



The Fabrication of a Culture Hero

by JOHN W. ALDRIDGE

BEING THERE

by Jerzy Kosinski

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 142 pp., \$4.95

In 1957, at the age of twenty-four, Jerzy Kosinski arrived in this country from his native Poland, and shortly began to write in English—a fine, pure English—some of the most original fiction of the postwar period. His first and still his best-known novel, *The Painted Bird* (1966), was an extraordinary work of combined fantasy and realism, a fairy-tale horror story about the experience of a Gypsy or Jewish refugee child wandering in a nameless wartime landscape, threatened on the one hand by the German occupation army and tortured and persecuted on the other by the simple, sadistic peasants with whom, in his passage from nightmare to nightmare, he is forced to seek shelter.

Steps (1968) was an essentially cinematic novel in the New Wave fashion, a book composed of fragments of experience or splinters of consciousness, having to do with a young man's odyssey through yet another Grand Guignol world in which, all standards being dead, violence and perversity register on the mind as unjudgable increments of the given—mere data in the mechanical procedure of being.

Both these novels won Kosinski large critical acclaim and important

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literary prizes (*Steps* received a National Book Award in 1969), and they did so obviously because they represented brilliant attempts to create not merely new but exceedingly bold effects in a form in which the possibilities for adventure have for many years seemed reduced, and recent experimental efforts have often resulted in a purely technical cleverness or the haphazard production of mere grotesquerie.

Kosinski has of course highly gifted contemporaries in the field of the experimental novel, and his work cannot finally be understood in isolation from theirs. In this country there are John Hawkes, Donald Barthelme, and John Barth, in France the so-called anti-novelists such as Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet, in England William Golding, and in Germany Günter Grass. Kosinski has clearly been energized by the post-avant-garde iconoclasm these writers represent, and there are elements in his work that undoubtedly would not be present if it were not for the influence of the black humor and French New Novel schools of writing. Yet he differs from both in the important respect that his vision is primarily philosophical. Kosinski is interested not in making a satirical indictment of modern society—although satire is an abrasive secondary feature of his point of view—nor in attempting to explore in the French manner the various possible ways of dramatizing individual consciousness. He is concerned rather with understanding the nature and meaning of the human condition, the relation, quite simply, of human values to the terms of existence in an essentially amoral and surely anarchistic universe.

This may suggest that, to the extent Kosinski can be placed in any line of literary derivation or influence, he belongs in the tradition of classic Euro-

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pean modernism. He may have learned something of value from those of his contemporaries who are working experimentally with the novel form, but his greatest teachers have evidently been Kafka, Camus, Sartre, and perhaps Dostoevsky, men who have possessed not only unusual creative power but the ability to deal directly with concepts of being—in the largest sense, with ideas—and to use them in their fiction as concrete modes of dramatic action. This has always been the central strength of the later European novel: that in it ideas are as important as physical sensations and may even be experienced with all the force and acuteness of physical sensations. And this also is a quality the American novel has almost completely lacked, if only because it is part of our frontier mythology to believe that ideas belong to one sphere of perception and sensations to another—ideas to pallid and passive thought, sensations to the life of real men in the real world of robust action.

Ever since Hawthorne and Melville our novel has typically taken the form of an inflated documentary celebration of the discovery and incessant rediscovery of what it *feels* like to experience America, and this experience almost never extends above the level of raw physical sensation, is seldom redeemed by a single idea. It may be that we have been suspicious of all forms of abstract conceptualization because of the nature of our national beginnings, because of some ancestral memory that still haunts us of that sterile, life-hating Puritan obsessiveness about sin and a vengeful God and the peril of emotion, and that this is what ideas, what thinking, came to symbolize for us. Thus when we began the migration westward we were not only seeking new country but were in frantic flight from such terrible, kill-

ing intellection, swearing to ourselves that once we hit the trail we would never, never think again but only *be* and *feel* in a glorious, mindless revel out there in all those great empty wide-open spaces. We were Huck Finns, every one of us, endlessly lighting out for the territory ahead where there would be no Aunt Sally to “civilize” us. It is scarcely any wonder that this pattern has had a profound effect upon our attitude toward ideas—that we conceive of them, whether in life or literature, as antithetical to creativity and honest feeling, and, therefore, as unmanly, perhaps even as undemocratic. For in the ethos of the frontier the manly American was the one anxious to move on, inspired by the lust for adventure and an unthinking love of country, while the contemplative man was, by definition, unadventurous, skeptical, aloof, slick-talking, a shifty and shiftless fellow, of dubious origins, probably a cheater at cards, almost certainly a foreigner.

