

## THE ART OF FICTION NO. 46

# JERZY KOSINSKI

Jerzy Kosinski, born in Poland in 1933, does not like to talk about his past, although the events of his life correspond almost exactly to those described in his novels. While still a young boy, he was separated from his parents and wandered from village to village in war-torn Eastern Europe. His life in postwar Poland was collective, structured and ordered—the very antithesis of the traumatic experience of his youth. From 1955 to 1957 he was an associate professor at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. In 1957, he left Poland and arrived in the United States as a “private individual” with no knowledge of English and no established means of support. “I did not like myself in Poland,” he says, explaining that it was the country of a past from which he was trying to separate himself. Why did he choose the United States? “Argentina and Brazil would not let me in. And so, I started at the other end of the alphabet.”

In 1962 he married Mary Hayward Weir, “a wealthy, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant who grounded me very definitely in purely American experience.” After her tragic death in 1968, he continued teaching as a professor of English—first at Wesleyan, then Princeton, and now at Yale, where he is Resident Fellow at Davenport College.

Kosinski has had twenty-five Manhattan addresses, and travels frequently in Western Europe. He has never had children, explaining that “my orbit does not make provision for the giving of life.” He will not accept the responsibility of bringing others into the world and feels that if he did, his children would be burdened with his past and the vision that developed from it. He has no desire to project himself beyond his books, over which he can exercise complete control. Children would be “yet another fragmentation, another split in the self. If that self is to be free,” he adds, “I must depend on no one and no one must depend on me.”

After two volumes of nonfiction under the pen name of Joseph Novak, in 1965 he published his first novel, *The Painted Bird*, using his own name. It has been translated into thirty-four languages, and was awarded *Le Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger* in France. For *Steps*, published in 1968, he received the National Book Award. *Being There* was published in 1971. He has also written two collections of essays, *Note of the Author* (1965) and *The Art of the Self* (1968).

—George Plimpton & Rocco Landesman, 1972

## INTERVIEWER

If you had continued to live in Eastern Europe and written in Polish or, as you were bilingual, in Russian, do you think your novels would have been published? And if so, would they have been popular?

## JERZY KOSINSKI

It's not even a matter for speculation. I would never have written in Polish or in Russian. I never saw myself as a man willingly expressing opinions in a totalitarian State. Make no mistake about it: all my generation was perfectly aware of the political price paid for our existence in the total State. To be a writer was to become

a spokesman for a particular philosophical dogma. I considered this a trap: I would not speak for it; nor could I publicly speak against it. That's why I slowly moved toward visual expression: while officially studying social psychology, I became a professional photographer. Of course, there were some other reasons for my apprehension about becoming a writer. Which language would I choose? I was split, like a child who belongs to two different families; studying in Polish at the university, but at home—my parents, even though Polish, were both Russian-born and -educated—all that mattered was Russian tradition and Russian literature.

#### INTERVIEWER

Given the dimensions of the political trap, could you express in photographs anything you felt?

#### KOSINSKI

Within the limits of photography, I could contrast collective behavior with individual destiny. Thus, my photographs often portrayed old age, which knows no politics. They showed the solitude of a man alone in an empty field or on a crowded street, and the State buildings and Party memorials, ridiculously monumental, inhuman in their grandeur. My photographs pointed out an independent, naked human being who, even in the total State, was still willing to be photographed naked. I even produced some nudes of rather attractive nonsocialist female forms. It ended on a very unpleasant political note however; at one annual meeting of the Photographers' Union I was officially accused of being a cosmopolitan who sees the flesh, but not its social implications. My membership in the union and my right to have my photographs published or exhibited nationally or abroad was suspended for an indefinite period. For the same reason, I was also suspended at the university, but then reinstated thanks to my uniformly good grades—and the personal intervention by the dean and the rector, both scholars of “the old guard.”

INTERVIEWER

Who accused you?

KOSINSKI

First, the Party members of the Photographers' Union. The same politically oriented State setup as the Writers' Union, you know. These unions control work assignments and permits, exhibitions, grants, awards, et cetera. They are geared to policing; that is what they're there for. Then my case was picked up by the Party cell of the Students' Union at the university. By then it was all very serious. One's whole life depended on an outcome of such an accusation—and of the review of one's total conduct that followed.

INTERVIEWER

Can one defend oneself?

