that of contemporary man; and his moral outlook (the perverse) to

a prominent strain of contemporary thought. So The Painted Bird, is an allegory. Because the evolution of the Boy is so central to its meaning, we will look at that first and in some detail.

The Boy is cast into an alien world by a series of accidents, a theme which Kosinski repeats at the beginning of Being There. Because of his dark complexion and urban accent--almost unintelligible to the peasants of the area--they suspect that he is either a Jew or a Gypsy and therefore a menace to them in one of two ways; first as an evil agent; the peasants, traditionally superstitious, retain a belief in witchcraft and magic; second, as a political danger: the Nazis who control the area exact stiff penalties for harboring Jews or Gypsies.

Predictably the Boy's first protectors are the local "witches", male or female, on whom the essentially pagan peasants depend as mediators between the supernatural world and themselves. The Boy is not a threat to these marginal people because they regard him as a controllable force, valuable as a talisman, or simply as useful assistant. From these witch-priests the Boy learns a kind of primitivism. Such a view insists on the interconnectedness of all things, both physical and spiritual; magic and ritual are means used to manipulate reality; the world is conceived as divided between the forces of light and dark, good and evil. Because the various deities, spirits, and demons are identified with physical phenomenon (sun, rain, fire, disease, etc.) the primitive generally assumes that evil (the forces of dark) are superior in strength to those of light. Because good and evil are conceived as physical things, this sort of view has a kind of superiority over more abstract moral systems in that good

and evil are more immediate and have concrete manifestations. For the Boy, this view of the world is the first point in his moral transformation.

Of those who harbor the Boy, the witches are the kindest and he has a kind of security with them. The ordinary peasants and farmers are the most brutal, no doubt because they are the most likely to see him as a threat. Eventually the Boy accepts their image of him as an evil and inferior being, so that by the time he is confronted by the SS officer he feels "like a squashed caterpiller oozing in the dust", and concludes,"I had nothing against his killing me"[PB, p. 129].

A local priest rescues him from the SS and gives him over to a farmer who turns out to be the most brutal of any of his masters. But through the influence of the priest, the Boy conceives a passion for religion. He becomes a fervent acolyte:

> And even though my prayers had not produced perceptible results, they must have been noticed in heaven, where justice is the law [PB, p. 154].

A Christian view of the world replaces his primitivism, but it is more accurate to say that Christianity displaces primitivism because primitivism remains in the Boy's background, just as in the historical case when Roman, Greek and Teutonic paganism remained after the Christian conversions of the first millenium. In the Christian world-view, the destiny of men and nations is not determined by the dialectic of two equally powerful forces. The forces of light are the more powerful and there is a final moral dimension (heaven) where justice will prevail. Apparently, however, the Boy's prayers have not been noticed in heaven. During the service on the feast day of Corpus Christi, he

is compelled to carry a missal that is too heavy for him. He drops it. The enraged peasants throw him in a dung pit and leave him to drown. When he crawls out, he discovers he has lost the ability to speak. As he wanders away from the village into the forest, he searches for an explanation for his calamity.

> There must have been some cause for the loss of my speech. Some greater force, with which I had not yet managed to communicate, commanded by destiny . . . .God had no reason to inflict such terrible punishment on me. I had probably incurred the wrath of some other forces, which spread their tentacles over those God abandoned for some reason or other. [PB, p. 161].

This explanation, involving a "greater force", as well as the idea that God "abandons" certain people for an undefined reason, is, in part, a regression to primitivism.

His next adventure furnishes him a name for his unknown force. In another village he is taken in by a family who the other villagers shun for an unnamed reason. Though he has not quite reached puberty, the daughter, Ewka, initiates him into sex. And with her he finds his only happy moments in the period of the narrative. Then one night he hears peculiar noises from the father's hut. Looking in he sees father, daughter, and brother engaged in a sexual act with a goat.

> Something collapsed inside me. My thoughts fell apart and shattered into broken fragments like a smashed jug. . . . All these events became suddenly clear and obvious. They explained the expression I had often heard people use about people who were very successful in life: 'He is in league with the Devil.'. . . .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.

> So far I had been one of those. I felt annoyed with myself for not having understood sooner the real rules of this world [PB, pp. 172-173].

Since his devotion to the powers of good--God and the church--have proven ineffective, he decides to commit himself to the power of evil. One premise of primitivism--that evil is stronger than good--has its influence in this decision. This too has an historical parallel--Satanism is the Christian transformation of pagan or pantheistic religions.

> The time of passivity was over; the belief in good, the power of prayer, altars, priests, and God had deprived me of my speech. My love for Ewka, my desire to do anything I could for her, also met with its proper reward.
>
> Now I would join those who were helped by the Evil Ones. [PB, p. 175].

The Boy's decision to join the Evil Ones is the crucial point of the novel, the beginning of a morality of hate and revenge, his determination to exist on the fringes of the community rather than within it. He chooses the perverse. This is not, however, a merely pragmatic decision, a choice between two moralities on the basis of one's superiority to another. His experience has left the Boy with a profound hatred. His adoption of the morality of evil provides an ideological base from which he can act out his feelings.

Following the Boy's initial choice, he has the opportunity to choose again--on one hand the possibility of joining the community through the vehicle of socialism, on the other a morality of personal vengeance. Towards the end of the summer, he is living near another village. With the advance of Russian armies from east to west,

the war is nearing the area. He witnesses a Kalmuk raid on the village. Structurally, this episode resembles the last act of a melodrama: the raid is an extravaganza of brutality; the Russian army, like the cavalry, appears, captures and hangs the Kalmuks; the Boy who has been wounded by the Kalmuks, faints, then wakes in a Russian army hospital. Nonetheless, it is a powerful episode, having the feel of Medieval conceptions of Apocalypse--even to the horsemen who mow down the villagers with swords and axes. The final scene suggests insurpassable violence which is appropriate because this is the climax of the Boy's experience as a wanderer among the peasants.

He becomes a charge of the Russian soldiers. He is cared for by two men in particular--Gavrilla, a political officer, and Mitka, "a sharp-shooting instructor and a crack sniper." Gavrilla teaches him to read and introduces him to communist thought:

> From him I learned that the order of the world had nothing to do with God, and that God had nothing to do with the world. The reason for this was quite simple. God did not exist. The cunning priests had invented Him so they could trick stupid superstitious people. There was no God, no Holy Trinity, no devils, ghosts, or ghouls rising from graves; there was no Death flying everywhere in search of new sinners to snare. These were all tales for ignorant people who did not understand the natural order of the world, did not believe in their own powers, and therefore had to take refuge in their belief in some God [PB, pp. 212-213].

The Boy regrets the time he spent praying and he reflects on the difficulties facing those who depend on their belief in God. Gavrilla teaches him about the great leaders (Stalin and Lenin), those who "because of (their) superior knowledge and wisdom" became the leaders of the people, those at the "summit of society" who saw the larger

pattern. Thus, Christianity which had displaced primitivism is now displaced by Marxism. But Marxism, despite its atheistic premise, has a feeling of divine proportions as the Boy observes:

> Some of the soldiers were more impressed by Lenin, others by Stalin, just as some of the peasants spoke more often about God the Father and others about God the son [PB, p. 215].

Marxism offers the Boy a last opportunity of believing that survival as a member of the community is possible:

> Eventually Gavrilla's lessons filled me with a new confidence. In this world there were realistic ways of promoting goodness, and there were people who had dedicated their whole lives to it. These were the Communist Party members [PB, p. 217].

But the Boy's confidence gives way to apprehension as he learns more about the life of the individual in the collective;

> I felt lost in this maze. In the world into which Gavrilla was initiating me, human aspirations and expectations were entangled with each other like the roots and branches of great trees in a thick forest, each tree struggling for more moisture from the soil and more sunshine from the sky. [PB, p. 221].

> I tried to memorize Gavrilla's teaching, not to lose a single word. He maintained that to be happy and useful one should join the march of the working people, keeping in step with the others in the place assigned in the column. Pushing too close to the head of the column was as bad as lagging behind. It could mean loss of contact with the masses, and would lead to decadence and degeneracy. Every stumble could slow down the whole column, and those who fell risked being trampled on by the others. . .[PB, p. 222].

The Boy is uncertain of the alternative that Gavrilla offers. At this point Mitka offers another alternative in the form of a lesson, and it is this alternative that most influences him. One evening several friends of Mitka slip out of camp to a village near the camp. At a

feast, they are murdered by jealous drunken peasants.

> Vanka lay on his back, his white face turned to the surrounding onlookers. In the dim light of a lantern one could see streaks of congealed blood on his chest. Lonka's face had been split in two by a terrible blow from an ax [PB, pp. 229-230].

No official retribution is planned; the troops are once again ordered to avoid contact with the local people. But Mitka takes his own revenge. He wakes the Boy before dawn, takes a rifle with a telescopic sight, tripod and field glasses, and leads him through the forest to the fields which border the village. He selects a tall oak. There from his sniper's perch he kills four people. Mitka, truly Russian in his contradiction, will not permit a child to witness the killings through the binoculars, although he means his action to be exemplary. So the Boy, who is telling the story in the first person must imagine what is happening. Thus the method of narration assumes a particularly ingenious quality.

> I closed my eyes and saw the village again, with the three bodies sliding to the ground. The remaining peasants, unable to hear the shots at that distance, scattered in panic, looking around in bewilderment and wondering where the shots were coming from [PB, p. 234].

This lesson and its implications are not lost on the Boy:

> How I envied Mitka!. . .Man carried in himself his own private war, which he has to wage, win, or lose, himself--his own justice, which is his alone to administer. . . .If he could not revenge his friends, what was the use of all those days of training in the sniper's art, the mastery of eye, hand, and breath?
>
> There was another element in Mitka's revenge. A man, no matter how popular and admired, lives mainly with himself.

> If he is not at peace with himself, if he is harassed by something he did not do but should have done to preserve his own image of himself, he is like the 'unhappy Demon, spirit of exile, gliding high above the sinful world. . .' [PB, p. 235].

From the Boy's point of view, Mitka's example provides an alternative to Gavrilla's ideal of the collective and the slow march to the summit with the army of the working class:

> . . .one could also reach the summit alone, with the help at most of a single friend, the way Mitka and I had climbed the tree [PB, p. 236].

It is this alternative which the Boy embraces and which becomes the basis for his creed of survival and revenge in his subsequent life. This creed is clearly a transformation of his earlier commitment to the powers of evil, and the psychological basis of the commitment remains the same, and is suggested by the passage above;

> Something he (a man) should have done but did not do to preserve his own image of himself (italics mine, M.B.)

In her classic study Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense, Anna Freud discusses a set of dynamics that could describe the Boy:[1]

> A child introjects some characteristic of an anxiety-object and so assimilates an anxiety-experience which he has just undergone. Here, the mechanism of identification or introjection is combined with a second important mechanism. By impersonating the aggressor, assuming his attributes or imitating his aggression, the child transforms himself from the person threatened into the person who makes the threat.

[1]Anna Freud, The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense, tr. from the German by Cecil Baines, New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1946. [See especially Chapter IX, "Identification with the Aggressor"]

> In Beyond the Pleasure Principle the significance of this change from the passive to the active role as a means of assimilating unpleasant or traumatic experiences in infancy is discussed in detail. (Italics mine, M.B., pg. 121-122).

The use of this particular mechanism, Anna Freud argues, is an intermediate step in the development of the super-ego; as such it is a "normal" stage in the development of personality. It is "normal" especially when the child is threatened by external aggression.

So when the Boy internalizes the aggression which is implicit in the philosophy of revenge, he is responding in a reasonable and predictable fashion. He defends himself; he preserves his ego. However, his later development, when the original sources of aggression are gone, shows a pathology, because his aggression at that time is generalized. If we assume for a moment that the protagonist of Steps is a mature version of the Boy of The Painted Bird a further comment of A. Freud is strikingly appropriate:

> The particular combination of introjection and projection to which we have applied the term 'identification with aggressor' can be regarded as normal only so long as the ego employs it in his conflict with authority, i.e., in its efforts to deal with anxiety-objects. It is a defensive process which ceases to be innocuous and becomes pathological when it is carried over into the love-life [op. cit., p. 129].

The philosophy of revenge reveals a pathology because it is generalized, no longer appropriate for the immediate situation of the Boy (as adult in Steps) or at the end of The Painted Bird. As a result the creed of revenge enables the Boy to preserve himself, but at the price of sacrificing those values that would enable him to rejoin the community.

Not only does the outward expression of hatred preserve the self at the critical moment, it arms the indiviudal with new and effective

weapons to deal with a destructive society in the future:

> . . .to possess hate is to possess great power, and the wielder of that power has control of magnificent gifts. Like Prospero he rules his kingdom, and justice is meted out according to his will. Things are as he sees them to be; if not, they soon submit to his vision of the world. He can shape his world as he wills: Prospero's wand becomes revenge [Notes, VII, p. 100].

The Boy's evolution is nearly complete. He is about to reenter the world fully armed with teeth and nails. And in the concluding episodes when he is re-united with his parents we see him in action. Yet the very last episode, in which he regains his voice, suggests a re-unification with the community, possibly a full return. Because a return seems inconsistent with the direction he has taken, we should take a careful look at that episode.

One night during a police raid he is arrested with his criminal companions. Shortly after, his parents move from the city. That winter they send him to live with an old ski instructor in a mountain shelter. The old man leads a simple life; he is calm, patient and religious. In the beginning, the Boy assumes a condescending attitude towards him:

> The instructor kneeled down for prayer while I looked on indulgently. Here was a grown man, educated in the city, who acted like a simple peasant and could not accept the idea that he was alone in the world and could expect no assistance from anyone. Everyone of us stood alone and the sooner a man realized that all Gavrillas, Mitkas, and Silent Ones were expendable, the better for him. It mattered little if one was mute; people did not understand one another anyway [PB, pp. 267-268].

Nonetheless, the instructor evokes the Boy's respect, and he assumes the role of novitiate, as he has done throughout the novel.

> I tried to obey him and was glad when I earned his scant praise.

In a sudden blizzard, the Boy has an accident. Waking in a hospital room he hears the phone ringing, lifts it to his ear and hears a man's voice:

> . . .somewhere at the other end of the wire there was someone who wanted to talk with me. . . .I felt an overpowering desire to speak. I opened my mouth and strained. Sounds crawled up my throat [PB, p. 269].

The few sounds become an outpour, a recitation of his life as a wanderer. He regains the voice he lost when he was cast into the dung pit.

The archetypal pattern--the elderly ski instructor as master or priest, the Boy as novitiate, the ascetic setting--suggests learning, healing, reconstruction, or perhaps the Boy's initiation into a higher truth. The process of healing is realized in the re-capture of speech. The response to the man's voice on the telephone suggests a return to the community. If we take this episode at face value, then, the Boy emerges as more of a "positive" hero, and the episode indicates a final point in his moral evolution.

But typically the reader finds this ending unconvincing, and for several good reasons, all of which can be summed up as convenience at the expense of consistency.

The ending is convenient formalistically because it provides a closure to the action, an end which is consistent with the beginning and middle; thus: (1) the Boy is separated from his parents, (2) the Boy is separated from the community and loses his voice; and (3) the

Boy regains his voice and rejoins the community. This fits with the actual dramatic tension of the book which lies between alienation and community.

This kind of ending is also convenient because it is positive. It has the feel, if not the conviction, of moral enlightenment. Presumably the Boy has made some sort of spiritual leap which enables him to reconcile the normal desires to trust other human beings and share with them with the profound fear and distrust of others which he has acquired through his experience. But the reader's sense of the realities of emotional life rejects this possiblity.