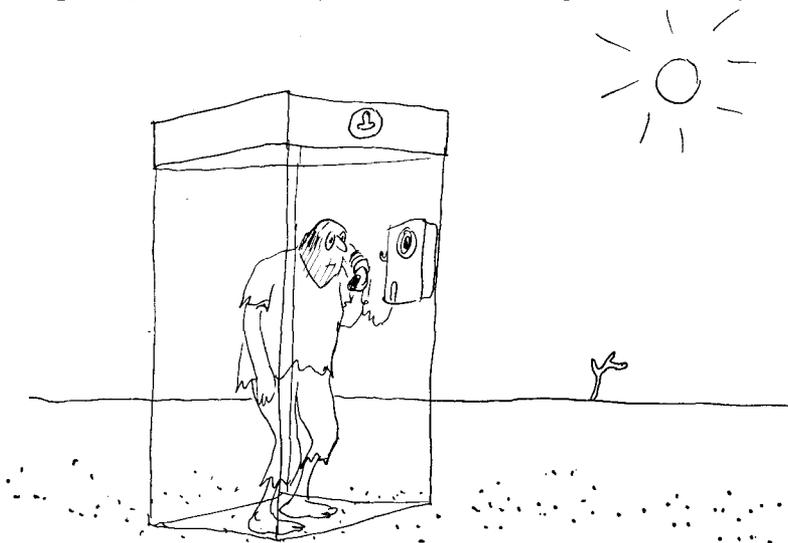
As a European Kosinski is fortunately free of this kind of grass-roots anti-intellectualism. Not only does he deal explicitly with ideas in his fiction; he is fully conscious of the extent to which they determine the cast and content of his creative vision. In two short monographs, *Notes of the Author* (1965) and *The Art of the Self* (1968), first published as companion pieces, respectively, to *The Painted Bird* and *Steps*, he has offered, somewhat in the manner of Camus, important critical-philosophical statements that explain his technical intentions in the novels at the same time that they illuminate the ideological structures on which each was conceived. In them Kosinski reminds us of a truth which most American novelists, just because of their abiding distrust of ideas, would much prefer us to forget: that in the most accomplished literary artists

vigor of execution is finally inseparable from vigor of conception. The quality of the work can be determined only by the extent to which the work provides a powerful imaginative rendering of a powerful idea.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Kosinski's new novel, *Being There*, should take the form that is most natural for the novelist of ideas, the form of parable, the metaphorical and analogical statement of an idea—in this case, one that happens not only to be powerful in itself but to have the widest conceivable relevance to the condition of society at the present time. Once again, as in *The Painted Bird*, he is concerned with the innocent and helpless victim—there a lost child, here a man with the mind of a child—who is destined to become the object of what Henry James saw as the worst human atrocity: the usurpation by others of the privacy and integrity of the individual self.

The Painted Bird was primarily a parable of demonic totalitarianism, of that form of Nazi bestiality which is not a politics but a violence of the soul and blood. *Being There* has to do with a totalitarianism of a much subtler and even more fearful kind, the kind that arises when the higher sensibilities of a people have become not so much brutalized as benumbed, when they have lost both skepticism and all hold on the real, and so fall victim to those agencies of propaganda which manipulate their thinking to accept whatever the state finds it expedient for them to accept. This fascistic enslavement of the will, the corruption by others of the power of individual choice, is implied in Sartre's famous remark that “Hell is other people,” and is explicitly characterized by Kosinski in *The Art of the Self* when he speaks of “the inability to escape from others who prove and prove again to you that you are as they see you”—or that *they* are as they wish you to see them.

The hell depicted in *Being There* is clearly contemporary America, but raised to the ultimate power of electronic derangement and populated with creatures who perceive life wholly in terms of the images offered them on the television screen, and who, therefore, create the personages they see on the screen in the image of their hopes for themselves, their wishful projections of transcendent glamour, wisdom, and financial success. Hence they are vulnerable to seduction by whatever powers happen at any moment to be in control of the mass media. Since their experience of a public figure is confined to the projected media image of that figure, they have no choice but



“Don't you know a mirage when you see one?”

to accept that image as the reliable index of his true identity. A person is what he appears to be, and he can be made to appear to be almost anything his sponsors or the viewing public wish him to be. He can also be created quite literally out of nothing. He need have no actual history or identity, no record of failure or accomplishment, and the result will be the same.

For the fatal power of the media is to confer instant celebrity upon anyone, anyone at all, simply through exposure to all those millions of people. And, once such celebrity is attained, the ability to influence, to control, the thoughts and actions of those millions follows automatically. It is entirely conceivable, given these premises, that an imbecile or a madman can with luck and the proper handling be presented as a sufficiently charismatic personality to be mistaken for a man of wisdom, a potential leader, a culture god.

It is just this diabolical possibility that creates the dramatic situation of *Being There*. Like Orwell in 1984, Kosinski has imagined what might result if existing social conditions were developed to their logical conclusions, and he has chosen for a protagonist exactly the sort of man who would exemplify those conclusions in their full absurdity and horror. There is a deadly appropriateness in the fact that this man, who is initially called simply Chance, actually is a mental defective, a man totally without history and public identity, who, as the story proceeds, is literally created as a person and personage because of qualities attributed to him by others.