KOSINSKI

Within the limits of the totalitarian doctrine; there is no defense against the supremacy of the Party that claims to be "the arm of the people." When I was growing up in a Stalinist society my guidelines were: Am I going to survive physically? Mentally? Am I going to remain a decent being? Will they, the Party, succeed in turning me into their pawn and unleash me against others like me? Since I could not avoid being in conflict with the Party, the unions, the whole totalitarian routine imposed on everyone, my real plight had to remain hidden. I avoided having close friends, men and women who would know too much about me and could be coerced into testifying against me. Still, the accusations, the reprimands, the attacks, continued. I was twice thrown out of the Students' Union and twice ordered back. From week to week, from meeting to meeting, it was a very perilous existence. Until I left for America I lived the life of an "inner émigré," as I called myself.

INTERVIEWER

An inner émigré?

KOSINSKI

Yes. 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. There is an episode in *Steps* in which a young philosophy student at the State university selects the lavatories as the only temples of privacy available to him. Well, think how much more of such a temple a darkroom is in a police state. Inside, I would develop my own private images; instead of writing fiction I imagined myself as a fictional character. I identified very strongly with characters of both Eastern and Western literature. I saw myself as Pechorin, in Lermontov's novel, *A Hero of Our Time*; as Romashov, the hero of Kuprin's *The Duel*; as Julien Sorel, or Rastignac, and once in a while as Arthur of E. L. Voynich's *The Gadfly*, facing the oppressive society and being at war with it. I wrote my fiction emotionally; I would never commit it to paper.

INTERVIEWER

Paddy Chayefsky said once that he felt these sort of oppressive strictures were really quite important in producing fine literature. He felt that a straitjacket was essential to a writer.

KOSINSKI

Easily said. One could as well argue the opposite and make a point for the Byronesque kind of expression, with its abandonment, its freedom to collide with others, to express outrage—for Nabokov's kind of vitality. Or we can make a point for a man who chooses a self-imposed visionary straitjacket, perhaps the best one there is. Look at Stendhal, Proust, Melville, Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor. For every Solzhenitsyn who manages to have his first novel published officially (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*),

there are probably hundreds of gifted writers in the Soviet bloc who create emotionally in their “darkrooms,” and who will never write anything. Or those very desperate ones who do commit their vision to paper but hide their manuscripts somewhere under the floorboards.

INTERVIEWER

What has been the reaction of the Soviet-bloc press to your achievements in English prose?

KOSINSKI

The reaction of the East European press toward, for example, *The Painted Bird* was hostile propaganda. They reinvented the content of the novel. Their major effort was to prove that any Pole who settled abroad, writes in English, and is published by various Western publishers had to do it by selling himself to the Library of Congress! According to the official Party journal, the most damaging proof of my collaboration with the White House was that the novel carried the Library of Congress number . . . which, of course, is automatically assigned to every book published in the U.S. There are a few things, however, which they can't quite cope with: My novels are warmly received by the progressive leftist press in the rest of Western Europe. To counteract it, the East European bureaucrats said that to achieve a “monetary success” in the West, I decided to abandon my “real” idiom, writing instead in English.

INTERVIEWER

Who are the people in the Writers' Union in the Soviet bloc?

KOSINSKI

They are journalists, novelists, literary critics, poets. They have to pay their bills, and to pay their bills they have to earn income and be published from time to time by the State publishing houses. I think many of them are primarily concerned with survival in their

profession. It's easy to attach labels, but we have to remember they have to function within a most threatening and unpredictable reality governed by the Party bureaucracy and the total State. Hence, many of them are extremely cautious, many tend to be dogmatic, many are just desperate, and some are servile agents of the State organs. The creative man in a police state has always been trapped in a cage where he can fly as long as he does not touch the wires. His predicament is how to spread his wings in the cage. I think the majority fight for sanity, and when one of them says I don't like this cage, I want out, and does something about it, the others descend on him because he is threatening the safety of all of them. Most often, the writer, poet, or playwright in the Soviet bloc feels that what he writes is the best thing that he can do for his nation, for his country; in good faith he delivers his manuscript to the publisher, and often is persecuted from the next day on—his case discussed by the Writers' Union because, apparently, according to the accusations, in his manuscript he reveals himself as an anti-Soviet character. This was the case of Pasternak, among many others. When he wrote *Doctor Zhivago* he thought it was about the fate of a man caught in the changing patterns of political upheavals. Well, the Party didn't see it that way. Instead, his official accusers declared it antisocialist, cosmopolitan, amoral, et cetera. He was condemned by the Writers' Union.

