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SOME IDEOLOGICAL ASPECTS IN THE POLISH RECEPTION OF JERZY KOSINSKI'S WORK

Examining reception is often a tricky and difficult task, especially if we aim for more than just a selection of astonishing and brilliant or – as the case may be – banal, incompetent or amusing comments. Although we are intrigued to learn what different critics have written about a writer who is considered controversial, it is not that easy to distinguish important voices from insignificant ones. Another problem is the amount of material we have at our disposal. If there are only few scattered comments, we might decide that too little has been said (although in some cases the absence of critical comments can be as meaningful as an abundance of reviews). In turn, if we discover that a great deal has been written on the topic, we might feel discouraged and confused. In the case of Jerzy Kosinski's work the amount of critical voices seems just enough not to perplex the curious reader and to permit him or her to draw some conclusions¹.

Polish interest in Kosinski's works came in waves and reached its highest peaks three times so far: in 1966 in Poland and in exile soon after *The Painted Bird* was published in the US, Britain, Germany and France; in 1988–1990 when the

¹ Altogether I collected about two hundred reviews, articles and interviews, as well as letters to the editors. I based my search mainly on the *Polska Bibliografia Literacka* and *Bibliografia Zawartości Czasopism*.

Polish translation of Kosinski's first novel finally appeared in Poland; and in 1994 when Joanna Siedlecka's book *Czarny ptasior*² was published. Apart from these three main phases we can also see a rising interest in 1982 in response to the article in the *Village Voice* and in 1991 after the writer's death. This pattern shows that reading Kosinski by Polish critics primarily means reading *The Painted Bird*. In fact ninety percent of the articles and reviews in Polish about Kosinski refer either directly or indirectly to this novel. To some extent this is justified since this was his first and perhaps best book, but when we take a closer look at what was said, it becomes clear that the whole issue is more ideological than literary.

Two key concepts that appear in the Polish reception of *The Painted Bird* are 'conspiracy' and 'ingratitude.' Very often these two abstract nouns are further defined, although sometimes authors leave it to the readers to decide what kind of conspiracy and ingratitude they have in mind. The key adjective is 'Jewish' and in case of 'conspiracy' enriched by the German and occasionally American elements. However, euphemisms are often used to avoid the words 'Jewish', 'of Jewish origin' or 'sympathetic to Jews', and instead we learn for instance that Kosinski's book was praised by 'fellow-travellers', 'in certain circles', by 'certain critics.'

As Joseph Lichten mentioned in his article about Polish-Jewish relations in America, in the Polish-Jewish controversy over the Holocaust the belief in Jewish ingratitude accompanied by a conviction that Poles did a lot to help rescue Jews often appears on the Polish side: "If there is one feeling which is likely to create a total agreement between a Polish American and a Polish Pole – whether he is a Communist, or non-

² Published by MARABUT/CIS, Gdańsk-Warszawa. For a discussion in English of the controversy caused by the book see James Sloan, "Kosinski's War," *New Yorker*, October 10 (1994), pp. 46–53.

-Communist, government official or man in the street – it is indignation at this 'ingratitude' of the Jew."³ This statement is a very good illustration of the way *The Painted Bird* was received both in Poland and in exile, often demonstrating a bond between otherwise antagonistic groups.

Nothing shows better the political atmosphere of the late sixties than an open letter to Jerzy Kosinski by Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz, a distinguished writer and the president of the Writers' Union at that time and nowadays a controversial figure (perceived as a talented writer in the service of the regime). It is clear from this letter that Kosinski wrote to him asking why in the *Twórczość* literary monthly of which Iwaszkiewicz was the editor-in-chief, a very favorable opinion about his book was followed a couple of months later by a very negative one, both signed by the same critic jł (Jerzy Lisowski, the present editor-in-chief); Kosinski probably assumed that it was Iwaszkiewicz who expressed those two contradictory opinions. In the first review Lisowski compared the novel to Gunter Grass's fiction and perceived Kosinski as "every inch a writer,"⁴ while in the second one he reexamined his first opinion and admitted that he had been wrong. He goes as far as to say that the novel is "commercial shit" and can be discussed only in "excremental terms."⁵ Iwaszkiewicz explains that he had to instruct his colleague and that after having read the whole book Lisowski changed his mind. He does not mention, however, that in the meantime in the Communist party hard-line weekly *Stolica* in an article entitled "Antypolonica" Kosinski was called a 'renegade' and 'turncoat' and this statement was illustrated with excerpts from various Polish newspapers. The author (or authors, because the article was not signed) seemed to be

³ Joseph L. Lichten, "Polish Americans and American Jews: Some Issues Which Unite and Divide," *The Polish Review*, 4 (1973), p. 60.