Since he is incompetent to make his way in the world, Chance has been confined from birth—which in his case was an event of the purest chance—in the mansion of his guardian, known to him as the Old Man. Hence, there exists no documentary evidence of any kind to prove that he has ever been alive. He has no birth certificate, driver's license, checkbook, or medical insurance card. He has never been arrested, paid taxes, been to a doctor, or once ventured outside the walls of the Old Man's garden, which he spends his days tending. His view of experience has been formed exclusively from his contact with plants and flowers and what he has been able to learn through incessantly watching television. In fact, the process of watching is his primary mode of engaging reality, and reality exists for him only so long as the images remain before his eyes on the screen. When the set is turned off, the images die, and with them the people, places, and events they represent.

Chance lives in this way for many years, and eventually grows into a tall,

handsome man who speaks well but simply, and who makes a most attractive appearance when dressed in the Old Man's expensive clothes. But then the Old Man dies; Chance is expelled into the world; and what follows is a series of events as accidental as his birth. He is befriended by the beautiful wife of Benjamin Rand, one of the most powerful financiers in the country. Because she misunderstands when he says he is Chance the gardener, she assumes that his name is Chauncey Gardiner, and that, judging by his appearance, he must be a successful businessman. Her husband is also impressed by Chance because, in addition to looking prosperous, he seems to possess remarkable self-confidence and a rare quality of inner serenity. When, in response to a question about his background, Chance speaks in the only language he knows, the imagery of the growth and decay of plant life, Rand assumes he is speaking metaphorically and credits him with great wisdom. Shortly thereafter, the President of the United States visits Rand in his home and invites Chance to give his opinion on the state of the national economy. Again his words are taken to be oracular:

"In a garden," he said, "growth has its season. There are spring and summer, but there are also fall and winter. And then spring and summer again. As long as the roots are not severed, all is well and all will be well." . . .

"I must admit, Mr. Gardiner," the President said, "that what you've just said is one of the most refreshing and optimistic statements I've heard in a very, very long time."

The President quotes Chance's remarks in a widely publicized speech, and at once Chance is identified from

coast to coast as an extremely influential economic adviser. Invited to appear on television, he is an instant success. Viewers are charmed by his good looks, his voice, and what they assume to be the prophetic nature of his banalities. At the end, after having achieved international reputation, Chance is seriously proposed as a Vice-Presidential candidate, just because he has no history and therefore no record of good or bad accomplishment that might affect the purity of his public image. His sole qualifications—and they are more than sufficient—are that "He's personable, well-spoken and he comes across well on TV."

It is to Kosinski's great credit that in treating material of this kind he avoided the temptation, which might have been overwhelming, to fall into the stereotypical anti-utopian stance made fashionable by Huxley and Orwell. He never provides a direct view of the sociological horror that is so clearly his true subject. Instead, he allows the tragicomic story of Chance to create, through its power of metaphorical suggestiveness, the effect of the actual existence of that spiritually anesthetized world in which such absurd events might well become commonplace. And Chance's story is so straightforwardly told, so barren of adornment, so evidently ingenuous that these very qualities preserve it from the charge of implausibility. One reads it as one might read a fairy tale, knowing that it is not a realistic description of life, but sensing also that it is a frighteningly real symbolic abstraction of life. For *Being There* exists simultaneously on the levels of fiction and fact, fantasy and contemporary history. It is a novel ingeniously conceived and endowed with some of the magical significance of myth.

Your Literary I.Q.

Conducted by David M. Glixon

THEIR MAJESTIES

You are requested by Anne McCaughey of Philadelphia to figure out to which sovereign each of these characters owed allegiance, and according to which author. If the reign is too hard, you can take shelter on page 59.

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|-----------------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 1. Constance Baynes () | A. Alexander I | a. Bennett |
| 2. Eugene Bazarov () | B. Alexander II | b. Cervantes |
| 3. Pierre Bezuhov () | C. Charles I | c. Dickens |
| 4. Hans Castorp () | D. Charles X | d. Dumas |
| 5. D'Artagnan () | E. George II | e. Hugo |
| 6. Quasimodo () | F. George III | f. Mann |
| 7. Rowena () | G. George IV | g. Scott |
| 8. Becky Sharp () | H. Louis XI | h. Stendhal |
| 9. Julien Sorel () | I. Louis XIII | i. Sterne |
| 10. Dulcinea del Toboso () | J. Richard I | j. Thackeray |
| 11. Uncle Toby () | K. Victoria | k. Tolstoy |
| 12. Tracy Tupman () | L. William II | l. Turgenev |