In his essay, Kosinski himself says this about the Boy's future:

> For this world he feels only boundless contempt and hate; and the shadow of this contempt will lengthen as the Boy grows. . .
>
> The Boy. . .embodies the drama of our culture: the tragedy of the crime always remains with the living. This drama cannot be killed on the fronts, bombed in cities, confined in concentration camps. This drama is borne by all the survivors of the crime, both the conquerors and the conquered. Its essence is hate [Notes, VII, p. 101].

But when Kosinski discusses the Boy's future in epilogue to the earlier editions, he does not mention hate or contempt. There he emphasizes what seems to be positive qualities--the Boy's sense of independence and self-sufficiency fostered by his experience.

> During the war years his powers of self-dependence had increased enormously, and the maintenance of personal freedom had been the goal to which he had given all his intelligence and energy [PB, p. 271].

The contrast in emphasis in these two passages is another indication of the moral dilemma underlying Kosinski's work: on the one hand,

a desire for self-realization; on the other, the desire for revenge which leads to the perverse.

For now we can say that the final episode implies, at best, the Boy's return to the community in a marginal position. This comment, which Kosinski makes in the essay, probably best describes the Boy as he emerges from the novel:

> And so the Boy survives the war, filled with the terrible poison of hatred which gives him a goal to live for and therefore helps him to endure [Notes, p. 101].

ii

The tragedy of The Painted Bird, then, is that the victim adopts the morality of his persecutor. "From a defenseless victim in the hands of pursuers he becomes a living symbol of those who had previously pursued him." [Notes, VII, p. 101.] This is the final irony of the Boy's decision to join the "Evil Ones" and to adopt the creed of Mitka the Sharpshooter. He adopts precisely the creed of the peasants who have brutalized him (even Mitka is most likely a Russian peasant) just as the peasants have adopted the creed of those who have oppressed them:

> Their actions had been governed by the traditions and beliefs of generations of forebears, whose fear of strangers--all too often invading armies--was indeed justified. . . . He came to accept that the peasants were hardly more cruel than any others of their kind and condition. Environment had quite naturally dominated behavior [PB, Epilogue, p. 270].

Compare Kosinski's theme to that of Aeschylus' Oresteia where, for the first time, the legitimacy of blood retribution was questioned. Aeschylus found the answer to the problem of perpetual bloodshed in the

universal laws of the state and its legal organs. But in the age in which Kosinski writes,the state itself and its laws are often the wrongdoers and therefore there is no appeal to justice.

> Could these peasants suddenly forget what the ubiquitous Bekanntmachungen (notices) perpetually reminded them about: that the penalty was death for giving shelter or aid to any Jew or Gypsy under any circumstances whatsoever. This law was not conceived in the remote poverty-stricken villages of Eastern Europe. . . it came to them expressly from that 'civilized' world. . . .Its writing and promulgation were undertaken by men educated in the centers of European culture, brought up with knowledge of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, of the philosophy of Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauler, loving the music of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, the poetry of Goethe and Schiller, and aware of the prose of the finest minds of their generation [Notes, VI, p. 96].

On the basis of similar arguments, many modern writers, especially those of revolutionary purpose,will justify, on two counts, violence and other acts which would normally be thought of as criminal: that they are the only effective means of initiating social and political change; and that they preserve and enhance the self, the theme which seems to underlie the Boy's creed. From the viewpoint of the revolutionary, violence is a necessary means since the state will use violence to preserve the status quo. While this argument seems undeniable, the problem for the revolutionary--who is almost always of humanistic persuasion--is to justify the use of nonhumanistic means; usually then, the revolutionary intends to limit violence to the transitional (the revolutionary) period, or he attributes different moral meanings to violence, depending on its object; thus, the violence of revolutionaries is different, in kind, from that of the state or oppressor. Marcuse, for example:

> In my lecture I have emphasized that there are many different kinds of violence employed in defense and in aggression. . . . The violence of revolutionary terror, for example, is very different from that of the White terror, because revolutionary terror implies its own abolition in the process of creating a free society, which is not the case for the White terror.[2]

Here again we encounter a moral dilemma which resembles that of the Kosinski protagonist; a desire for humanistic freedom on one hand, an impulse for terror and destruction on the other. With this exception--here it is fully rationalized; destruction leads to humanism. This is exactly the kind of philosophy Camus condemns in The Rebel, on the grounds that it is a moral and logical contradiction.

The philosophy of violent revolution, nihilism, and the idea of the perverse are related in the moral dilemma they pose and in their historical roots--the final collapse of religious faith in the 19th century and with it the collapse of a belief in a coherent universe ruled over by a divine intelligence. While this view and its implications are hardly limited to any one school of thought, the atheistic existentialists express it in the clearest terms:

> The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an a priori God, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the God exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky said, 'If God didn't exist, everything would be possible.' That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to.[3]

[2]Herbert Marcuse, Five Lectures, tr. Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shirley M. Weber, Boston Beacon Press (1970).

[3]Jean Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions. New York: Philosophical Society (1957).

This is the starting point of both existentialism and nihilism. Nihilism which began as an affirmation of dignity and freedom decayed into violence and terror, possibly because it did not, in Camus' words, recognize responsible limits. For Camus and Sartre the solution to the crisis produced by the collapse of faith is man's assumption of the responsibility for his own destiny. He sets his own limits and creates himself.

In choosing the perverse, the Boy chooses nihilism. It is not, however, a peculiar individual response. It is a prominent modern response to the modern crisis.

iii

In a world of crumbling belief, man experiences alienation. That and the moral problems of choice it implies are expressed symbolically by the major structural events of the novel. There are three of these.

The Boy is thrust by circumstances into an alien world. As Sartre says,

> We are alone, with no excuses. That is the idea I shall try to convey when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.[4]

Kosinski repeats this theme in Being There where his protagonist, aptly named "Chance", is expelled from his "garden", not because of sin, pride, or disobedience, as in the case of Adam in the original garden, but through accident. In general, the modern fictional convention of man's

[4] Ibid.

finding himself in the context of life by accident manifests the conviction of our age that one can no longer believe in a larger order, which guarantees each man, or Man, his purpose.

The Boy loses his voice. As a manifestation of inner paralysis, this is also, in kind, a familiar convention of our fiction. One thinks, for example, of the protagonist of Gunter Grass' Tin Drum who, at the age of three, makes the rational decision not to talk or grow. Then there is Melville's Bartleby, a grandfather of modern protagonists, who reduces speech to the barest uses--to communicate his own negation: "I would prefer not to." And Lucky in Waiting for Godot, whose problem is the obverse--too much talk, dissociated and fragmented as his world--which, in the end, is the same as no talk at all. In addition to signifiying paralysis, the breakdown in speech has the actual effect of intensifying the alienation of the individual from the community: the Boy is compelled into the position of bystander and observer, also a familiar situation for the contemporary hero:

> Observation is a silent process; without the means of participation, the silent one must observe. Perhaps this silence is also a metaphor for dissociation from the community and from something greater [Notes, III, p. 92].

This "something greater" is undoubtedly alienation from self, and ultimately from Being.

But while silence enforces isolation from others and from the community, it also compels action:

> Whereas speech may be a substitute for action, or an oblique method of suggesting it, action speaks for itself. [Notes, III, p. 91].

Because the Boy cannot express himself in speech, he must express himself in acts; moreover, the threats of his immediate situation demand action. Yet there is no dependable external guide to action. He is caught in the dilemma described by Sartre:

> Therefore everything takes place as if I were compelled to be responsible. I am abandoned in the world, not in the sense that I might remain abandoned and passive in a hostile universe, like a board floating on the water, but rather in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility for an instant.[5]

The Boy regains his speech. As a fictional convention, the recapture of speech should mean a return to the community. But the Boy's return is superficial. He chooses to remain a marginal figure--a kind of spiritual outlaw. By this choice and by adopting the creed of impersonal revenge, he attempts to reverse the roles, to make others the victim. But to become the pursuer rather than the pursued, he must sever his bonds from the community, he must dehumanize himself by eradicating compassion and empathy. He commits, against himself, precisely that crime which made him a victim in the first place--he makes himself into an object. He remains a victim.

In a culture where belief and institutions have crumbled--Kosinski suggests in his essay on Steps--the choice of the perverse seems to be ". . .the only possible creative act, the independent act of choice and self-enhancement. . ." This is the choice the Boy makes, and it is the choice which all of Kosinski's protagonists make, or are forced to make.

[5] Ibid.

The Painted Bird shows the evolution that leads to that choice. The Boy rejects the ideologies and institutions that fail him, together with the social orders they represent. He responds to those who brutalize him with a growing hatred. The one ideology he clings to is the one which will never fail him because it is the perfect expression of hatred which is enduring. His condition at the end of the novel is pathological. That pathology, acted out in an adult world, furnishes the material in Steps.

Chapter 2 Steps

Steps, Jerzy Kosinski's second novel, published in the fall of 1968, was received with widespread critical acclaim, and in the spring of 1969 won the National Book Award. In design, the book consists of some fifty short episodes narrated by an unnamed man. The construction of the individual episodes is classical--each has a clearly outlined plot and each is self-enclosed. While the episodes do fall into general thematic groups and while there is a general sense of movement--from Eastern Europe to the United States, for example--there is no overall plot in the traditional sense--that is, a framework of action into which the individual episodes might fit. Interspersed among the episodes are fragmentary conversations in dramatic form, presumably between the narrator and his mistress. The subjects of the individual episodes comprise a catalog of the grotesque: sexual perversion, murder, disease, violence and crime. Typically the narrator is the principle "actor" in these small tales which he reports in a narrative characterized by a pervasive sense of detachment.

At the time of publication, the reviewers remarked the novel's unusual form and nearly all acclaimed it as innovative, but few attempted more specific criticism. The reviewers also praised Kosinski's style which had become even more lucid and controlled since The Painted Bird. But the moral implications of the material as well as the implicit amorality of the author-narrator's posture troubled many reviewers. Writing in the New Leader, Geoffrey Wolff suggested that Kosinski had

not fulfilled an implicit responsibility to present a balanced view of life: "The novel leaves no orifice unexploited. It goes beyond guilt, ignores love. One must question its morality."[1]

Altogether the novel seemed puzzling. It was innovative. It addressed itself to issues that had profound moral implications. Yet, despite the transparency of style and the sense of simplicity, the novel did not offer readers any readily apparent moral or aesthetic framework with which they could approach it. So, while everyone recognized the power of the novel, only a very few ventured any definitive evaluations and these were either too flattering or too harsh, and usually for the wrong reasons. Irving Howe's response probably best expresses what most reviewers felt. Certainly it represents what most readers say:

> It is a work highly problematic in aesthetic strategy and moral implications, and even after two careful readings I do not pretend to grasp it fully. All I hope is that I will not gloss over my puzzlement by means of an overheated "literary" rhetoric, such as overwhelmed or intimidated reviewers often employ to mask their difficulties.[2]

As in the case of The Painted Bird, Kosinski wrote a critical essay on Steps--The Art of the Self, Essays a Propos Steps. This also is a difficult piece. But it offers substantial insights into Kosinski's thinking. Here he develops what I believe are the two ideas most relevant to all his fiction, the "perverse" and "transference."

While Kosinski discusses "transference" frequently in "The Art of the Self" he never offers a definitive explanation of the term. We will

[1]Geoffrey Wolff, "Growing Poisonous Flowers," New Leader, October 7, 1968, pp. 18-19.

[2]Irving Howe, "From the Other Side of the Moon," Harper's, March, 1969, pp. 102-105.

get a clearer idea of what transference means by examining the essay in some detail. At the same time we will see that Kosinski takes a strangely ambivalent position in his judgement of its moral implications.

Kosinski first mentions transference as he begins a discussion of the episode in which the narrator installs a listening device in a woman's apartment, seduces her, then, when he becomes bored with her, considers introducing her to drugs:

> From the viewpoint of the protagonist of Steps, the only truly satisfying relationship, then, is one of growing domination, one in which his experience--a certain form of the past--can be projected onto the other person.
>
> When the narrator has become so intimately involved with this woman that he has succeeded in unburdening himself and grafting his past onto her, when the relationship no longer has any valid function, then he no longer needs her, since the forms of his past and his effort to discard them were the basis of his need.
>
> Not only is the woman no longer needed, she is also no longer wanted. She is now his past, and that he has discarded. Since his past has transferred to another being, he assumes that its cancerous action will continue in the other person. It was a necessary act because his past was crippling him, preventing him from acting fully in the present.[3]

After reading these passages we want to know two things: What are the "forms of the past"? By what mechanism are they "transferred"?

First, let us consider Kosinski's attitude towards "transference" without knowing exactly what transference is. From the phrase "it was a necessary act", we might infer that Kosinski is asserting the truth of the preceding lines--that the narrator's past was in fact preventing him

[3]Jerzy Kosinski, "The Art of the Self: Essays a Propos Steps," Exile, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Toronto, York University). For convenience all future references to the essay will be indicated in the text by title and page number.

from "acting fully in the present", and that, therefore, Kosinski places a positive value on the protagonist's action. But Kosinski goes on to add:

> The narrator's projections serve also an opposite function that of a mutual shield thrust out to prevent the admission of the present and to perpetuate and intensify shared memories.
>
> The hostility discernible in his relationships indicates an occasional recognition of the deception, of the fact that they serve solely as the defense against spontaneity of the present moment. [Art, pg. 53].

This seems a clear statement of Kosinski's own attitude, and therefore, we must assume that the earlier statement is supposed to represent the narrator's own rationale, a deception either for himself or the other, in this case, the woman of the episode which Kosinski is discussing. Notice, however, the ambiguity of Kosinski's discussion in these passages, indicating, perhaps, his inability, or unwillingness to separate himself as author from the protagonist or his indecision on the moral issues involved.

His comment that the narrator's "projections" are "a defense against the spontaneity of the present moment" is consistent with another reference to the subject of transference which Kosinski makes during a discussion of suicide. Referring to Camus' play Caligula, Kosinski writes,

> Man dies because the human condition both wills it and allows it. The definitive act of defiance and of superiority over the human condition is to defeat Nature with her own weapon, is to bring about death at will (truly one's last will). [Art, pg. 54].

At this point in his exposition, Kosinski is not yet speaking of the protagonist of Steps, and one assumes that he is stating his own attitudes towards suicide. But, as he continues, he attributes the same attitude to the protagonist.

> For the protagonist of Steps, suicide is an act of the present. In performing it a man chooses to escape from his future and from his past, thus overcoming the knowledge that he will die.
>
> By suicide, he takes over a natural function. To die in nature's time is to accede to a denial of man's dignity: to die in one's own time is to affirm that dignity. Man has the power to choose--it is his comfort in the face of the predictable.
>
> In committing suicide, the man makes himself historical (that is, people can and must preface their statements about him with "he was"). He is transferring the burden of his past onto the shoulders of the world, onto history. [Art, pg. 54]

Notice first the parallel between "the man (. . .) transferring the burden of his past onto the shoulders of the world" and the passage we discussed earlier in which Kosinski asserts that the narrator is transferring forms of his past onto the woman of the apartment episode. So we see that the same dynamics are involved although we do not yet know what they are. The above passage offers another difficulty: When Kosinski says, "For the protagonist of Steps suicide is an act of the present." is he speaking about the literal suicide? And whose? A minor character's? The narrator's? There are only two suicides in the novel: a girl at the university and an unrelated male student. And the narrator has little to say about the fact of their suicides in an evaluative sense. There is no evidence for the narrator's suicide. It would make more sense to assume that Kosinski is speaking metaphorically

about the protagonists desire to "kill" the spontaneity of the present moment. This interpretation would answer the question of why Kosinski mentions suicide in connection with the narrator of Steps. However it raises still another question related to Kosinski's evaluation of the act.