⁴ *Twórczość*, 5 (1966), p. 153.

⁵ See jł, *Twórczość*, 5 (1966), p. 153 and 7 (1966), p. 139.

astonished that "this anti-Polish and filthy book" had been reviewed favorably by *Twórczość* and stated that "astonishment was not the only feeling that accompanied reading this 'review'."⁶ Knowing the mechanisms at work in a totalitarian country one can easily guess that both Lisowski and Iwaszkiewicz were put in an awkward position and maybe even reproached by some Communist party officials.

The letter itself is written in a mixture of a patronizing and arrogant tone and what is most uncanny – especially in the view of Kosinski's later death – Iwaszkiewicz closes his rebuke with a warning that some artists who like Kosinski had become famous from one day to the next had ended tragically, one of them Panait Istrati having cut his own throat in a shabby hotel in the Riviera.⁷

Most other reactions in Poland were also highly ideological. Kosinski's novel was seen as a step in the campaign against Poland instigated by Germany and helped by the US and Israel. Most of these items were not literary reviews per se but attacks written by journalists who had nothing to do with literature. The opinions expressed by the most influential papers like *Trybuna Ludu*, *Polityka* or *Prawo i Życie* were later reprinted by dozens of local and less influential ones. The book was presented to the Polish readers in the context of the apparent anti-Polish campaign in the West, infamous Polish jokes and Leon Uris's books,⁸ and of course no readers in the country had a chance to read it and confront their impressions with the official stand. Typical expressions used in this type of criticism were full of military sounding phrases like "we face a new offensive of perfidious propaganda" or "the time of the attack was well prepared. It coincides with the problems ex-

⁶ "Antypolonica," *Stolica*, 27 (1966), p. 11.

⁷ See Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, "List do Jerzego Kosińskiego," *Twórczość*, 10 (1969), pp. 163–164.

⁸ See e.g. Wiesław Górnicki, "Laur malowany," *Polityka*, 12 (1966), p. 10.

perienced by the NATO and the West German attempts to gain nuclear weapons."⁹

An article that deserves particular attention appeared in the Kielce Communist party organ *Słowo Ludu*. An idealized image of Polish peasants mistreated by Kosinski appears there for the first time.¹⁰ The author concludes that the book shows its connections with West German politics and exposes the real political intentions of Israel and that Jerzy Lewinkopf-Kosinski, rescued by Poles' generosity, debased himself by cooperating with those 'circles'.¹¹

Similar reactions could be seen in the émigré press, especially in Britain and Canada, as well as France. The book was criticized in the prestigious and influential *Kultura* (published in Paris) as pornographic and pathological and considered as a conscious or unconscious lie since while aspiring to documentary values it contained vicious accusations against Poland and Poles.¹²

In the London-based *Kronika* the novel was perceived as a product of German-American conspiracy. In the review the emphasis was put on the fact that the Nazis were presented in a positive light while Poles as subhuman creatures. The writer's ingratitude was stressed.¹³ Another émigré critic from London who underlines the fact that the book was immediately translated into German, states that Kosinski hates Poles and is ecstatic in his praise of the Soviets. The novel makes one believe, he concludes ironically, that "the Red Army brought Poland culture, justice and kindheartedness." He describes the

⁹ See Komentator [Jan Gerhard], "Malowany ptak," *Forum*, 24 (1966), p. 23.

¹⁰ This motif will be used, later in the late eighties to assume its fullest form in Siedlecka's book.

¹¹ Tadeusz Wiącek, "Śladem plugawej książki," *Słowo Ludu*, 161 (1968), p. 3.

¹² Magdalena Czajkowska, "Pornografia a humanizm," *Kultura*, 7/8 (1966), pp. 216–220.

¹³ See Antoni Spandowski, "Malowany ptak," *Kronika* 32/33 (1966), p. 4.

book as "repulsive, abominable, repelling, stinking" and claims that this is still an understatement.¹⁴ Another émigré reviewer quotes someone's opinion that Kosinski "is not the only one... (read: Jew – M. A.-G.) who ate Polish bread and took advantage of Polish kindness and then spat, defamed and mocked this kindheartedness."¹⁵

A number of critics suspected Kosinski of revenge, or suggested that he required psychiatric help; most of those with negative opinions charged him with doing 'all this' for money and claimed that the writer had made the novel ambiguous on purpose to have an alibi before Polish readers by pretending that this was fiction while at the same time creating an impression of authenticity for foreign readers. Some suggested that he should be sued and claimed that even Germans were appalled by such a treatment of World War II.