#### INTERVIEWER

Given the unusual circumstances of your life, many people think of all your novels as a form of extended autobiography, or autobiographical even.

#### KOSINSKI

I have argued against such views many times. To say that any novel is autobiographical may be convenient for classification, but it's not easily justified. What we remember lacks the hard edge of fact. To help us along we create little fictions, highly subtle and individual scenarios which clarify and shape our experience. The

remembered event becomes an incident, a highly compressed dramatic unit that mixes memory and emotion, a structure made to accommodate certain feelings. If it weren't for these structures, art would be too personal for the artist to create, much less for the audience to grasp. Even film, the most literal of all the arts, is edited.

#### INTERVIEWER

You wrote once that *The Painted Bird* is the result of a “slow unfreezing of a mind long gripped by fear.” I assume this fear refers to the horrors of World War II.

#### KOSINSKI

In terms of “a mind long gripped by fear,” I see no essential difference between war and any other traumatic experience. For example, I know many people whose adolescence in the peaceful United States or Sweden was in its own way just as traumatic as was the war or Stalinist oppression for millions of Central and East Europeans.

#### INTERVIEWER

Yes, but in this case a whole generation was affected by the Holocaust. A noted American critic spoke of a “brutalization of the imagination” produced in many writers by this one catastrophe.

#### KOSINSKI

I don't believe that human experience can be graded, from less brutal to extremely brutal. It depends on how it affects the mind. Among the Eastern Europeans I know, I never saw myself as a victim; rather, as one of the multitude. I think I was no more, no less affected by the war than were millions of others.

#### INTERVIEWER

You sound like Roman Polanski, who said that violence is horrible and traumatic only when you look at it from a particular point of view.



Third set of galley-proofs of *Passion Play*. Between the first and the third set, Kosinski managed to shorten the novel by one third (over 100 pages).

FILE COPY  
DO NOT REMOVE

A professional polo player, Fabian was as fascinated by the animal as he was by the game. ~~In the beginning~~, man had traveled on a horse, or his horse had pulled him in a carriage. Now, in the era of the automobile, Fabian reasoned, it was time for man to carry his horse with him in a motor home.

Once

At this second thought, and fueled by a generous cash gift from the same friend, Fabian bought two disqualified show horses to train as his polo ponies.

He fixed to each side of his VanHome a sign that read Quarantined. The sign had proven useful: thieves kept away, and

Small Copy

Fabian reached the outskirts of a city. Acre on acre of cemeteries seemed to surround it; the dead watched the city like massed troops waiting for a fortress to submit. Against a smudged horizon, behind the giant ant hills of the city dumps, skyscrapers were strewn without pattern.

So did other drivers and pedestrians; but if he noticed any shortcuts, he could more readily murder them.

Good

To Fabian, a city was always a place of deliverance. Nature opened between men the chasm of forest and river, but a city offered that solitude which was not only freedom, but refuge. Here in this enclosure of touch, of sidewalks, subways, buses, theaters, hospitals, morgues, cemeteries, where flesh was always only feet away from flesh, all streets led to his psychic home.

S.F./u.c.

~~Fabian~~ the city was a habitat of sex. ~~He~~ reasoned that if nature had given man, in proportion to his size, the largest and most developed organs of sex, it had done so because, of all mammals, only man could keep himself in a state of perpetual heat. Sexuality thus became the most human of instincts. Life gave man the fullness of time, to think and to do, to lust and to act. Because ~~these~~ those powers were suspended, were to be retrieved in sex, Fabian divided his life into the sphere of sleep and the sphere of sex.

in sleep and

Sleep was time's hostage, a prison which muted action, now inviting dreams, now forbidding them entry. Sex liberated, giving language to an urgent vocabulary of need, mood, signal, gesture, glance, a language truly human, universally available.

PR: run in - no f

~~Sex was as natural as sleep, but as sleep was the expression of his life's inner design, sex was its outward manifestation.~~ In sleep, he existed for himself, in sex, for others. Thus, sleep imposed; sex proposed. He refused to think of "sleeping with somebody" as synonymous with having sex, the bed in which sleep and sex took place being often their only point of communion.

u.c.

Sleep had always come easily to him, and his sexual urges came often, but their span was brief, he went about their fulfillment as the crafting of yet another artwork, independent of the artist's own life. To be given sex was a favor, and he was always ready to return one favor with another—the gift of a meal in his VanHome or in a restaurant, a ride on his pony in some park, ~~some~~ money.

an l.c.

ultimately

He never offered himself as a sexual reward to strangers. He saw the spontaneous play of sex between lovers as a consequence of a mutual inoculation in the charge of feeling. He did not need to be instructed in the natural.