As we have seen, Kosinski began his discussion of suicide with a statement that appears to be an expression of his own views; then he switches to the protagonist of Steps, making no distinction between his views and those of his protagonist; finally, he uses the general term "the man." Apparently, Kosinski intends us to understand that the view of suicide which is expressed here is his view, that of his protagonist, and the general condition (as an ethical possibility) of all men. Now let us for a moment assume that this is so and that the kind of transference accomplished by suicide is equivalent to the kind accomplished in the narrator's relationship to the woman in the apartment episode.

We recall that Kosinski, in discussing that episode, speaks in negative terms about the narrator's actions:

> The hostility discernible in his relationships indicates an occasional recognition of the deception, of the fact that they (projections or transferences) serve solely as a defense against spontaneity of the present moment. [Art, pg. 53].

And earlier in the same discussion, Kosinski, in describing the process of "transference" from narrator to woman, states that,

> The issue of solipsism is always at the center of such dark art--and the game of expropriation is always momentary and hence illusory. [Art, pg. 53]

The tone of both of these above comments, in regard to the narrator's transference to the woman, are clearly negative. Should we apply the same judgement to the other example of transference--that which Kosinski says occurs in suicide? When Kosinski discusses suicide he takes what seems to be an affirmative stance, but because of the ambiguities of his argument we cannot be sure, and therefore we cannot make any firm judgement.

Our sense of Kosinski's ambiguity towards "transference" is further heightened by the conclusion of the discussion in question, [Art, pg. 54-55], a discussion of Sade. Sade, Kosinski argues, reduces people to their most basic characteristics--those which will serve Sade's own ends, which will "advance his own intended action." On this basis, Kosinski calls Sade's vision "theatrical," meaning "ritualistic."

> . . .the other person is the stage onto which Sade projects a form of his past. [Italics mine, M.B.] In this way he acts out the self, obtains a kind of purgation derived from the scene which does not last beyond the scene's physical duration. Thus Sade must act again and again--without lasting satisfaction, without the true recognition of having discarded the forms of his past. In forcing history to summarize him in a word, he has obliterated his self, but has marked his survivors with chosen forms of his past, with his particular shadow [Art, pg. 55].

Aside from his use of the word "projects" which he uses interchangably with "transfers" throughout the essay, this parallels exactly what Kosinski says about the narrator in the episode involving the woman in the apartment. In both cases, the process involves someone (the narrator or Sade) attempting to rid themselves of the "forms of the past" by moving it to someone else (the other). And in only one respect does the

passage differ from Kosinski's comments about suicide: ". . .without the true recognition of having discarded the forms of his past." [sic.] The The qualifying use of "true" suggests that there are effective or valid ways of transferring the past or ineffective or invalid ways. Perhaps Kosinski means to imply that literal suicide is superior as a means of discarding the forms of the past to Sade's real or his fictionalized activities. Again the ambiguity of the argument precludes any firm decision.

What we are able to say so far is that Kosinski draws an implicit parallel between the narrator of Steps, the suicide (as Kosinski defines him), and De Sade. In each case the actor is attempting to relieve himself of the burden of his past by transferring to another, a sexual partner or others, mankind in general, or the more abstract personage of history. So if we are not yet able to say anything definitive about the process of transference, we can say something about the motive. In each of the examples Kosinski discusses, the principle "actor" wants to get rid of his past. This is consistent with what we have already said about the narrator's motives in his choice of sadism in relation to others: his motive in part for sadism is to escape his "facticity", the conditions by which he comes into existence in a particular world. The personal past is a major component of that facticity. At this point, we can also say that inasmuch as Kosinski is ambivalent towards "transference," he may also be ambivalent towards the motive for "transference."

At various points in the essay, Kosinski uses the term "transference" interchangeably with "projection", and this use of terms may give us further insight into the process Kosinski describes. Both are classic

psychoanalytic terms referring to similar processes. Transference refers to the phenomenon, encountered in psychoanalytic therapy, where the patient expresses towards the therapist, emotions previously experienced towards a central person in his life. The analyst, then, becomes a surrogate for a parent, teacher, husband, wife, or lover. Typically the emotions are hostile and often they represent emotions experienced in childhood.

Projection is one of the classic defense mechanisms, a defense mechanism being a pattern of behavior which enables the individual to defend his ego. In projection (the popular name for which is scapegoating), the individual ascribes to another party unwanted emotions, feelings, or attitudes.

Both of these may be involved in what Kosinski means by transference: The victim, or other, in the relationship may be a surrogate for those others in the narrator's past. By expressing hostility to the present other, the narrator avenges himself for old wrongs. (This pattern explains the Boy's later behavior in The Painted Bird, for example; there is little similar background for the narrator of Steps; when we meet him he is already embarked on a career of perversity.) In addition, by projecting, by ascribing his own feelings and emotions to the present other, the narrator believes (according to Kosinski in his essay) that he can rid himself of them.

Kosinski does employ this kind of psychoanalytic argument at least once in the essay--in a final discussion of transference in reference to the Nazi persecutions:

> In purging an "unhealthy" mass element, a nation was really attempting to purge the unhealthy (the unacceptable) in itself. This selected group served as a screen on which one could

> project one's own individually crippled past. This was acting out a sheer transference. [Art, pg. 56]

This is scapegoating in the classic psychoanalytic sense, and Kosinski refers to it as a "sheer transference." We should also notice how the language of his passage describing a political phenomenon parallels descriptions of the narrator in his relations with others; a similar situation occurs in Being There where "Chance", that novel's protagonist is a "blank page" (the code name assigned to him by Russian espionage) on whom an entire nation projects their fantasies. Transference has historical and political dimensions. In the case of Nazi Germany they were institutionalized by means of the dominant political ideology.

While this explanation of Nazi persecutions is hardly original, Kosinski gives it an original twist with a theory of the relation of memory and emotion:

> For the protagonist of Steps memories carry no emotions: they exist as incidents, as concise dramas. He does not remember (i.e., experience) his past emotion or pain. He can recall his response to a specific incident in the past--a movement of the mind, a physical reaction--but he cannot re-experience the pain or the emotion proper which produced this response.
>
> For the protagonist of Steps emotions have no memories: they exist only in the present. When he reads emotion into memory, he is acting in the present, spontaneously filling the structures of the drama with feeling (this is similar to what one does when engrossed in a play or in music). Thus he is revisiting the present.
>
> A speculative aside: memories have no emotions, and emotions have no memories. Perhaps that is why the Nazis were compelled to create motive memories in order to hold the German people within the strictures of the past and make spontaneous present motion impossible. Their purpose was to create a crippled group past and maintain it in an almost frozen state. [Art, pg. 55]

Let us set this out in systematic terms for examination: (1) One can remember the event in the past, but one cannot remember the emotional response to the act; therefore one must assign to the event in the past an emotion taken from the present. This would explain Kosinski's insistence throughout the essays that the past is never remembered but fictionalized. (2) Present emotions are not connected to events in the past. This statement presents certain difficulties: The statement only applies to a situation where the present emotion is connected to an event in the past which cannot be remembered ("emotions have no memories"). This, however, contradicts the first statement which implies that only events from the past--as opposed to emotions--can be remembered. In addition, neither statement defines the connection between present events and present emotions, and one would suspect that a similar disassociation might apply to the narrator in that respect.

The passage from which we abstract these statements must be taken as a paradox; on this level the contradiction disappears if we interpret the passage to mean that for the protagonist a radical disassociation has occurred between act and feeling (event and emotion). This general interpretation would also cover the case where there is no connection between present emotion and present event, a condition that is suggested by the narrator's alienation.

This interpretation also explains why Kosinski describes the protagonist's assertion that he must unburden himself of the forms of the past in order to act freely in the present as a deception [Art, p. 53]. By transferring the past to the "other", the protagonist avoids the responsibility that would follow as a necessary condition of living in the world. But without an integration of act and feeling, he cannot act

meaningfully in the present, chosen a future, or "act out" or "live" his past.

The significance of a disassociation of act from feeling is consistent with what we have already said about the narrator's choice of sadism: The disassociation of act from feeling is another manifestation of the narrator's attempts to deny his facticity; that is, his existence in a world of contingencies.

At this point we can attempt a definition of transference. First, the term describes the dynamics of a relationship of dominance in which there are two parties, a dominant "actor" (the narrator, Sade, the Nazis the rational suicide) and a submissive "other" (the woman, the others in general, mankind, history, a nation).

These dynamics involve both of the classic psychoanalytic meanings of "transference" and "projection." "Transference" applies in that the submissive "other" acts as a surrogate for another or others from the "actor's" past towards whom the "actor" can express hostility or hate for real or imagined wrongs. "Projection" applies in that the "other" functions as a screen on whom the "actor" projects memories, desires, fantasies, attitudes or fears, anything, in short, which is emotionally unacceptable or burdensome to the "actor." As in the original ritual of scapegoating, the popular name for projection, the "other" is a ritual victim who accepts on his head the "sins" of the "actor."

Not only does ritual structure the situation in which transference occurs, it also corresponds to the nature of the material being transferred--in this case, the <u>forms of the past</u>, an expression which Kosinski uses rather than "the past". The use of the qualifier "forms"

suggests that Kosinski understands the past in terms of structures, perhaps repeated or recurring experiences.

At least part of the method of transference is ritualistic, or theatrical, in that it involves acting-out with pre-conceived roles. For example, in his relationship with the woman of the conversational interludes, the narrator is possibly re-enacting experiences that he has already related to her, such as the episode involving the village girl [Steps, pp. 3-7] and the credit card, or the episode involving the woman in the apartment [Steps, pp. 127-130]. Transference also involves the acting out of universally understood patterns of dominance such as that which occurs in the sexual relationship described in the conversational interludes or more archetypal patterns such as the one suggested in the narrator's sexual encounter with the acrobat [Steps, pp. 72-77].

So far, however, we have spoken about transference as if it were actual. Obviously the parties involved in such a relationship are changed in some way by the experience. But whether or not the narrator or "actor" does, in fact, rid himself of the burdens of his past is questionable. Kosinski, in discussion transference, says, ". . .the game of expropriation is always momentary and hence illustory" [Art, p. 53]. But according to Kosinski, the protagonist believes it to be real, and as we will see in a moment, Kosinski himself seems to subscribe to the reality of transference as a basis for an aesthetic theory.

Kosinski's theory of transference explains the central design of the novel as well as the intended relationship of the novel to the reader.

The novel is organized around the framework provided by the conversational interludes which occur more frequently in the last half of the book. We should notice once again the quality of these interludes. They are dramatic, that is, they consist entirely of dialogue between two people, the narrator and his mistress. The language is entirely formal suggesting the ritualistic nature of the situation and the relationship. And, as I pointed out earlier, the narrator assumes the dominant role--master or priest--the woman assumes the role of initiate. Their conversations concern their relationship, which is on-going through most of the novel, or the narrator's past. Thus, within this relationship the narrator acts out a transference to his mistress. She assumes the role of the other.

The interludes, fragmentary though they are, are written from an objective point-of-view, and therefore establish a present moment from which the novel is narrated. One imagines, in fact, that the episodes, narrated in the first-person, constitute the forms of the past which the narrator is transferring to his mistress. Yet the "story line" of these conversations also ends within the span of the novel. In the final episode, an unidentified woman finds that her lover has abandoned her in a sea-side hotel. If we assume that this woman is the mistress of the conversational interludes, then the last episode documents the end of that relationship. From the narrator's standpoint, the relationship must end because she has served her purpose. She is the victim to whom the narrator has transferred the forms of his past--the episodes of the novel. Because the narrator is "gone" in the final episode, that episode is told from the "outside" of the novel--in the third

person; this establishes another "present" moment, that from which any writer writes.

The idea of the narrator's experience becoming part of this woman, through transference, is elaborated metaphorically by the imagery of the final paragraphs which describe her undressing and entering the ocean:

> On the bottom a shadow glided over the seaweed, lending life and motion to the ocean floor. She looked up through the water to find its source and caught sight of the tiny leaf that had touched her before [Steps, pg. 148].

The "tiny leaf" represents the interlude she shares with the narrator; the shadow which "ends life and motion to the ocean floor" represents the changes in her life initiated by the transference of the narrator's experience.[4]

In addition to explaining the central design of the novel, transference also explains the relationship between the novel and the reader, or at least the relationship Kosinski intended. The woman of the interludes and the final episode is a surrogate for the reader. Recall that the final episode is prefaced with this italicized passage:

> WHEN I'M GONE. I'll be for you just another memory descending upon you uninvited, stirring up your thoughts, confusing your feelings. And then you'll recognize yourself in this woman. [Steps, pg. 146].

[4]At least one other writer has suggested a similar interpretation of the structure of the novel (Howard M. Harper, Jr., Contemporary Literature, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1971, pg. 213, University of Wisconsin). Harper, however, asserts that the woman of the apartment episode is the same as the narrator's mistress who appears in the interludes. This is odd, considering that the narrator's story of the woman of the apartment is told to his mistress within one of the conversational interludes. Harper also suggests that the woman of the final episode (who he correctly identifies with the narrator's mistress) is committing suicide as she walks into the ocean. Aside from the lack of evidence for this interpreation, it seems to contradict Kosinski's suggestions that the narrator's experience, once transferred, will continue to grow in the other.

"This woman" refers to the abandoned woman of that final episode, but the "you" of this passage is the reader and it is to him that this sentiment is addressed. Now it is the reader who has absorbed the forms of the past of the author just as the woman of the interludes has absorbed the forms of the past of the narrator-protagonist. The shadow of the "tiny leaf" also falls on the reader. The reader discovers that he too is a "victim", the other-as-object is his relationship with Kosinski which is exactly Kosinski's intention:

> At the end of every consecutive incident Steps allows the reader to break his journey--or to continue reading. In the fissure separating these possibilities the struggle between the book (the predator) and the reader (the victim) takes place [Art, pg. 48].

Transference takes place within a relationship described by Kosinski in Art of the Self as one of "growing domination." In many respects, as the essay suggests, this relationship resembles Sarte's version of "sado-masochism," the dynamics of which help to explain the moral nature of the protagonist.[5]

In his relation with others a governing pattern of behavior emerges, a ritual, in which the protagonist meets the other--often a stranger--they engage in a struggle of will, the other capitulates, the protagonist then loses interest.

> If there is anything in a person which enables that person to remain independent, the protagonist of Steps attempts to conquer that independence; if he succeeds he feels only indifference [Art, pg. 54].

[5]A summary of Sarte's ontology is provided in the Appendix.

A nonsexual episode perhaps best illustrates this pattern: The protagonist becomes aware of a retired watchman [Steps, pp. 103-105] who guards his factory although it is shut down and he is retired. The protagonist for no apparent reason engages in a contest with him, hurling stones, attempting to force the man to give up his territory. The watchman's defiance makes the protagonist even more determined. The struggle escalates and the protagonist accidentally kills the man with a rock.

The struggle is clearly one of pure will. The mere existence of the watchman as a free agent (as a subjective consciousness) in his own right constitutes a threat to the protagonist.

But the pattern is most often sexual: The protagonist has concealed a microphone in a woman's apartment [Steps, pp. 127-130]. Using the information he obtains he becomes her lover; "Now I could manipulate her: she was in love with me." He becomes bored with her, and he considers introducing her to drugs, hoping that she might become an addict ". . .she might free herself from what she had been. She might emerge as a very different woman. . .Like a polyp, she would expand and develop in unpredictable directions."

In another episode, the protagonist and a woman are out walking at night when they are accosted by a group of men who rape the girl. Following this their relationship changes. He begins to demean her.