There were also some more balanced and objective opinions. Michał Chmielowiec summed up the whole affair aptly by stating that "all this genuine or ingenuine concern about what foreigners will think of us is for any real Polish patriot a pitiful proof of our inferiority complex" and that both Communist and émigré press revealed "patriotic oversensitivity."¹⁶ Wit Tarnawski, a respected émigré critic, was not enthusiastic about the amount of violence and perversities in the book, but nevertheless considered Kosinski a talented writer and concluded that if anyone should be offended it would be a Polesie Association, but in fact it does not make sense to see any connection with reality in this surrealist Boschian fantasy.¹⁷

¹⁴ See Karol Zbyszewski, "Parada sadyzmu," *Dziennik Polski i Dziennik Żołnierza*, 160 (1966), p. 2.

¹⁵ Leon Mitkiewicz, "Polskie recenzje o *Malowanym ptaku*," *Horyzonty*, 129 (1967), p. 74.

¹⁶ Michał Chmielowiec, "Zły to ptak?," *Wiadomości*, 41 (1966), p. 1.

¹⁷ Wit Tarnawski, "*Ptak odmieniec* Jerzego Kosinskiego," *Przemiany* (published in Rome), 2 (1968), pp. 216–217.

Enthusiastic reviews appeared sporadically. The most favorable stand was taken by the London monthly *Kontynenty*. In an unsigned article entitled "The Kosinski Case" they deplored the fact that both émigré and Communist press had treated the book so unfairly.¹⁸ Earlier Zbigniew Grabowski, the editor-in-chief, in a review entitled "A Talented Writer Is Born" praised the novel very highly by saying that his encounter with Kosinski's books was similar to his reaction to three other excellent writers when he had read their first works: Michał Choromański, Zbigniew Uniłowski and Marek Hłasko.¹⁹

Those who praise Kosinski's book often take a psycho-analytical approach. One of the émigré critics states that this is an "indictment against mankind" and that the writer had to "get his experiences off his mind,"²⁰ another illustrates her review with Różewicz's poetry and discusses the novel from the point of view of her own experiences from childhood.²¹

Some of those émigré authors who take a relatively favorable attitude towards the book admit that it is a description of peasants' mentality who for many centuries lived in terrible conditions which had strengthened their prejudices and ignorance.²² Most of them stress the fact that the action takes place at the Polish-Belorussian-Lithuanian frontier and that some of the cruelties are possible: „Between ourselves, the peasants from Polesie and Belarus were not particularly enlightened."²³

¹⁸ "Sprawa Kosinskiego," *Kontynenty*, 91/92 (1966), pp. 1–6.

¹⁹ Zbigniew Grabowski, "Narodziny talentu," *Kontynenty*, 85/86 (1966), pp. 14–16.

²⁰ See Zygmunt Nagórski, "Pomalowany ptak," *Na Antenie*, 34 (1966), p. 7.

²¹ See Jadwiga Maurer, "Chciałabym być szczurem," *Wiadomości*, 45 (1966), p. 1.

²² See e.g. Zygmunt Nagórski, *op. cit.*

²³ Jadwiga Jurkszus-Tomaszewska, "Na szczęście nie best-seller," *Oficyna Poetów*, 2 (1968), p. 46.

A gradual lifting of censorship imposed in the People's Republic of Poland on Kosinski's works, that can be seen to some extent against the background of the widespread interest in Jewish topics, started in 1987. And yet, as late as in 1986 Jerzy Robert Nowak, who started the discussion over the Hungarian writer Georgy Spiro's controversial book, claimed that *Az Ikszek* should not be translated into Polish since there was no tradition in Poland of translating mendacious and slanderous books like *The Painted Bird*. He argues that this would be a waste of paper and that there are more worthy books that should be published.²⁴ This type of pseudopragmatism or naive reading is visible in a review published in the Communist *Życie i Myśl* after the book was published in Poland. Its author concludes that there are so many interesting and not too stressful books published in Poland nowadays that it does not make sense to disturb one's sleep by reading Kosinski's novel and regrets that a contract was signed with Kosinski for a translation of all his works.²⁵

Generally, however, the change of attitude in the late eighties is unquestionable. There are very few open attacks and more favorable or neutral opinions. A diametrically different position in respect to Jewish topics is manifested to the effect that the author's Jewishness is used not to accuse but justify Kosinski's approach. One critic states that as a Jew, Kosinski has the right to describe his complexes and shortcomings, or make striking judgements,²⁶ while another claims that the fact that Kosinski's book was published in Poland and reviewed both favorably and unfavorably proves that Polish-Jewish relations are becoming more normal.²⁷

²⁴ See Bogdan Góralczyk, "Prasa o polemice ze Spiro," *Zdanie*, 10 (1986), pp. 54-55.