OK

JERZY KOSINSKI

He did not see himself as sexually desirable.

A page from the third set of galley proofs of *Passion Play*. Between the first and third set, Kosinski shortened the novel by over 100 pages.

KOSINSKI

We both tend to perceive violence as human, and thus plausible. There is no objective yardstick to human imagination or emotion. A needle or the sight of blood may be as terrifying to a North Dakotan as a bomb is to the Vietnamese.

INTERVIEWER

So in your view, subjective experience is arbitrary; X pretty much equals Y or Z?

KOSINSKI

Our judgment of our experience is arbitrary. It all depends on the perceiving mind.

INTERVIEWER

But the experiences that you deal with, in *Steps*, for instance, are certainly not what we might call “ordinary” experiences. One episode takes place in an asylum, another in a rest home, another in a lavatory, another in the New York underworld. And you continually choose incidents that to other people, at least, seem unusual.

KOSINSKI

I don't know who those “other people” are. The asylum in itself is not a very unusual institution: one-half of all hospital beds in the United States are occupied by psychiatric patients. One in every ten North Americans develops some form of mental or emotional illness; soon one in five will be over sixty-five, and lavatories seem to me to be as common in our daily life as the underworld is in the life of our cities. When *Cockpit* was published, its imaginative scenario containing, among others, a secret agent in hiding, instances of radiation, mass subway poisoning, mysterious disease, kidnappings, food-color dye panic, et cetera; a well-known art critic reproached me for what he called my supposed freedom to ignore in my fiction all worldly plausibility. Well, years later, the American public learned to its horror from the pages of *The New*

*York Times* that for the past fifteen years the unsuspecting staff of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow has been irradiated by microwaves, that a mysterious new disease—possibly army toxin—has spread in several states, that CIA scientists secretly spread simulated biological poison on Manhattan subway lines to test its vulnerability to a biological warfare attack, and that its agents have routinely kidnapped and tortured suspected foreign spies in the United States; that the food-color dye was finally banned, et cetera, et cetera. Come to think, reality has always caught up with the novelist's imagination . . . In any case, my novels are not about wars, credit cards, darkrooms, asylums, rest homes, lavatories, subways, or diseases. They are about people and their relationships with themselves and with each other. "I'm myself—it's the ultimate risk," says a character in *Blind Date*. My novels are about such characters—and about taking such risks. The greatest risks there are.

#### INTERVIEWER

If all our institutions and experiences have for you an equal imaginary value, that is, if anything goes, isn't there a corresponding reduction in the immediacy or intensity of your response?

#### KOSINSKI

It depends, I think, primarily on one's outlook. *JAMA*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, recommended *Being There* as a supplement to scientific study of what they termed *unsaneness*, that awfully ambiguous line of demarcation between what is sane and what is insane in our lives. Most of my fiction takes place in this no-man's-land between sane and insane, common and uncommon, between collective norm and the individual schism, indeed in this realm of unsaneness of the self as well as of its environment. If such fiction makes one "less sensitive"—that conversely would mean that the least aware, the most provincial among us, is also the most sensitive.

INTERVIEWER

It would seem then that no one thing would faze you more than anything else.

KOSINSKI

Well, on one level, that's true: humanity does not surprise me. By its very nature as art, fiction rises above the world of realities and stays within the realm of plausibility and perception. But I detest the dismissal of the true drama of our life by the emissaries of the popular culture—the videots of Disneyland, the fiddlers of Broadway's sentimentality, and so many other professional cultural propagandists whose moral tenet apparently demands that we should never appear as we really are.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you choose the United States when you left the Soviet bloc?

KOSINSKI

I was not leaving for any specific place. Attempting to leave Eastern Europe, I had three priorities on my list, in alphabetical order as well as in the order of my intent: Argentina, Brazil, and the United States, all large multiethnic societies where I assumed I could find anonymity. I remember that first I carefully began collecting Spanish and Portuguese dictionaries. Only much later, English and American ones. In addition to Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian, I knew a bit of French and of Italian, of Latin and Esperanto. I assumed it would have been easier for me to pick up Spanish or Portuguese. But I was turned down by both Argentina and Brazil. Having studied at the Communist universities in Poland and in the Soviet Union made me potentially threatening to the strongly anti-Communist governments of Latin America. On December 20, 1957, I was admitted to the United States and had to decide what to do next. I was twenty-four. I did not believe in cumulative riches, as I do not believe now, because while thinking

they always win, the rich actually lose twice: once while they're alive, because with so much to lose they never really take chances; and once when they die, because being rich they lose so much. Hence my faith in "portable skills," originally photography, now writing, which leave me mobile, free to *exit*—*exiting* is for me very important. When I reached the United States, I decided that since photography unfortunately requires such expensive equipment, my exit would have to be the English language, writing prose.