> . . .forcefully I subjected her to various experiments stimulating her responses, exploring and violating her in spite of her pleas and protests. She became an object which I could control or pair with other objects [Steps, pp. 54-59].

Later, after a steady process of deterioration, he offers her as a "gift" to the men at a party and leaves as an orgy begins.

The two general modes of relating to others are love and hate; the protagonist of Steps has chosen hate (sadism). Therefore, the kind of relationship he engages in is sado-masochistic, in which he assumes the dominant role and strives to reduce the other to an object-for-him, thus denying the other's existence as a subjective mind.

The original motive for turning to love or hate is the desire to preserve one's own subjectivity--to resist becoming an object for the other (Sarte). In sadism the motive is to totally deny the subjectivity of the other by making him the object. By denying the other as a subjective mind, one "frees" oneself from the restrictions that the other places on the self, for the existence of the other as subject is a reminder of facticity--the truth that the self does live in a world with limits:

> "Hell is other people." (Sarte) Hell is the inability to escape from others who prove and prove again to you that you are as they see you. Hell is also the inability to be alone, to see yourself as your self sees you. Both convert the subjectivity of the other into a menacing object and originate the sado-masochistic struggle to impose our will on another more dominantly than he can impose his will on us. [Art, p. 61].

In denying his facticity and insisting on his transcendence,[6] the protagonist creates the illusion of "solipsism," a state in which he alone exists, and thus causes others-as-objects to be. In one of the conversational interludes, the protagonist discusses prostitution:

[6]The existence of self as a potential in the future. Transcendence denies the limitations of the past or present. See Appendix.

> [He] . . .she appears to be not so much a woman as a desire that all men share in common.
>
> [She] But after you leave her, she isn't even aware that you exist.
>
> [He] When I leave her, the awareness of what has happened leaves with me: that awareness is mine, not hers [Steps, p. 61].

In still another of the conversational interludes, he expresses a similar idea:

> [She] When you are inside me, why do you urge me to caress myself at the same time? I feel you, so why must I touch myself?
>
> [He] I want you, you alone. Buy beyond you and me together, I see myself in our love-making. It is this vision of myself as your lover I wish to retain and make more real.
>
> [She] Then all you need me for is to provide a stage on which you can project and view yourself, and see how your discarded experiences become alive when they affect me [Steps, pp. 130-131].

The sexual form of solipsism, as these passages suggest, is narcissism. In both cases, the woman is an object-as-tool through which the narrator can realize his own fantasies about himself. The insistence that the reality of a fantasy about one's own self is the significant reality implies a denial of the other's reality as subject as well as the other's experience. Such a denial, however, contradicts the reality of the situation: that the other does exist as subject, even though the other accepts the role of object within the relationship that the narrator has defined. Speaking of the relationship of struggle, dominance and indifference, Kosinski writes:

> But when that instant passes, he feels only emptiness and he moves again from threat to conquest, from love to indifference. The issue of solipsism is always at the center of such dark art--and the game of expropriation is always momentary and hence illusory [Art, pg. 53].

This pattern, which I will call sado-masochistic, using Sarte's general definition, is highly ritualized in all of the narrator's relations with others. In the sexual relationships, especially, he assumes the role of priest and the woman assumes the role of initiate. The conversational interludes we have just considered are a good example of this. The formality of the language, and the dialectic, suggest a catechism. In another interlude, the woman offers an explicit metaphor in which she compares the rites of the church to the rites of fellatio:

> . . .you know, it's a wierd sensation having it in one's mouth. It's as if the entire body of the man, everything had suddenly shrunk into this one thing. . . .I loved what was ejected from you: like hot wax, it was suddenly melting all over me, over my neck and breasts and stomach. I felt as though I were being christened: it was so white and pure [Steps, pg. 83].

The importance of ritual for the narrator is explained by the dynamics of the sado-masochistic relationship. One part accepts the role of object by freely willing away his freedom. He no longer strives to preserve himself as subject for the other. The fact of his subjectivity, however, remains. What he presents, then, is one aspect of his being.

> In sado-masochism there is a lack of acknowledgement of the self by the other. This relation, more than hate, is the true opposite of love, for if love is the dual acknowledgement of two selves, sado-masochism denies them totally. [Art, pg. 58].

By restricting the other to only one aspect of his being, the narrator does not have to acknowledge him as a subject, that is, as a self. It is for this reason that the narrator seeks out strangers and interposes himself in their lives. The stranger, especially, has no reality as a self.

> We see strangers as blocks of objective traits, identified with what lies in our past. We see them in theatrical terms; the complexity of mutual identification still lies ahead since we are not yet involved. . . .At this point, we have not yet begun to care [Art, pg. 52].

The importance of ritual for the protagonist, then, is control. The ritual offers a preconceived form in which the narrator can experience a relationship without the danger of emotional involvement. The specific ritual of sado-masochism is especially suited to this purpose since it defines the other as object. In such a ritual the narrator retains the privileges of author, director and principle actor. He is like God:

> When the boy in Steps kills the children, he is performing a drama at the level of a relationship with a stranger. He selects only those facets of the individual which suit his action. . . .Perhaps these murders satisfy the murderer's sense of self and gain for him an increased solidity, a temporary freedom, a previously unreachable equality, and at the same time an absolute superiority. These are rituals of drama, just as Sade's erotic situations are ritual acts and dramas [Art, pg. 57].

Considering the meaning of control for the narrator of Steps, the quotation from the Bhagavidgita which prefaces the novel is essentially ironic:

> For the uncontrolled there is no wisdom, nor for the uncontrolled is there the power of concentration; and for him without concentration there is no peace. And for the unpeaceful, how can there be happiness?

What is the meaning of transference in moral terms? Our discussion of Steps and Kosinski's essay reveals his ambiguity on this point; and, as we will see later in our discussion of Being There and The Devil Tree, this ambiguity persists.

To approach this question let us put the subject of transference in perspective. We can think of transference as Kosinski's explanation of the dynamics of the perverse where we are considering the relationship of the perverse hero to others, to institutions or society. I have suggested that the perverse is a special case of nihilism where perversity is a reversal of what might be considered the normal human creative/pro-creative instincts. In all of his fiction, the process of transference is bound up with the perverse. Thus, in The Painted Bird which shows the evolution of the perverse hero, the peasants transfer their fears and superstitions to the Boy; he in turn, transfers his accumulated experience to "others" through acts of violence; in Steps, a perverse hero transfers his past to others, particularly to women in relationships of sexual domination; in Being There, a perverse society transfers its desires (which are a response to national hysteria) to the protagonist who assumes the role of other-as-object; and in The Devil Tree, the protagonist Jonathan Whalen explains to the reader that his object in unburdening his past to Karen (transfering it) is to free himself to act in the present, at the same time that the Whalen family (equivalent in social status to the Rockefellers, Fricks, Carnegies) functions as a screen onto which the public projects (or transfers) their fantasies of wealth and power and glamor. In the end Jonathan chooses the perverse as a response to a perverse (upside down) world.

Thus, in discussing the moral implications of transference we are led to a discussion of the moral implications of the perverse and nihilism in general. And since these are the recurring themes of Kosinski's fiction and his essays, we are really talking about the moral implications of all of Kosinski's work.

Kosinski's discussion of the choice of the perverse implies two motives. First, it is a response against an oppressive, suffocating society or culture:

> If sin is any act which prevents the self from functioning freely, the greatest sources of sin are those formerly protective agencies like society and religion. The original sense of "creative" becomes completely reversed; now the only possible creative act, the independent act of choice and self-enhancement, seems to be the destructive act--as in Sade.. . .Perversion, defined as any act or practice or viewpoint which subverts procreation in the physical sense, is esteemed as a gesture of freedom. . . .In perversion, the negation of "the creative" becomes literal--an acting out of a more fundamental negation. . .[Art, pg. 54].

The second motive, explicit in the passage above, is the desire of the individual for self-realization. Kosinski expresses this desire in many different ways throughout his work. A little further on in the same essay, for example, he says,

> . . .to him (the protagonist of Steps) the most meaningful and fulfilling gesture is negative; it is aimed against the collective and is a movement toward the solitude within which the self can display its reality.

And it is on this basis that the protagonist of Steps justifies introducing a woman to drugs, the same woman he has seduced by placing listening devices in her apartment,

> It occurred to me then that if I introduced her to drugs of a certain kind, and if she became addicted, she might free herself from what she had been. She might emerge as a very different woman. . .
>
> Her addition might regenerate all that had become flabby and moribund in her and at the same time break down what was stiff and rigid; she would acquire new desires and new habits and liberate herself from what she thought of me, from what she felt for me. Like a polyp she would expand and develop in unpredictable directions [Steps, pg. 130].

Much of the protagonist's manipulative behavior might be interpreted this way--as a means of freeing others to realize their selves. Kosinski, himself, hints at this early in his essay.

> His entrance often leads to the metamorphosis of others: the credit card in the first incident of the novel becomes the magical object which transforms and releases the peasant girl from herself [Art, pg. 50].

The theme of self-realization is expressed again in Being There by "Chance," of whom the novel says,

> By looking at him, others could open him up and unfold him; not to be seen was to blur and fade out. Perhaps he was missing a lot of simply watching others on TV and not being watched by them [Being There, pg. 13].

and especially in The Devil Tree where Jonathan says of Karen, "I'm sure there are aspects of my personality buried within me that will surface as soon as I know I am completely loved" [The Devil Tree, pg. 32].

The destructive response towards an oppressive society and the desire for self-realization are consistent in that they manifest an impulse for personal existence--for self preservation. Nonetheless, they suggest a contradiction: the destructive act, especially when

directed against others, negates the premises on which self-realization, in the humanistic sense, is achieved.

So, the contradiction which we sense as ambiguity in Kosinski's fiction and the essays does not belong essentially to him; it is rather the reflection of a more fundamental moral ambiguity inherent in the idea of the perverse itself, and therefore belonging to nihilistic doctrine in general. Camus outlined this argument in his classic work on nihilism, The Rebel. Rebellion, Camus says, begins as an altruistic gesture, an act which affirms rather than disavows the dignity of the individual, and which affirms the possibility of a just society. But nihilism, which for Camus is a rebellion which recognizes no limits, asserts that anything is possible and anything is permissible. Thus, in denying morality, nihilism denies its original impluse--the altruistic impulse which is rebellion. Nihilism contradicts its intentions.

> It is then possible to say that rebellion, when it develops into destruction, is illogical. Claiming the unity of the human condition, it is a force of life, not death. Its most profound logic is not the logic of destruction; it is the logic of creation. . . .Nihilistic passion, adding to falsehood and injustice, destroys in its fury its original demands and thus deprives rebellion of its most cogent reasons. [Camus, pg. 285].

This essential contradiction within the doctrine of nihilism identifies the moral ambiguity of Kosinski. For perversity, as Kosinski defines it, with reference to Camus, is the essence of nihilism:

> In perversion, the negation of "the creative" becomes literal--an acting out of a more fundamental negation; an example of this is the murder which Caligula attempts when faced with the knowledge that "men die and they are not happy." (Camus, Caligula) In this, murder is the ultimate negation, for it genuinely devolves a thing from a human being [Art, pg. 54].

We can see this contradiction in the two aspects of Kosinski's idea of the perverse: first the "gesture of freedom," which implies a desire for individual dignity; second, the destructive act which implies a desire for a constructive life-giving society and religion. Here, then, we find the original motive for rebellion, and the meaning of perversity becomes literal, a reversal of the expected and normal. The impulse towards social justice is turned into destructive anti-social acts; the impulse towards self-realization and individual dignity is turned into alienation from self.

In all of his public statements, and throughout his essays, Kosinski asserts that the function of art is "subversion." By this he means that a work of fiction, if successful, will undermine the reader's presumably secure but illusionary view of the world and his values, and open him to a different sort of vision. Thus, Kosinski's ultimate purposes are moralistic:

> As tradition is continually attacked in art, myths exist to be broken. [Art of the Self, pg. 67]. . . .Literature seeks to describe what is, and, in the process, to do away with what is not or what is no longer.
>
> From this function of literature arises the necessity for the subversive, for subversion makes its points by indirection. . .[Art, pg. 67].

The vision that he offers is essentially "absurdist."

> Formerly the wanderer returned home safely, but his wisdom is disquieting and he has only affirmed what he has all along suspected. He discovers that his quest in search of inner life is a symbol for something lost or untouched by him. The modern wanderer travels in an empty universe as solitary as that which lies behind his own self. . .[Art, pg. 69].

This assertion is the essence of Heidegger, Sarte, and Camus--the self exists in an empty universe; and an empty universe lies behind the self. The universe is empty in the sense that there is no external set of values, no design, no ultimate purpose, no God to give it meaning. An empty universe lies behind the self in the sense that consciousness comes out of nothing, knows itself only by what it is not and returns to nothing.

What are the ethical implications of this ontological condition? For Kosinski? For Sartre and Camus?

For Sartre, especially, it means that there is an aspect of one's being which is inaccessible--in principle: The for-itself has no being other than that which is revealed by confronting that which it is not--the in-itself. Although the for-itself desires absorption into the in-itself, this is impossible because the for-itself comes into existence by its separation from the in-itself. Thus, the self never knows itself directly, but only as a reflection of everything external to it. Perhaps, then, this is what Kosinski means by "something . . .untouched by him."--that aspect of being which is inaccessible in principle.

However, the for-itself does know itself, even if indirectly, by it immersion in the world (being-in-the-world). Ethically, this means that for the individual self-knowledge or self-realization even if imperfect, is achieved by "choosing" being-in-the-world; i.e. to accept responsibility for one's existence, one's choices and actions. To choose otherwise is to deny one's being; on the basis Sartre speaks of "bad faith" versus authenticity. From similar premises Camus argues that one must choose life over suicide, and such a choice

implies the necessity for responsible action: rebellion is a choice for life and responsible action; nihilism is a choice for death and irresponsible action.

The choice of the perverse, on the part of the protagonist of Steps, is immoral from both viewpoints. For Camus, as I argued earlier nihilism (in this case in the form of the perverse) is a contradiction of the humanistic goals of rebellion. For Sartre, the perverse, as we understand it, in the novel, in its particulars, is a denial of the responsible freedom implied by being-in-the-world.

While he agrees in general with the ontology of Sartre and Camus, Kosinski is ambivalent when it comes to the issue of responsible freedom versus nihilism. On one hand he speaks about the transference of the burden of the past in positive terms; on the other, he condemns it as illusory, the "dark art of solipsism."

If we were dealing with the fiction alone it would be possible to specualte that Kosinski was restricting himself to a portrait of perversity, to raising the necessary questions, while reserving his own judgement. But the evidence of the essays precludes that interpretation; in the essays Kosinski does make judgements and reveals intentions. In addition, we should consider the highly personal nature of his work. All of this suggests that the perverse response is an ideological and emotional matter with which Kosinski is still struggling.

For whatever reason, the ambiguity of Kosinski's fiction contributes to its effect, for if the content of Steps had been mediated by a framework of moral evaluation it would lack the power that every reader has observed. As it is, Steps expresses a fantasy, for the mass of its readership for whom nihilism as a doctrine remains a distant and

obscure philosophy but for whom the perverse, as an ultimate response to an oppressive culture, is an ever-closer possibility.