²⁵ See Marzenna Plewa-Dziurdzia, *Życie i Myśl*, 3/4 (1990), p. 77.

²⁶ See Krzysztof Derdowski, "Najczystsze zło," *Metafora*, 1-2 (1989/1990), p. 246.

²⁷ Adam Krzeminski, "Wzajemna terapia," *Polityka*, 22 (1989), p. 9.

Nevertheless, even those authors who try to read *The Painted Bird* in a nonideological manner stress the fact that most Polish readers will consciously or unconsciously test it with reality and wonder whether it is justified to place the concrete events of World War II in a seemingly ahistorical context.²⁸ A number of authors point to the fact that a necessity to supplement the book with notes is its weakness: an artistic work that requires additional commentary shows imperfection. Some reviewers discuss this aspect only in the context of artistic integrity, others make a stronger claim like that in the light of the *Notes* the novel is a "parable of human fate, and without them – unfortunately – an abominable lampoon."²⁹

The reoccurrence of some patterns from the sixties was best displayed in a polemic printed in *Ład*, *Polityka* and *Życie Literackie*. The polemic started with Marian Błażejczyk's article (Błażejczyk being a professor of agrarian law shows that *The Painted Bird* troubled not only professional writers and journalists) in which the anti-Polish aspect of the novel and the lack of gratitude on Kosinski's part were particularly stressed. Błażejczyk says that Kosinski should examine his conscience and tries to imagine the writer coming to Poland on the same plane as Polish peasants, good decent people, an image reminiscent of the article from *Słowo Ludu*.³⁰ One of his adversaries, Kazimierz Koźniewski who concluded and summed up the whole polemic

²⁸ See e.g. Jerzy Jarniewicz, "Zniewolenie historią," *Odra*, 2 (1990), p. 99.

²⁹ Tomasz Sobeczko, "Groteskowe ptaszysko," *Więź*, 11/12 (1989), p. 183.

³⁰ See Marian Błażejczyk, "Pstry ptak," *Ład*, 17 (1988), pp. 12-13 and his letter in *Ład*, 26 (1988), p. 11. On his side in this polemic there were Tomasz Galis, "Gwiazda z Ameryki," *Ład*, 27 (1988), p. 7 and Krzysztof Kleiber, *Ład*, 34 (1988), p. 13, while his adversaries were R. M. Groński, "Taksówkarz i profesor," *Polityka*, 20 (1988), p. 15, Daniel Passent, "Uwagi starego awanturnika," *Polityka*, 22 (1988), p. 16 and Kazimierz Koźniewski, "Ptak pomalowany fałszywie," *Życie Literackie*, 30 (1988), p. 16. Błażejczyk responded in "Przemalowywanie malowanego ptaka," *Życie Literackie*, 44 (1988), p. 11. On the same page see Koźniewski's response.

(which involved seven participants), took a very characteristic stand saying that he did not like Kosinski's book but felt a responsibility to defend him against false accusations. Koźniewski states directly that the main reason Błażejczyk attacks Kosinski is that the former identifies Polishness with Catholicism. To some extent the polemic revealed two typical and extreme positions: idealizing Kosinski and/or pretending that he never intended to make the book a documentary, versus focusing on anti-Polishness and treating the novel as a lampoon on Poland.

Political rhetoric and mutual accusations have been best displayed, however, in the discussion over Siedlecka's book. For instance a reviewer defending Siedlecka describes the reviews in *Polityka* and *Gazeta Wyborcza* as "March-like style coming from people harmed in 1968" and "people from the cultural circle who consider it proper to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising by means of counting the Jews murdered by the insurgents,"³¹ while another one concludes her essay in which Kosinski's ingratitude is stressed by saying that Siedlecka revealed the fact that "the little martyr from *The Painted Bird* [...] turned out to be a literary charlatan who knew how to sell products particularly welcome in leftist America: sexual deviation, Polonophobia (polakożerstwo) and love toward Soviet communism."³² One could easily imagine similar rhetoric used by the Communist and some of the émigré press more than twenty years earlier in reference to *The Painted Bird*. 'Leftist' America in such an imaginary attack on Kosinski would

³¹ Teresa Bochwic, "Czarny ptasior," *Tygodnik Solidarność*, 19 (1994), p. 22. The second quotation is an allusion to Michał Cichy's article in *Gazeta o książkach* (a monthly supplement to *Gazeta Wyborcza*) that started a stormy discussion about antisemitism within the Home Army during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.