Chapter 3 Being There

Being There was published in the spring of 1971. By that time Kosinski was considered an important literary figure and his new novel received widespread attention. The reviews, however, were mixed. Some complained of the thinness of the book, meaning both its size and depth. Almost everyone agreed that it was a fable or parable, with one notable exception: Irving Howe, writing in Harper's [July, 1971], asserted that the novel ". . .constitutes a neat literary joke. Not the fable or allegory that some reviewers have supposed, but something smaller, fresher, more clever." Just what that joke was Howe never explained.[1]

As with Steps, reviewers complained about the moral ambiguities of the novel, but in the case of Being There, more took that point of view. For example, Peter Glassgold in The Nation: "A 'modern parable,'--perhaps--so the jacket copy terms it--but unsuccessful, since its symbols are unclear and its moral elusive."[2] Or James Farrant in Books and Bookmen:

> We are left to supply alternatives which do not fit. The tale is scarcely compelling enough to suggest that this is man leaving the garden for the cruel waste of the world--a fable of the FALL. There seems to be, in the initial implausibility, a failure of the imagination which makes the reader see things in this way. The novel is neither parable nor realism because there are bits of both. At best it is

[1] Irving Howe, Harper's, July 1971, pp. 243-289.

[2] Peter Glassgold, "Taking a Bad Chance," The Nation, May 31, 1971, pp. 699-700.

> reducible to a suspense story because it cannot reach the ambiguities of Ballard or the mathematical precision of a Borgesian journey into past or future.[3]

Being There combines an allegory of contemporary man, an investigation into ontology, and a satire of a perverse society. So, Being There repeats themes from The Painted Bird and of Steps, there are differences, however. The allegory in Being There, expressed in a reworking of Genesis, is restricted to the immediate situation of contemporary man--his plight of finding himself thrust into the world (being there) by accident from which the hero takes his name ("Chance"). The ontological argument is centered, as in Steps, on the problem of "solipsism", or relations with others, but in contrast to the protagonist of Steps, Chance chooses to become an object for others rather than make objects of them. Similarly, Chance does not choose perversity; rather, when he is expelled from his garden, he is thrust into a perverse society.

The first clue that Being There is an ontological novel, or has an ontological underpinning is Kosinski's choice of title; "being there" is a conventional translation of Heidegger's term dasein meaning the situation where man finds, or discovers, himself placed in the world. The idea that consciousness finds itself at the center of its own experience is expressed by most of the existential writers. Sartre, for example, denotes the same idea with the expression "being-in-the-world" (See Appendix).

The question of a Heideggerian influence came up in the Paris Review

[3]James Farrant, Books and Bookmen, June 1971.

interview. Kosinski was explaining that as he wrote each novel he assigned a code name to it:

> And Being There was Blank Page, and sometimes Dasein, a philosophical term, difficult to translate, which could mean the state in which one is and is not at the same time . . .one of the American critics learned from my publisher that Dasein was the code name, and months later wrote a very negative review of Being There as a Heideggerian novel --a terribly unfair thing to do. Had the code name been Kapital, he probably would have considered the book a Marxist novel.[4]

Unfortunately, I have not been able to identify this critic or the review to which Kosinski refers. No doubt the reviewers insistence that Kosinski had written a Heideggerian novel was unfair. But Kosinski's last contention begs the question. He did not call the novel Kapital, and, evidently, from the consistency of the titles he employed over a period of time, he knew he had particular ideas in mind. As we will see, these ideas are similar to those in Steps, and can be best explained, once again, by reference to Sartre.[5]

The ontological is manifested in Being There, as in Steps, with the issue of solipsism, which we have generally defined as the problem of knowing that others exists as individual subjective minds. Chance, in his existence at the opening of the novel, is possibly as close as a human being could get to a purely solipsistic state: He believes that he himself causes himself to be and causes others to be:

[4]Paris Review, Summer 1972, No. 54,"The Art of Fiction XLVI, "Jerzy Kosinski", pg. 200. (For convenience, all future reference to this review will be indicated by PR with the page number.

[5]On the other hand, I do not mean that Kosinski is writing a "Sartrian" novel, repeating the heresy of the critic Kosinski refers to. I do mean that the ontology which the novel implies is best explained by Sartre, but, in general, corresponds to the ontology of the major existential writers.

> By changing the channel he could change himself. He could go through phases, as garden plants went through phases, but he could change as rapidly as he wished by twisting the dial backwards and forwards. In some cases he could spread out into the screen without stopping, just as on TV people spread out into the screen. By turning the dial, Chance could bring others inside his eyelids. Thus he came to believe that it was he, Chance, and no one else, who made himself be [BT, pg. 6].

But Chance does recognize the subjectivity of others--or, in Sartre's terms, that he exists as an object-for-others--and he is eager to experience himself this way:

> As long as one didn't look at people, they did not exist. They began to exist, as on TV, when one turned one's eyes on them. Only then could they stay in one's mind before being erased by new images. The same was true of him. By looking at him, others could make him be clear, could open him up and unfold him; not to be seen was to blur and fade out. Perhaps he was missing a lot by simply watching others on TV and not being watched by them [BT, pg. 13].

In his desire to experience himself as object-for-others, he is exactly the opposite of the protagonist of Steps who chooses to make objects of others. Chance's motive for this desire is suggested by, "not to be seen was to blur and fade out." In not being seen, one takes the risk of losing one's reality; to be seen is to understand, in part, one's reality. Therefore, Chance, who may otherwise strike the reader as simply another vegetable from the garden, does possess a motive: like Kosinski's other protagonists, he is engaged in the project of realizing his being. Chance does not, like the others, choose perversity. But he does, like them, pursue his quest in a perverse world.

To achieve realization Chance must experience himself in the eyes of the others who make up that world. Therefore, success depends, in part, on them. The others can take two attitudes towards him: (1) they can attempt to dominate him, reduce him to an object that can be used or accounted for in the matrix of their own subjectivity; or (2) they can make themselves objects and experience themselves in the context of Chance's subjectivity. That is, they can choose "sadism" or "masochism." In this case, the others, consisting of public and individuals, choose masochism.

This may be a surprising assertion. After all, isn't Chance used by the society he is thrust into? Doesn't he, in fact, become a political tool? While this is true, we must consider the particular way he is used. Others "use" Chance by becoming objects-for-him. That they do so is singularly ironic because Chance has no subjectivity to which they can submit themselves. What little he did have--in the form of solipsistic fantasies--he has given up in order to experience himself as an object-for-others. The others are confronted with a "blank page," the code name finally ascribed to Chance by the Russian super-spies. The others, however, mistake Chance's objectivity as a detached object-for-others, that aspect of being which we present to the other's subjectivity in order to save and preserve our own self (see Appendix). In this mistaken perception, the others invent a subjectivity that lies behind the "blank page." That is, they invent Chance as "Chauncey Gardiner."

They invent an authority so immense that it requires their masochism, or better still, it justifies their masochism. For the public

at large, masochism takes the form of political subordination: Chance is invented as super-statesman and moral leader:

> 'Thank you, thank you, Mr. Gardiner. Yours is the spirit which this country so greatly needs. Let's hope it will help usher spring into our economy. Thank you again, Mr. Chauncey Gardiner--financier, presidential adviser, and true statesman.' [BT, pg. 71].

In personal relationships, Chance is invented as mysterious, authoritative, inaccessible,which makes him enormously attractive sexually.

> But unlike the other men with whom she was intimate, Gardiner neither restrained nor repulsed her. The thought of seducing him, of making him lose his composure excited her. The more withdrawn he was, the more she wanted him to look at her and to acknowledge her desire, to recognize her as a willing mistress. She saw herself making love to him--abandoned, wanton, without reticence or reserve [BT, pg. 79].

Chance cannot reject the sexual advances of the others (E.E. or the strange man at the party) because he cannot reject what he does not understand. But the others interpret his lack of response as a particular kind of eroticism in which the loved one (in this case, the invented Chance) requires the lover to turn inward on himself--into narcissism. For this reason, the other invents Chance as an even greater, more remote being, so self-sufficient, so perfect, that they are unworthy of a direct sexual relationship. Therefore, they choose to become objects of what they imagine is his voyeurism; they choose to become objects-for-him; and here "masochism" assumes its more typical meaning of one person becoming a sexual object for another. But what they make love to, under his baffled gaze, are their own fantasies of self:

> 'Dearest. . .You uncoil my wants: desire flows within me, and when you watch me my passion dissolves it. You make me free. I reveal myself to myself and I am drenched and purged.' [BT, pg. 123].

There is a parallel between the sexual and political responses: Both the public and individuals invent Chance as a super-being and become objects for his subjectivity. Thus, they choose masochism. By becoming objects-for-him, they can indulge their fantasies of self as individuals; as the public they indulge a fantasy of political destiny, vague as it may be. By making themselves objects-for-Chance, by inventing him, the others doom, at the outset, his project of realizing his own being. He is finally turned back on himself: The peace he experiences in the final scene is not merely a return to the familiar, tranquil setting of the garden, but the momentary return to a solipsistic identity with self.

Allegorically, Being There expresses the historical situation which is the "starting point for both existentialism and nihilism--the 'existential crisis'." And in this respect, Being There reiterates the theme of The Painted Bird.

Chance's explusion from the garden is a decidedly 20th century interpretation of Genesis.[7] The god of Chance's garden is not quite dead at the beginning; but he is old, distant, unconcerned, arbitrary. This god, like Eden's original, furnishes Chance with complete sustenance, but--like the original--with a condition: Chance is forbidden knowledge

[7]A Similar interpretation of Being There (as a retelling of Genesis) is offered by Anatole Broyard in "The High Price of Profundity," New York Times, April 24, 1971, p. 45.

of certain things--in this case, the world outside the garden wall. This prohibition is based on the rationale that Chance is born of a feebleminded mother and is incapable of living outside the garden. But whether this is indeed the case is left open to doubt. There remains the possibility that this is a myth designed to control and imprision Chance; this too is a popular contemporary view of the Judaic-Christian tradition.

But television brings Chance knowledge of the world outside the garden, and later, when expulsion is imminent, vague stirrings of interest excite him, and he looks to TV for the possibilities of things to come. But TV is deceitful; the dreams that it embodies are perversions of human work and desire. In this garden, television is the serpent.

Unlike Adam, Chance does not willfully disobey the Old Man; throughout this first part, Chance would rather remain in the garden. His expulsion has nothing to do with sin or temptation; like his existence, it is a random accident--pure chance. And when the Old Man dies, Chance puts on his clothes and leaves the garden--his regret equally balanced with anticipation. As we of this century might say, Adam has made himself in the image of his dead God.

In the first part, then, allegory points in two directions: first, Chance is everyman or anyman, and the condition of anyman is to find himself thrust, not by his choice, into a world, not of his making. Historically, Chance is Western man after the 19th century naturalists have taken the cosmic pulse and pronounced God dead.

In the remainder of the novel Chance becomes a "culture hero"

(in the words of John Aldredge)[8] and super leader in an unconscious and unwilled rise to power. Continuing the historical allegory, I suggest that Chance is also a latter day messiah. This is less than saying he is a Christ-symbol, and therefore safe, but more than saying he is only a super-celebrity and therefore risky. In any case Chance does assume the kind of historical role we associate with the second coming--he is about to preside, willingly or not, over an apocalypse.

In this case apocalypse does not mean the intersection of the divine with the secular world at the end of history. Here it means the disintegration of a culture that has lost its soul by refusing to accept the responsibility of its freedom. Instead the society portrayed in Being There has chosen the inversion of normal human desire; that is, they have chosen perversity and this is the significance of the collective and individual fantasies which the "others" (the entire society) project onto the "blank page" of Chance.

Being There, then, is not only a satire of American and Russian pretension, materialism and folly, it is also an allegory of a culture that has lost the power to realize its being. In such a culture, it is impossible for any individual, let alone Chance, to achieve self-realization.

> Being There is about the absence of being in the modern American world of power, and as a corollary the absence of human beings in the world.[9]

[8]John Aldridge, "The Fabrication of a Culture Hero," The Saturday Review, April 24, 1971, pp. 25-27.

[9]Martin Tucker, Commonweal, May 7, 1971, pg. 221.

For the individual the implications of a perverse society are at the very least, inauthenticity, or, if he chooses to adopt that perversity--as does the Boy of The Painted Bird or the protagonist of Steps--nihilism. For society, it means anarchy or fascism. This, at least, is one implication of the ending of Being There: The group of politicians in the smoke filled room who are choosing Chance as a vice-presidential candidate are leaders of an extreme right-wing movement who have unwittingly found in Chance the ultimate expression of their philosophy.

Two kinds of imagery dominate the book: images of television and images of the garden; together they express the idea of the perverse society. Each have literal meanings--since both are actual institutions--and each have symbolic meanings. We have seen, for example that the garden is a literal place and an archetypal place--an existential Eden. Television, too, is an actual social institution, and inasmuch as it expresses collective dreams of a society, a symbolic thing. In his discussion of "archetypal meaning" (The Anatomy of Criticism) Northrop Frye defines two kinds of imagery, apocolyptic and demonic.[10] Of the first--apocolyptic imagery--Frye says:

> The apocolyptic world, the heaven of religion, presents, in the first, place, the categories of reality in the forms of human desire, as indicated by the forms they assume under the work of human civilization. The form imposed on the vegetable world, for instance, is that of the garden, the farm the grove, or the park. . . .The human form of the mineral world. . .is the city.

The other side of the coin, demonic imagery, is the form of

[10]Northrup Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1957), pp. 141-147.

the "world that desire totally rejects: the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion. . .the world also of perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly."

What is relevant to us and our discussion of Being There is (1) the idea that society, the garden, and the city are the forms that nature takes when transformed by human desire and work; and (2) that desire, as Frey uses it, means a positive, constructive, moral force. We will want to qualify this last idea in this respect: desire itself can be perverted, and could, in that condition, seek after the world that desire would ordinarily reject, the demonic world. It is likely that Frey would object to this qualification, but, in any event, we will exonerate him from responsibility for that and the interpreation which follows:

The garden is the form that nature takes when transformed by human work and desire; the particular garden from which Chance is expelled is a small piece of nature transformed by his work and desire. Accordingly, American society and its great cities (even the economy) are all the "categories of reality" as transformed by human work and desire. Therefore, there is a double irony in Chance's unconscious use of gardening "metaphors" when questioned about the economy. The economy is, in an archetypal sense, like the garden. And when human desire is perverted, the result is the kind of society, city, and economy into which Chance is cast out. It is a demonic world filled with demonic imagery.

So the garden is not nature itself, nor is it a romantic image of unspoiled nature. In the final scene, for example, Chance escapes,

momentarily, from the frenzy of the ball to a garden where he finds peace once again. Here we find the juxtaposition of the two possibilities. The garden, a human design imposed on nature, is the result when desire is not perverted. The society--manifested by the ball--is the result when desire is perverted.

The garden, then, represents the world that unperverted human desire seeks after. Television, the second kind of imagery represents the world that desire ordinarily rejects but which it seeks after when it is perverted.

The nature of TV, as Kosinski describes it from the point-of-view of Chance, approaches a pure dream state:

> The set created its own light, its own color, its own time. It did not follow the law of gravity that forever bent all plants downward. Everything on TV was tangled and mixed and yet smoothed out; night and day, big and small, tough and brittle, soft and rough, hot and cold, far and near [BT, pg. 5].

The dream is the state in which desires are realized; therefore, TV, as the collective dream of the society manifests the collective desire of that society. The content of TV are the categories of reality when perverted human desire is imposed on nature; for this is the power of art and media--to shape nature according to pure desire.

The shape of nature in the collective desire bears little resemblance to the actual. Life, or reality, is attenuated. Chance's notions of sex, which are taken from TV, are the most obvious example:

> He. . .recalled situations on TV in which a woman advanced toward a man on a couch or a bed or inside a car. Usually, after a while, they would come very close to each other, and, often they would be partly undressed. They would then kiss and embrace. But on TV what happened next was always obscured:

> a brand-new image would appear on the screen: the embrace of man and woman was utterly forgotton. And yet Chance knew, there could be other gestures and other kinds of closeness following such intimacies. [BT, pg. 80].

While TV attenuates reality, it also distorts it. Because of national demands, the media shapes its content into dramatic ritual:

> The President's eyes were veiled with distant thought. He watched the thousands in their ranks, who were reduced by the TV screen to mere mounds of lifeless leaves swept forward by a driving wind. Suddenly, down from the skies, jets swooped in tight, faultless formations. . . .The President's head once more pervaded the screen. He gazed up at the disappearing planes; a fleeting smile softened his face [BT, pg. 54].

Therefore, one reason that TV attenuates and distorts reality is that it is acting out the collective dream which wants to shape reality according to its desire. But there is another reason which has nothing to do with purpose or motive. We return for a moment to ontology and the subject of solipsism:

TV operates by presenting images, that is, a picture of an exterior surface. What TV shows of people, therefore,is that detached aspect of our being that we alienate from ourselves and present to others in order to preserve our own subjective being. Chance considers this:

> The people who watched him on their sets did not know who actually faced them; how could they, if they had never met him? Television reflected only people's surfaces; it also kept peeling their images from their bodies until they were sucked into the cavern of their viewers' eyes, forever beyond retrieval, to disappear. Facing the cameras with their unsensing triple lenses pointed at him like snouts, Chance became only an image for millions of real people. They would never know how real he was, since his thinking could not be televised. And to him, the viewer existed only as projections of his own thought, as images. He would never know how real they were [BT, pg. 68].

TV exacerbates the usual ontological difficulties of knowing the other; what the other perceives, TV or not, is detached from the inner self. Once again we are reminded that Chance's original purpose--to realize his own being--is hopeless. Similarly, Kosinski implies that the media--hailed by the McCluhanites as the electronic network which will make a village community of the world--actually removes people from each other and distracts society from realizing the natural purposes of its desire.

If TV has the power to shape nature according to its desire within the autonomous world of the flickering screen, it has the greater power of shaping men and society by example. Chance looks to TV for guides to the life he is experiencing:

> Thinking that he ought to show a keen interest in what EE was saying, Chance resorted to repeating to her parts of her own sentences, a practice he had observed on TV [BT, pg. 40].

TV also shapes men and society by its power as social ritual. The talk show host, for example, is like a priest who leads the community of studio audience and millions of viewers in worship of a national myth:

> The host lifted his hand to silence the audience, but the applause continued, punctuated by isolated boos. He rose slowly and motioned Chance to join him at center stage, where he embraced him ceremoniously. [BT, pg. 71].

It is Ralph Edwards, Merv Griffin, and Johnny Carson who now lead us in worship in the tabernacle of TV.

That this is so troubles Kosinski. And in this respect, among others, Being There approaches pure social criticism rather than allegory.

Kosinski's arguments are not original and they may strike the reader as slightly old-fashioned: TV distorts life; it confers power on an individual merely by showing him; it creates a national myth which the nation begins to act out. But Kosinski, on this level, is old fashioned. He believes in the responsibility of the writer and the responsibility of art. The writer (or artist) from Kosinski's point of view is primarily concerned with involving the reader (or spectator, for involvement is the requisite for moral reflection:

Interviewer

> Your intent, then, is subversive. You want to involve, to implicate the reader via his own imagination.

Kosinski

> I guess I do. Once he is implicated he is an accomplice, he is provoked, he is involved, he is purged. That's why I won't give him moral guidelines. The reader must ask himself questions. Was it his curiosity that dragged him into the midst of my story, or was it recognition, his complicity? For me this is the ultimate purpose of writing [Paris Review, op. cit., pp. 206-207].

According to Kosinski, television permits the viewer (or spectator) to remain uninvolved, and therefore television, among all the popular media, is most guilty of failing the responsibility of art.

> . . .Language requires some inner triggering; television doesn't. The image is ultimately accessible, i.e., extremely attractive. And I think, ultimately deadly, because it turns the viewer into a bystander. Of course, that's a situation we have always dreamt of. . .the ultimate hope of religion was that it would release all of us from trauma. Television actually does so. It 'proves' that you can always be an observer of the tragedies of others. . . .When you read about a man who dies, part of you dies with him because you have to recreate his dying inside your head [Ibid., pg. 205].

In a perverse society, the artist (and art) presumably has the responsibility to "subvert" those cultural fantasies which are the superstructure of perverted desire. Instead, television expresses and thereby reinforces them. In doing so television creates a society in which few men, let alone Chance, have the possibility of self-realization.

iv

So, in Being There Kosinski presents us with an allegory of contemporary man and a satire of contemporary American life. Underlying both is the presumption that our social institutions (politics, television, and morality) are perverse in the sense that they distort or invert the normal objects of human desire. This idea is consistent with the view of society presented in The Painted Bird and Steps and in The Devil Tree.

There is a clear difference, however, between Being There and the other novels in the conception of the protagonist. Chance does not choose perversity as a response to his world. He does, however, demonstrate the same desire for self-realization that is implied for the others. Perhaps because he does not (and cannot) choose perversity, the conflict between the choice of perversity and the desire for self-realization which we see in Kosinski's other novels does not occur in Being There.

As in Steps, existential ontology provides the underpinnings of the novel. Ontology, we should remember, is a description of being; and therefore, Being There suggests that the perversity of contemporary American life is the manifestation, the outgrowth of an ontological

condition; that is, that the morality of American culture is intimately connected with the state of its being. Now this is an important and persuasive idea, and few other American authors have attempted it. Mailer, in The American Dream comes to mind as an exception. For these reasons, Being There has an important place in contemporary American fiction, despite whatever shortcomings it may have.

Chapter 4 The Devil Tree

The Devil Tree, Kosinski's latest novel, was published in the spring of 1972, and was the least warmly received. Those who were cautious in their response to Being There came down hard on The Devil Tree. Time's review was devastating:

> Postulate a neurotic, hopeless main character, then spend 200 pages proving that the character is hopeless and neurotic. . . .The novel's situation--it is too static to be called a plot--seems better suited to one of Harold Robbins' meat operas than to the work of a man who once won the National Book Award (for Steps) and who is now a professor of prose and criticism at Yale. . . .The author's other novels are as impressive as this one is futile.[1]

Admittedly, The Devil Tree is a problematic novel. Unlike Steps, it does not consist of individual episodes, each of which is structurally complete, but rather fragments, narrated from different points of view. While there is a plot (contrary to Time's opinion), the method of narration and the book's design make it difficult to perceive. In contrast to Kosinski's other work, the style is often turgid: the protagonist talks at great length about his feelings in an often academic way; and his preoccupations often seem adolescent. As in Being There, Kosinski attempts to integrate some large symbols and ideas into a large-scale vision of contemporary culture, and is in Being There, the vehicle he uses seems too thin. In addition, there is ambiguity about the protagonist's reliability as a narrator and

[1]John Skow, "Strike It Rich," Time, February 19, 1973, p. 88.

there is no clear moral-norm. As a result, the novel seems obscure or thematically confused.

Despite these problems, The Devil Tree does have impact and often manages to generate the fascination which is Kosinski's talent. For one thing, the novel does capture--despite occasional caricature--the feel of modern urban mania. Jonathan and Karen's relationship is a classic contemporary study. Moreover, in The Devil Tree, Kosinski finally expresses, as a fictional theme, the conflict that he expressed earlier in his essay on Steps and which underlies his other novels--the conflict between a desire for self-realization and the impulse towards the perverse. Consider the plot:

> Jonathan Whalen, the scion of an American industrial family, peers of the Carnegies, Fricks, Phipps, has returned from a stay abroad. We learn that he has recovered from an episode with drugs in a hospital in Rangoon. During his trip his mother has died, presumably a suicide. His father had died some time before. He is sole heir to his father's fortune and a majority stockholder in Whalen corporation.
>
> But Whalen is uninterested in the corporate world; and although his money provides him with almost super-human ability to wield power and influence, he uses it to indulge personal and seemingly eccentric whims. His two main preoccupations are his past, especially his childhood and his relations with his mother and father; and his present relationship with Karen. He struggles with both, seeking some sense of identity. He establishes himself in an apartment with servants and a chef; he buys an American car, a Ford, and has a motor from an

Italian car installed; he joins an encounter group.

Yielding to pressure from the Howmets, majority stockholders, friends of his parents, and his own god-parents, he makes a gesture at entering corporate society. He joins a fraternal order; he toys with the idea of becoming an active member of the corporation.

The relationship with Karen disintegrates. He plans a vacation with the Howmets, then leaves them stranded on a sand-bar to drown.

At the close of the novel, he recovers from a long illness to find himself in what appears to be a mental hospital in Geneva.

From the ideological point of view, the plot of the novel is simple: Jonathan desires self-realization, he seeks it in an essentially perverse society; finding no satisfaction (no hope) he chooses perversity, a choice which is signalled by his murdering the Howmets and his subsequent descent into madness. We observe Jonathan's choice of the perverse, just as we observe the same choice in The Painted Bird; and as in The Painted Bird, many of the determinants in that choice are psychological. In The Devil Tree, however, the protagonist is self-aware in a way the Boy is not. He is also educated in the popular Freudian jargon and uses it in talking about his own experience analytically. In this respect, of course, Jonathan is very unlike the protagonist of Steps, although they share an essential attraction to the perverse. In one of the earliest episodes of The Devil Tree, for example, Jonathan convinces Barbara that he has murdered the old lady who owns the villa in which they are staying, an act reminiscent of the narrator of Steps.

Jonathan and the narrator of Steps also share a preoccupation with the idea of "transference," although Kosinski represents it in much different terms in The Devil Tree, an inconsistency which will figure in our discussion of the moral dilemma underlying his fiction.

In regard to the Freudian overtones, it is unclear whether they are part of Kosinski's characterization of Jonathan and possibly satiric, or whether they are Kosinski's own ideas spoken through Jonathan as mouthpiece. This problem is one of several that arises because Jonathan's reliability as a narrator is never established. It is also interesting to notice that the ontological preoccupations that dominated Steps and and Being There are not apparent in The Devil Tree. Perhaps Freudian psychology has indeed displaced ontology as a theoretical base for this novel and the Freudian overtones are, in fact, serious arguments on Kosinski's part.

When Jonathan chooses the perverse, he chooses in response to a perverse society. The perversity of that society is documented in the fragmentary monologues that are directed at Jonathan in which the speakers, from all walks of life, unveil an array of corruption, vice and brutality. But mainly Kosinski comes at American society from the top in this novel. He aims at the most simpleminded form of what has become known as the American myth--what we call the Horatio Alger story in which humble beginnings, the "protestant work-ethic",personal righteousness, and hard work result in power, wealth, and glory. The Whalen family, of whom Jonathan is the sole survivor and heir, embodies that myth. So, Jonathan's probings of the past provide the thematic link between his choice of the perverse and the foundations of a perverse society.

As Jonathan explains his relationship with his deceased parents, it constitutes the classical psychoanalytic case: His father, whom he hated, was cold, distant, domineering and cruel. Jonathan's mother, with whom he sympathized, was passionate, sensitive woman, seemingly dissatisfied and bored with her life in corporate society. But she too was distant:

> I still suffer from my father's rejection and my mother's indifference. Yet I know that I am wrong to accept this unjustified and self-inflicted pain. I deserve no punishment at all for being who I am [DT, pg. 35].

In his preoccupation with his mother's suicide, Jonathan reveals both sympathy and guilt as well as a longing for an affectionate bond. She appears often in his dreams:

> I saw her in her bedroom in Watch Hill, swallowing red pills, choking, trying to reach for her phone, staggering from her bed, with blood running down her leg [DT, pg. 89].

The actual suicide, we learn elsewhere, was caused by an overdose of pills. What then is the blood running down her leg? This can only have sexual connotations--perhaps menstruation or birth. For Whalen, his mother's fate is woven with his own existence:

> Last night I dreamed I was in Africa, knowing that my mother was ill and hoping that my trip would be her punishment for giving birth to a child who was not to fulfill his father's dreams [DT, pg. 61].

Throughout the novel, Whalen, like a detective, investigates the past. He searches his memories, questions friends and associates of his parents, and on one occasion revisits the family mansion, which has been closed since his mother's death. His companion on this trip is

black girl he picks up in a bar in Pittsburgh. He has sex with the girl (perhaps in his parents' bedroom), wanders about the house. He looks in his mother's bathroom:

> In the medicine cabinet he could see an infinity of drug samples, many still in the manufacturer's packages, accompanied by printed inserts indicating dosage and warnings. . . 'overdosage might produce stupor, coma, shock, respiratory depression and death.'

He reads his parents' letters, newpaper clippings, their obituaries, his mother's school yearbook. But none of this, he says, moves him:

> The memories triggered no emotion [DT, pg. 133].

Or is this another instance of the control that Whalen desires and hates? In the midst of the memorabilia, while he is making love to the strange black girl on his (mother's?) bed, Whalen remembers a deep-water snake he had seen once while skindiving: "He envied the snake's ability to control its heartbeat, to slow its pace even as it attacked." [DT, pg. 126].

The exact nature of his mother and father's relationship is left to our speculation. But the facts of their biographies, which Jonathan reads during his visit to the closed-up house, are highly suggestive [DT, pp. 125-136]: Whalen's father was born in Colorado; he never completed his grade school education: "He was forced at the age of thirteen to leave school to find work after the death of his father. . ." Beginning his career as an office boy in an aluminium company at four dollars and eighty-five cents a week, Whalen ends up as a major industrial pioneer, and is a peer of the legendary figures of American

industry, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, etc. The character of Whalen, Sr., is obviously the stuff Horatio Alger novels are made of.

Jon's mother comes from the other end of the social spectrum. The family home, we learn is at Pierre Magnol plantation in South Carolina. She attends "Samuel Tuke Upper School for Girls" She is a Merit Finalist. So Whalen's mother enjoys the blessings of beauty, brains and money from the start.

The marriage of Jonathan's mother and father has obvious mythological overtones: The poor boy with talent and determination wins the beautiful and rich princess. The meanings of this mating are especially significant in American folkmyth: tough and ruthless Yankee urban wins vulnerable and wealthy Southern aristocrat; vulnerable perhaps because the aristocracy begins its decay in the industrial age. Since Whalen, Sr., embodies the industrial age, there are the additional connotations of sexuality where sexuality implies possession and destruction. Even their deaths--drowning in heavy storms off the coast, and suicide, have a touch of the heroic, the tragic, the mythic.

While Jonathan is the offspring of a "divine" union in mythological terms, he is a cursed rather than a blessed child. In fact, we could view Jonathan's problem as that of a person with ordinary instincts and talents attempting to live with (or within) a myth. The text of this myth--created by the media and the corporate peers of his parents--calls for Jonathan to assume the mantle of heir, but it is a role that Jonathan is ill-suited for. The reality of his parents, their lives, etc., remains a mystery which he cannot penetrate. He too remains an outsider. He has only fragmentary glimpses--in memory--of his parents,

plus the information he can find from those few persons who knew them. From these persons he receives a contradictory picture. And there is a large disparity between what he himself knows and the public image or myth. "Horace Sumner Whalen," the newpaper obituary reports, "reads Dickens for inspiration and listened to Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor at least once a day." [DT, pg. 130]. This is the same man who, as Jonathan has recalled earlier, beat a dog mercilessly because it would not stop barking.

Speaking of his mother, a newspaper obituary reports that "Mrs. Whalen was grief-sticken for years after her husband's death despite the consolation of her youth, and her son Jonathan Whalen has been living abroad, where he combines study with travel." Nothing in this gives any clue to the reality of Jonathan's life or the life of his mother following the death of Whalen, Sr. Jonathan, as we have learned, has flunked out of school, has had an episode with drug addition. His mother has travelled throughout Europe with a lover, experiencing bouts with alcoholism and drugs.