³² Elżbieta Morawiec, "O sprawiedliwej nienawiści i malowanych ptakach," *Arka*, 50 (1994), p. 189.

be replaced with a 'rightist' or 'imperialist' one and 'love toward Soviet communism' with 'love toward West German revisionism.'

When we compare some titles of reviews and articles from the three different phases, we see striking similarities. Very strong, emotionally burdened words were used, often flavored with irony and suspicion. What is particularly interesting, some of the expressions used earlier to discredit Kosinski are applied in 1994 to express disapproval of Siedlecka's book. These parallels are visible in the very titles of various reviews. Some examples:

1966: "Of a Certain Pseudo Bestseller" (O pewnym pseudo-bestsellerze), "Sick Imagination" (Chora wyobraźnia), "My Hands Still Stink" (Ręce mi dotąd cuchną), "Following the Filthy Book" (Śladami plugawej książki), "Muddy Wave" (Mętna fala), "Psychology of Hatred" (Psychologia nienawiści);

1988: "A Star from America" (Gwiazda z Ameryki), "A Grotesque Apalling Bird" (Groteskowe ptaszysko), "A Trashy Picture of a Village" (Kiczowaty obraz wioski);

1994: "Poison" (Trucizna), "Poisonous Nonsense" (Trucizna głupstw), "A Swamp" (Bagno), "Pokrętna prawda" (Deceitful Truth).

The stormy discussion over Siedlecka's book that repeats and even intensifies some patterns that appeared earlier in the Polish language press shows that *The Painted Bird* still constitutes an ideological issue and it is very hard for Polish critics to perceive Kosinski's work in mainly literary or artistic terms. Although there were more negative opinions published about Siedlecka's book than favorable ones, one may suspect that some critics did not want to reveal their true feelings in order not to be classified as members of any particular group.

This ideological aspect of the Polish literary life was ironically stressed by Anna Bojarska who states in a review of *Being There* that she would like to say what she really thinks of Kosinski's books, but her friends whom she respects a lot asked her not to do so since it is not proper to talk unfavorably

about the writer in post-Communist Poland. If you do, you risk being classified as a former Communist.³³

The ideological bias of Jerzy Kosinski's reception is not an isolated case. Similar reactions were caused by William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, some of I. B. Singer's books, particularly *The Slave*, and Gyorgy Spiro's *Az Ikszek*. The Jewish aspect appeared in each reception. In Kosinski's and Singer's case their Jewish roots were obvious while in the case of Styron the fact that his wife was Jewish was emphasized and he was even presented as a Judaized American hired by Jews to defame Poles.³⁴ Spiro's Jewish roots were hinted at very subtly and indirectly. However in none of these cases was the ideological aspect as strong as in Kosinski's case.

In writing about Kosinski (not only by Polish but also other critics), sociological aspects of his work and career have sometimes been emphasized: positively, in that as a sociologist he had better insight into some phenomena; pejoratively, in that his books are more like studies than artistic works, or that being a sociologist he sensed what would interest readers and attract critics at that particular time. Paradoxically, Kosinski the sociologist, primarily but not exclusively due to his first novel, has himself become a sociological phenomenon and given rise to discussions that constitute excellent material for a sociological

³³ She used a similar argument while reviewing Singer's books a few years earlier. See Anna Bojarska, "Dyzma w ogrodzie," *Nowe Książki*, 5 (1991), pp. 30–31. She does, however, express her disapproval of Kosinski's work by the very title of the review which implies that *Being There* is an imitation of *Kariera Nikodema Dyzmy*. In 1994 those who criticize Kosinski and defend Siedlecka are, on the other hand, perceived as 'rightist'.

³⁴ For a more detailed discussion of Singer's and Styron's reception see the last chapter of my book *Polska Isaaca Bashevisa Singera. Rozstanie i powrót*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 1994 or my article "The Reception of I. B. Singer's Fiction in Poland," *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division C, vol. III; "Hebrew and Jewish Literature," Jerusalem: 1994, pp. 61–68.

study of selected aspects of the Polish mentality, political divisions existing in the Polish society and even a better understanding of such obscure, complex and ambivalent terms as the Left and the Right in Poland. I would risk a statement that reading different ways of reading Kosinski is as interesting as reading his own works and could be a topic of a study surpassing the confines of this paper.³⁵

³⁵ An extended version of this paper with a closer examination of Siedlecka's book will appear in *Polin: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies*.

JERZY KOSINSKI
MAN AND WORK
AT THE CROSSROADS OF CULTURES

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