This disparity between the public myth about the Whalen family and the reality of their lives signifies not only the failure of the American folk-myth of success, it illustrates as well, the difficulties for the individual who attempts to break through social myth-building in an attempt to find his own self. This theme is consistent with that of Being There where Chance, the "blank page" protagonist of the novel, is the center of myth-building on a national scale.

Jonathan has created his own explanation (ergo his own "Psychology") of himself. Most often he describes himself in terms of oppositions. His real private self, he asserts, is "violently anti-social--like a

lunatic chained in a basement, grunting and pounding the floor while the rest of his family, the respectable ones, sit upstairs, ignoring the tumult. I don't know what to do about the family lunatic: destroy him, keep him locked in the cellar or set him free?" [DT, pg. 13]. This metaphor expresses, of course, the actual contradiction between the public respectable image of the Whalens (Whalen, Sr., reading Dickens for inspiration) and their private lives (Whalen Sr's. cruelty).

At other times Jonathan sees himself as divided between a "manipulative adult" and a "child who craves acceptance and love.":

> Now I know that I have really tried to conceal the child at the expense of the adult [DT, pg. 23].

This introduces the theme of repression and control, a theme which runs through all of Jonathan's comments about himself, as well as comments made about him by others. Jonathan almost always identifies feelings of violence with "the child" within him. And it is clear that these feelings began in childhood out of frustrations at not receiving acceptance and love:

> I feel my old fear of violence returning. It began in early childhood when I lay in bed and listened to my father rage. He also took out his fury on my dog, Mesabi. One night in Watch Hill, I woke to Mesabi's yelping. I put on my bathrobe and went down to the beach. My father stood at the water's edge, grasping the dog by the collar and punching its head and ribs with his fist. The dog howled with pain. I did not interfere. I simply watched, torn by pity for the dog, anger at my father and hatred for my own weakness [DT, pg. 36].

The major conflict in Whalen, then, is that of the desire for acceptance and love versus rage and anger, a conflict which began in childhood and which he identifies as the child within him. As an adult he

represses the conflict, and the emerging personality as cold, detached, controlled:

> My depressions are no longer such natural urges as sex, sleep and hunger. Now they are completely calculated. I could as easily have done something else yesterday afternoon, but I chose to enact a familiar ritual, to dull my mind and lose myself completely.

Still he yearns for something else. And his desire for a relationship with Karen is evidence of this:

> I tried to explain that the freedom I have always desired has nothing to do with being able to travel or with surrendering responsiblity; it means not being afraid, not disguising myself and not performing, not structuring my feelings to gain another's approval [DT, pg. 83].

Although Jonathan wants to be known for what he is, being possessed of enormous self-hatred, he cannot believe that anyone will accept him once they know him. When a friend relates the facts of his marriage, Jonathan comments:

> I began to see that he loved her in spite of her self-contempt; he simply ignored her perception of herself and created his own vision of her. It occurred to me that I could never love like that, nor could I respect anyone who didn't share my perception of myself. I have always suspected everyone who likes me of having poor judgement. I despise them for being so easily taken in [DT, pg. 59].

And speaking of the encounter group, Jonathan says:

> . . .I remained detached from the group, aware that when people claim to know who I am, I can no longer act freely [DT].

This is consistent with one of Kosinski's comments in his essay on Steps. Discussing the psychology of his protagonist Kosinski

paraphrases Sartre:

> Hell is the inability to escape from others who prove and prove again that you are as they see you [Art, pg. 61].

But despite Jonathan's resistance to other's perceptions of him and their interpretations of his personality, he asserts that he responds according to the roles they create for him.

> My presence in the group has been important if only as a constant reminder that no one possesses completely consistent emotions. I can be described as neither a hostile nor a sympathetic person. My sense of myself is entirely relative. My hostility and sympathy vary, depending on whom I'm with: I compete or I pity. Either I'm not good enough for anyone or I'm too good for everyone [DT, pg. 149].

Jonathan's project, then, is to escape the central conflict (rage versus craving for love) which results in his adopting the role of manipulative detached adult. He desires to free himself from the roles created by others in order to realize his many possibilities, his "many selves." He is embarked on a project of "self-realization."

Jonathan's relationship with Karen, which dominates the novel, is central in his quest for self-realization:

> The possibility of becoming close to Karen is more exciting than anything else has ever been. I begin to feel that I could be loved for whatever I am, not for my actions or my appearance. Everything about me would be acceptable; everything would be a reflection of my central self. I'm sure there are aspects of my personality buried within me that will surface as soon as I know I am completely loved [DT, pg. 32].

As a move towards her acceptance, he attempts to relate his past to her; her ability, or so he imagines it, to accept his past without condemnation will give the kind of "freedom" he desires, and may,

he speculates, provide the basis for love:

> I have given Karen my notes and the photographs from Burma, India and Africa. I gave them to her because I wanted to show her something tangible from my past to make her understand it. At the same time I wonder what this new knowledge about me will mean to her. I am always afraid that some incident from my past will destroy other people's affection for me. Since I have no idea exactly what that incident will be, I have learned to be defensive, I have become a master of the art of concealment, of tailoring my reminiscences to the person I'm talking to. Generally this means suppressing anything that might conceivably sound neuseating or foul. But with Karen I'm not so frightened. With her there is no need to hide those things in me that seem bizarre or ugly [DT, pg. 31].

Jonathan's desire to relate or "transfer" the past to another seems similar to that of the protagonist of Steps, yet there seems to be a remarkable difference in their motives. For the protagonist of Steps, as we have seen, the past is a burden to be transferred to a "victim" where it may ". . .continue its concerous action." [Art, pg. 45]. His motive for accomplishing this "transfer" is to escape the past, and we concluded on that basis that he was guilty of bad faith. For Jonathan, on the other hand, the past may be a burden but his object seems to be not so much to escape it but to understand it. He does not seem to regard Karen as a victim (an object) but rather as another subjective consciousness, so that Jonathan's attitudes seem to correspond with Kosinski's descrition of love as he expresses it The Art of the Self:

> . . .the attempt to be simultaneously subject and object, and is the willing relinquishment of the single subject to a new subject created from two single ones, each subject enhanced into one heightened self [Art, pg. 59].

This is the same project of loving which, we inferred, was the original project for the protagonist of Steps, and failing which he chose sadism as a mode of relating to others. As in Steps, the project is doomed in The Devil Tree. Both Jonathan and Karen are unequal to the task, perhaps Karen more unequal than Jonathan.

The central psychoanalytic fact about Karen is her inability to have an orgasm. This is mentioned early in the novel and is a recurrent theme throughout. Jonathan recalls an early experience with Karen: After a luncheon given by one of Karen's roomate's parents, she and Jonathan are left alone in the house [DT, pp. 29-31].

> She was still aroused, but when I asked her if I could enter her, she said she didn't want to come. She insisted that I wouldn't like what happened to her after she came, that she cried and screamed. I kissed her eyes, her hair, her mouth and told her how much I wanted to feel myself inside her. Again she resisted, saying that she didn't need to have an orgasm in order to like me. My fingers played with her flesh and I kissed and sucked her again. Her body twisted and quivered, she was panting and very wet, but she did not come [DT, pg. 29].

What Karen expressed to Jonathan in this episode is her fear of orgasm; later it is her inability:

> I often have this nightmare. I hear a man's voice coaxing and urging me and I suddenly freeze and say: 'It isn't fair. You're taking advantage of me.' I feel like screaming, but then I think, what the hell, I need it and I want it, so why not? Still I can't come. It's emotional, I know, but what can I do about it? Sometimes, when the sex is very good, I feel intense pleasure, but I never reach the final hill, I stay detached [DT, pg. 66].

In another passage [DT, pp. 114-115], "Karen was surprised by all the articles on masturbation in 'libertated' newspapers and magazines, complete with diagrams and detailed instructions." She tells Jonathan

that she learned how to masturbate early: "I never imagined people needed to be taught." This would imply her own freedom from sexual hangups. But as she continues, she reveals once again her inability to achieve orgasm, a problem which, adopting the latest feminist rhetoric, she blames on men:

> She also admitted that in bed she can never tell a man what she really wants. 'I've been conditioned,' she said, 'to please men and to take my pleasure only from pleasing them; I don't know what I want. When a man does ask me how he can make it good for me--and that doesn't happen much--I can't tell him what I want. I've learned to fake coming, but I despise those men who believe my act.

As she continues she reveals an even more fundamental and probably more relevant problem:

> . . .even more she dreaded the thought of sex with men with whom she could honestly abandon herself. She was afraid that once they saw what she really was, they would leave her.

Karen's relationships with men swing between fear and resentment on one side and desperation on the other. In one of her "feminist" moods she phones Jonathan and fires off this salvo:

> Karen was furious that anyone could prefer the synthetic scents of raspberry, jasmine, orange blossom and champagne to the pungency of the glands. 'They force us to take the pill,' Karen said, 'they force us to shave our hair, they want to penetrate our brains as well as our vaginas.' She did not say who 'they' were, and I didn't ask [DT, pg. 111].

But more often, she puts herself in degrading, humiliating positions viz a viz men; she willingly makes herself a sexual tool:

> Once, in front of me, Karen said to him, 'I would like to fuck you, baby, until, until. . .' Then she dragged him into the bathroom and slammed the door. When she came out, she said

> to him, 'Will I see you again?' and he answered, 'I don't know. That depends on how bad you want it.'

And despite her protests of aversion to sexual fads, Karen continually fantacizes and/or experiments, almost complusively. Behind her decisions there is the fashionable creed of experience for experience's sake.

> I'm sick of my friends who suck guys off in parked cars because it's trendy. I'm tired of sexual fads [DT, pg. 65].

> After they all had smoked some grass, the couple asked Karen if they could make love in her bedroom. Karen offered to go shopping. 'Stay,' they said. 'Why don't you join us?' She did. . . .Karen told me how arousing it had been to fantasize making love to them and then actually do it. She claimed that during this experience she was more excited and uninhibited than ever before [DT, pg. 116].

The contradictions in Karen's behavior and attitudes are manifestations of the deeper conflict expressed in her inability to achieve orgasm: the desire for spontaneity versus her fear of losing control and of revealing herself. Underlying both is the fundamental fear of rejection. She expresses this conflict in her behavior: on one hand, a masochistic abandon, on the other, detachment. The result is her frenzied search for satisfaction, impulsive and desperate tries at experience.

This conflict is the exact counterpart of Jonathan's, and therefore, it is part of the irony of their relationship that she is more critical of his detachment and control than any other aspect of his character:

> When we were lying next to each other, Karen said that now that she was liberated, she could understand me better. My

> biggest hang-ups, she said, were my lack of spontaneity, my steadiness and my unyielding self-control. I told her it wasn't any help knowing she could read or fall asleep so easily while I stayed awake and tense. She slid her hand along the inside of my thigh and when I didn't react she turned away and said, 'Good night, ice cube, maybe we'll clink against each other during the night.' It was as though she had totally forgotten how many times she had turned me down, as though she weren't the most self-controlled woman I had ever known. She fell asleep while I was telling her this. It was just perfect [DT, pg. 42].

In a world where hypocrisy is the common coin where, as Camus says, crime has assumed the mantle of reason, the positive act is undistinguished, it is absorbed and finally rendered meaningless. In such a world, the perverse is the only effective statement left. Jonathan's murder of the Howmets is perverse in that it is a destructive act committed by a man who yearns for creative life. But it is not gratuitous. The Howmets genuinely represent the hypocrisy of society which Jonathan finds utterly deficient: "decent" bland insensitive people who mouth those platitudes which justify their excercise of power. While Jonathan's plan to help the Bowery derelicts may be simpleminded [DT, pp. 182-184], Mrs. Howmet's refusal to consider it reveals her callousness. Dismissing it, she suggests instead that Jonathan join an Order, to which her husband belongs and to which Jonathan's father belonged.

Later as Jonathan is initiated, he reflects that he is following a herd instinct; he feels that "he had let himself get caught in an irreversible process." But it is unclear whether the process is towards his absorption in the society which the Howmets represent or towards their eventual destruction. Is this the point at which Jonathan decides to murder them? Regardless, the murder itself is cold and calculated; planned far in advance, and here Jonathan most

resembles the protagonists of Steps and The Painted Bird.

The perverse is the ethical sense turned upside-down, the appropriate act for a world in which everything, like the boababab tree (The devil tree) is upside down. Up to the point at which he murders the Howmets, Jonathan has made various attempts to begin some sort of life after his return to the U.S.--his relationship with Karen, his half-hearted attempt at corporate social life, the encounter group. The murder of the Howmets, an act of quiet desperation, signals the failure of these attempts. The murder is the dividing line in the novel and therefore the climax. Following this episode, Jonathan descends rapidly into madness. His plan to become a world ski champion is a last fling at finding satisfaction through the exercise of power and money.

ii

In design, The Devil Tree is the most unconventional of Kosinski's four novels. The story is told in fragments rather than episodes, where episodes are finished and closed actions. The story is told from Jonathan's point-of-view, sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third. Often there are fragmentary monologues, apparently directed at Jonathan, representing sheer input. These monologues, cinematic in quality, remind one of Dos Passos, and produce a similar sense of speed, frenzy, and complexity in a media-dominated urban culture. The effect is sometimes overpowering as it must be on Jonathan who, because of his long absence, must feel bombarded.

The content of these monologues represents a corrupt, hypocritical society whether they are spoken by drug dealers, con men, or corporate

types. All are similar in that what they offer can have no relevance to Jonathan in achieving his project of self-discovery; on the other hand they do reveal to Jonathan what he is not, or what is not possible to him. This view of society is consistent with Kosinski's other novels, and is probably best expressed by this comment from Kosinski's essay on Steps: "In a time of crumbling systems the protagonist of Steps searches for symbols and finds that what is offered him is paper-thin." [Art, pg. 62].

Underlying the pattern of fragments which form the text of the narrative, there is a story, beginning with Jonathan's return to the States, climaxing in his murder of the Howmets, and ending in his confinement in a mental hospital in Geneva. But it is not a story consisting of specific events linked one to the other in an identifiable period of time. While there are specific events, most of the narrative consists of general conditions, states of mind, evolving over an unspecified time.

The Devil Tree presents the reader with particular difficulties: is Jonathan a sympathetic protagonist? is he a reliable narrator? is there a moral-norm in the novel? Does it lie in Jonathan or the author? The lack of a defined moral-norm or a reliable narrator could be part of the author's intention: perhaps he means to show a world of moral ambiguities. Certainly in his early novels he avoids taking any direct moral position within the narrative. His narrative method is wholly objective; even when the protagonist narrates in the first person, he reveals little of his feelings, motives or thoughts. The exception is The Painted Bird, and even there, a good deal of emotional material

is reported without commentary. Only in the two essays, do we learn that he considers the Boy in The Painted Bird a "negative hero" and that he considers the protagonist of Steps a man who deludes himself. Further the lack of a defined moral-norm seems consistent with Kosinski's ideas of "subverting" the reader, to force him to become engaged with the fiction by presenting him with choices, puzzles and paradoxes. The difficulty, regardless of Kosinski's intentions, arises in two areas: first the design and second the moral values that are expressed.

While the story is told from Jonathan's point-of-view, some is told in the first person and some in the third. There are also fragments written as direct asides (or monologues) to the reader, spoken by Jonathan; these are almost wholly emotional material, and reveal a great deal about what Jonathan is thinking. Those sections written in the first person, however, are less revealing, and sometimes resemble the episodes in Steps. Why, for example, does Jonathan torture Barbara by pretending to have murdered the old lady who has lent them her villa? The answer, if any, must be inferred. Those sections written in the third person are even less revealing. These are narrated from a strictly objective viewpoint; that is, they give the reader no inkling of what Jonathan is thinking at the time. Why, again, does Jonathan murder the Howmets? The answer must be purely speculative. All of this has its impact on the question of a moral-norm and whether or not Jonathan is a reliable narrator--there is no adequate basis to judge Jonathan.

But there is one point of reference we can assume is reliable. The objective point of view of the author is meant to be reliable even

if only in the matter of fact. Thus, when Kosinski, from his third person point of view, tells us that Jonathan goes to the family home outside Pittsburg one night, and when he reports the contents of letters and newspaper clippings in the same scene, we can be sure that Kosinski intends that we accept these as factual.

To a certain extent, then, we can check Jonathan's reliability by comparing his observations of fact to those provided in the third-person narrative. For example, the contents of the news clippings, the letters, in the same scene seems to corroborate his experience of his parents. While these instances are limited, there are enough to suggest that Jonathan is meant to be a reliable narrator, even a sympathetic protagonist, but there is no certainty of this.

The issue becomes even more confused when we examine the moral values that are expressed in the novel, or the thematic sense. Even though Kosinski's preoccupations seem to be the same, the angle of approach is very different. Like Kosinski's other protagonists, Jonathan is obsessed with the past; he desires to "transfer" his past experience to another person--a woman--and sexuality is the key instrument of this transfer; for the protagonist of Steps, all of these preoccupations were manifestations of a generally negative moral stance; his obsession with the past and his desire to "transfer" it to another person where "he assumes that its cancerous action will continue. . ." [Art, pg. 45] is evidence of "bad faith"--his desire to escape moral responsibility for himself. But, in the case of Jonathan, and The Devil Tree, these same preoccupations seem to assume a positive meaning. His desire to relate his past to Karen appears to be a move towards

mutual understanding and respect. He speculates that her acceptance of his past, if proffered, would free him, allow him to express the many aspects of his self, and thus provide a basis for love. The protagonist of Steps had chosen "sadism," before the novel began, as his mode of relation to others Jonathan, although he toys with sadism throughout his novel (his torment of Barbara, for example) has embarked on the project of love. But finally, when this project has clearly failed, he chooses hate (the precondition of sadism). With hate, Sartre says, one chooses to destroy the other. Jonathan destroys the Howmets. In this respect, then, there is a thematic agreement between The Devil Tree, Steps, and The Painted Bird: perversity is the final desperate response to the failure of the individual man and his society.

The novel seems to require a psychoanlytic interpretation, in fact almost asks for it, especially in respect to Jonathan's preoccupation with his childhood. But this issue too is made ambiguous by the question of Jonathan's reliability. Once again we are left with two possibilities: a) Kosinski intends that we understand psychoanalysis (in this case the popularized form) as another "myth," a system of abstractions, which fails to comprehend the complexity of experience, or b) he intends that we accept Jonathan's perceptions of himself and his childhood as accurate and consistent with the other thematic materials. Once again, these sections written in an objective, third-person point-of-view seem to support the latter, but once again, we cannot be sure.

But if we assume that the psychoanalytic material is accurate--that is, that Kosinski intends that we accept it as accurate--a more important

question arises, and this involves the interrelationship of the thematic materials in the novel: the myth of the American success story; the psychological background; the contemporary scene; the inevitable (or so it seems) failure of the project of loving.

The real significance of the American myth, as with any other, is not that it accurately describes reality but that people believe it does and attempt to fashion reality to correspond to it. To some extent, their attempts will be successful. Thus, one may draw the inference that the aberrations of the society in which Jonathan finds himself--where illegal traffic in drugs imitates the methods of corporate big business and the corporate big business imitates organized crime--are the ultimate result of a false myth or ideology. And therefore Jonathan's project of discovering his self will be frustrated by a society that offers him meaningless or corrupt models, institutions, etc. This theme is similar to that of Being There and Steps. The Devil Tree, however, investigates the source of the myth--the living models who are Jonathan's parents. The weak point in this argument is the psychoanalytic implications of Jonathan's childhood. Surely these would be the same for anyone. Is Kosinski trying to lay the blame for all neurosis at the door of corporate wealth as Freud did with civilization? Or is Kosinski merely trying to draw the obvious point that for the wealthy and powerful the elementary human passions are the same? In either event, the relation of myth to neurosis in this case is unclear.

* * *

In The Devil Tree Kosinski comes as close as he has yet to expressing the moral dilemma that seems to underlie his fiction--the

desire for self-realization against the impulse for the perverse. Even so it is obscured by the overlay of psychological and mythical arguments. Further, the reader who has followed Kosinski's work, even perhaps to the extent of reading his essays, may be confused by Kosinski's fictionalization, for the first time, of this dilemma. For example, if that reader has read the essay on Steps, the idea of "transference" will have negative connotations rather than the positive ones Kosinski ascribes to the same idea when Jonathan considers it; similarly, the same reader may identify the desire to realize the many potential selves with the manipulative behavior of the protagonist of Steps.

Perhaps there is another explanation for this inconsistency of meaning. Kosinski may see the acts and preoccupations of his protagonists as essentially unknowable in their fundamental motive. Therefore, the act may assume different moral meanings and result in paradox.

But this is speculation. Even paradox must be visible.

Conclusion

The contemporary man desires the experience of his own being, his "inner self", and a coherent and just world. The reality he perceives frustrates that desire. For this reason, the perverse as a possible ethical choice and course of action occupies a peculiar place in the modern sensibility..

The choice of the perverse is made as a response to two aspects of the world as modern man perceives it: 1) the failure of institutions and society, all of those "formerly protective agencies" which are, in the modern age, the sources of sin, i.e. destructive of self, and 2) the ontological condition on which human existence is based: nothingness underlies being; consciousness comes out of nothing, returns to nothing, and defines itself by that which it is not: that is, by an act of negation.

In choosing the perverse, the man rejects the terms of existence as they are understood in the modern period: that man lives in an indifferent universe; that his being is founded on nothingness; that he must, therefore, assume responsibility for his existence and his destiny. The implications of a rejection of these terms, then, is a choice of inauthenticity--in plain terms, living a lie. This is the ethical meaning of "transference", the process by which--as Kosinski explains in Art of the Self--the protagonist of Steps attempts to rid himself of the burden of his past by transferring it to the other, whether the other is the woman of the interludes or, in fact, the reader: because

the past is part of one's facticity, it is part of one's existence. The protagonist of Steps also attempts to deny the terms of existence by means of rigid control over himself and others, and by means of emotional detachment--all of which are manifested in the language of the narration.

While rejecting the terms of existence (the ontological condition), Kosinski's protagonists also mount an attack on those protective agencies, social institutions and their symbols, which are perceived as destructive of self: The protagonist of Steps confronts the priest who has acquiesced in the sexual exploitation of the demented woman and who can be construed to represent a hypocritical church; he engages in petty acts directed against the state bureaucracy--ruining an officious army commander. The Boy of The Painted Bird engages in small acts of crime and vandalism. Jonathan Whalen of The Devil Tree humiliates a local official, and murders the Howmets, constituents of the power elite.

For the most part, however, Kosinski's protagonists attack ordinary people, not powerful or representative of protective agencies. The motive in these cases is not simply defense of the self against the power of suffocating social institutions. It is rather a working out of the motives assigned to the Boy of The Painted Bird by Kosinski in Notes of the Author: ". . .he desires and thirsts to hate others for all that had happened to him in this world." In the case of the Boy this hatred is not ". . .directed at any single person or group; they become attitudes. . .the basis for his behavior in all situations." It is not important that the Boy necessarily know the victim of his revenge; similarly it is perferable that the protagonist of Steps not know the victim who will be the object of his manipulation.

The Boy adopts the morality of his persecutors, a psychological solution described by Anna Freud in her study of defense mechanisms as "introjection of aggression." For the Boy, then, and presumably Kosinski's other perverse protagonists, pathology reinforces--or underlies--the despair at the terms of existence and anger at the failure of social institutions.

In addition to his impulse towards perversity, the Kosinski protagonist desires self realization. The Boy of The Painted Bird desires a just world, love, and a community in which he can experience his "inner self." The protagonist of Steps, Kosinski implies in The Art of the Self is engaged in a "quest in search of inner life"; in discussing his protagonist's motives, Kosinski seems to justify "transference" by arguing for personal liberation: ("It was a necessary act because his past was crippling him, preventing him from acting fully in the present.") "Chance", of Being There, leaves his solipsistic state in the garden with the expectation that others will ". . .open him up and unfold him. . ." And in The Devil Tree Jonathan hopes to realize his many selves, by transferring his past to Karen.

If we think of Kosinski's meaning of "self" and "inner life" as synonymous with the humanistic values implied by "self-realization", the desire for self and the choice of the perverse are anti-thetical. Therefore we can understand Kosinski's novel as a dialectic between the two, ending always in the frustration of the desire for self.

A moral dilemma underlies that dialectic, best described by Camus in The Rebel; when rebellion turns into nihilism, it negates its original impulse--the affirmations of human dignity and freedom.

From Camus' position, it is still possible to choose rebellion and reject nihilism, and with it, the perverse. But in Kosinski's mythology, the historical moment has passed when one can make that choice: "With the death of Man and the birth of collective and mechanized society, faith loses its meaning. In the face of faith lost and in a universe unmasked in its indifference,. . .the most meaningful and fulfilling gesture is negative. . ."

For Kosinski, the choice of the perverse is a last resort, the final defense of the self, ". . .a movement towards the solitude within which the self can display its reality."

Still the desire for a different alternative lingers: The perverse reveals, in its emotional malaise, the despair and anger of the man who chooses that doctrine.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

A Summary of Sartre's Ontology[1]

For philosophic systems a theory of being (ontology) is usually central. Ontology is the subject which Sartre addresses in his major work, Being and Nothingness. His method is phenomenological; that is, he begins with an analysis of phenomenae, those objects or perceptions which appear in our senses.

Like Descartes, Sartre begins his analysis with the initial phenomenon which is consciousness itself, or the awareness of consciousness. Descartes, wanting to find some absolute certainty from which he could build, subjected all beliefs to doubt. Everything, he found, could indeed be doubted, except the fact of his doubt. But doubt, argued Descarte, implied consciousness, and consciousness implied being, "Cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am). Sartre begins with the assumption that consciousness must have an object, that is, it must be conscious of something. Consciousness cannot be conscious of itself because that would imply that consciousness is conscious of itself being conscious of itself, and so on, leading to an infinite regression. His analysis leads to a pre-reflective cogito; that is, the implicit consciousness of being conscious of an object. That object is everything which consciousness is not, which is that constituent of being revealed

[1]Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology, translated by Hazel E. Barnes, Washington Square Press edition, New York, New York, 1966. For convenience, all future references will be included in the text and indicated by the title and page number.

through the phenomenae. Consciousness, then, knows itself by an act of negation: it says, in effect, I am that which is not the being revealed through phenomenae. (Note that "negation" in this context carried no moral connotation, but is purely a functional category.) By the act of negation, consciousness (being-for-itself) separates itself from all non-conscious being (being-in-itself) which is revealed through phenomenae; thus, the "in-itself" is founded on the "for-itself." And while the for-itself desires a union with the in-itself, such a union is impossible, in principle, for if accomplished, the for-itself would cease to be. That the for-itself comes into existence by an act of negation is a fundamental idea for Sartre.

The for-itself exists in two modes: its "facticity" and its "transcendence." Facticity signifies the connection between the for-itself and the in-itself. First, as we have just seen, although the for-itself is separate from the in-itself, the for-itself is founded on the in-itself, and is thus dependent on it. In addition, the for-itself as a subjective mind exists within a world; that is, it has a physical base for its existence, and it is located in a body which is an object in a world of objects and it appears in the world at a certain time. Body, place and time constitute the given conditions and limitations on the subjective consciousness. The temporal facticity of the individual consits of his past and his present because these assume an objective quality which corresponds to that of being-in-itself.

The for-itself also exists in the mode of transcendence. This means that in certain ways consciousness is not limited by body, place and time. Consciousness can project itself into the future and having freedom of choice, can continually invent itself. Thus the transcendent

mode of consciousness extends beyond the temporal limitations of past and present into the futre. Transcendence and facticity are the basis for Sartre's idea of "bad faith," a concept which describes an ontological condition but which has ethical implications. Ontologically "bad faith" means a vacillation between these two modes, and a refusal to recognize each for what it is or to synthesize them.[2] Ethically, this means an attempt by the indiviudal to deny or escape the condition of responsible freedom which is implied by the conditions of his existence within the world. Consider these examples:

The individual insists on his facticity alone: "I am only what I am at the present moment because my condition is determined by my past, by history, or by the situation into which I was born, and by the circumstances of the present." While it is true that facticity imposes certain limits, the individual possesses a wide array of choices within those limits. So by present choices he can project himself into the future. By insisting on his facticity and refusing to recognize his transcendence, he excuses himself for responsibility for his fate. The psychological equivalent of this attitude is resignation.

The individual insists on his transcedence alone: that is, he denies a connection with the past or to the circumstances of the present: "I am not who I was, and I am not who I am." This individual insists on no limitations; he sees the future not in terms of a life-project but as an empty void into which he can project himself as anything by pure will. By adopting this attitude the individual escapes the responsiblity for making present choices (expressed in concrete acts) and for

[2]Sartre, op. cit. This definition is paraphrased from the translators glossary.

living in a concrete particular world (facticity). The psychological equivalent of this attitude is detachment and/or narcissism.

In either case, the individual is guilty of "bad faith." One alternative to bad faith is "authenticity" in which the self coordinates transcendence and facticity, thereby avoiding inner disintegration. By recognizing these two modes for what they are, the self acknowledges the real conditions on which its being is founded.

Sartre approaches this relationship of the self to other through the traditional problem posed by "solipsism" which may be defined in two ways: (1) the doctrine that the indiviudal mind (subject) is unable to prove the existence or reality of other minds (subjects) external to itself; or (2) the doctrine that nothing is real (exists) but the subject, the individual mind. Put in the form of a question, the problem posed by solipsism is this: How do we know that the other exists as a subjective mind?

The existence of others as phenomenae is clearly established; that is, they appear as figures in our senses, but only as objects; we have no way of knowing their subjectivity when we see them as objects. And while we can conjecture from their appearance that they possess a subjectivity like ours, this remains only conjecture, not knowledge.

Sartre's solution to this problem lies once again in the analysis of the consciousness of phenomenae. The for-itself experiences one aspect of itself as an object--being-for-others. We experience being for others as "affects" (emotional states); for example, when we experience shame, anger, resentment, we do so as objects in another's subjectivity.

The self, however, tries to escape becoming an object for the other. In doing so, it engages in "hate" or "love"; that is, it attempts to make an object of the other or become an object for the other. Sartre uses the terms "sadism" and "masochism" to apply to these general processes, as well as specific sexual instances.

The ideal of love, however, is not masochism but the possession of the liberty of the other by the other's own choice. In order to achieve this, the self must make itself an object capable of standing in place of the whole world for the other because in the normal exercise of subjectivity, the other would choose a state of being-in-the-world. The same is true of the other as subject; that is, he wishes to possess the liberty of the other (the first subject) and therefore he must make himself an object capable of standing in place of the whole world. This mutual project is doomed from the beginning because each must choose the other choosing, and so forth; this leads to an infinite regression, and thus is impossible in principle.

Because of the failure of the project of love, the self may turn aside into sadism or masochism. In masochism the self uses its liberty to deprive itself of liberty, to become wholly an object for the other; in sadism the self makes an object of the other, but in this case the self possesses only the exterior (the body) of the other.