INTERVIEWER

How long did it take you to learn English?

KOSINSKI

Sufficiently to express myself in writing? About six months, when, in 1958, while studying for my Ph.D. on a Ford Fellowship, I began writing in English my university term papers and essays. My father was a classical scholar, a philologist, fluent in English, and via airmail he kept sending me six times a week English lessons tailored to my needs. But, in fact, I am still learning. Doesn't every writer? Language is like a moody lover: She might take a leave at any time. In other words, I shouldn't leave her alone for too long. When I am abroad—I spend about half a year traveling—I fear that one day I might forget English. Do remember, I was in my mid-twenties when I began writing in English and ever since it has to be constantly pressed deeper and deeper, otherwise it might evaporate. It is my only true possession—and the possession possesses.

INTERVIEWER

When did Joseph Conrad leave Poland?

KOSINSKI

He left for England when he was twenty-one. He wrote his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, when he was thirty-eight, and he collaborated for a while with Ford Madox Ford. What is of interest is that he had difficulty expressing himself vocally; apparently, his

accent was quite pronounced. Possibly, he considered speaking a nuisance—occasionally so do I: a writer’s true calling is not about speaking but about being “mute,” about writing. Similarly, when in 1958 I sat down to write my first book in English, *The Future Is Ours, Comrade*, a nonfiction on collective behavior, I found that I could *write* the book, but I had great difficulty discussing its chapters with friends; even when it was published less than two years later, conversing in English did not interest me. I aimed at the written word, an expression which was articulate but abstract, a language without sound. I didn’t want to meet or know my audience. In the act of writing in English, I extracted a part of myself, my preoccupation with the place of an individual in a collective society, hoping my American audience was eventually to be found. When it was, I followed two years later with another Novak book, *No Third Path: A Study of Collective Behavior*.

#### INTERVIEWER

But listening to you telling stories on various TV and radio talk shows—Carson, Cavett, Long John Nebel et al.—and then finding some of them in your novels, one wonders whether it is true that you test your stories on the listeners. If you do, how much do you change them according to audience reaction?

#### KOSINSKI

As a novelist, I am, first, a storyteller. I remember how in the Soviet Union I and several other students of social psychology were assigned by the university to lecture at a collective farm, traveling to and from the farm by train. There were always peasants taking the train to a farmers’ market on the way, and they invariably listened in on the students’ conversation. One of us would begin a tale; as the train approached the market station, the drama would increase, the narrator piling one dramatic incident upon another. The peasants, openmouthed, usually swallowed every word, laughing, crying, or gasping with terror. The train would stop at the market, but afraid to miss a word, they seldom moved. As the

train pulled away from the platform and began to pick up speed, the story would end abruptly. Only then would they become aware that they had missed their stop. At the end of the week, the student whose storytelling had caused the largest number of peasants to miss the market stop won the game. Well, I use the talk shows as a trainful of passengers willing to listen to my story, even if they miss their stop. Mind you, not an easy task: commercials break any story more often than a train's stops. No wonder—in this country we watch the conversation, a TV host once reminded me graciously. But usually I don't use the TV popular audience's reaction—mostly, an easily evokable laughter—as a yardstick, even though one of my novels, *Being There*, is about that very audience.

#### INTERVIEWER

You are said to develop the suspense of your novels by first trying it out in life—sneaking about in disguise and employing yourself in various holy and unholy establishments, hiding in the apartments of your friends (after they assumed you had left them), bluffing your way with authorities with fictitious ID cards, et cetera. Is such turning what is real into fiction necessary for you?

#### KOSINSKI

It is from time to time. It reassures my belief that for a man or woman, who is often unsuspecting and unimaginative, the institutions of our daily, familiar environment entrap us more effectively than do all federal and state internal security agencies. Yet, it is in this very familiar setting that the actual and potential drama of our life unfolds. The purpose of a fictional protagonist who is sufficiently threatening and menacing is to enlist the reader on his side for the duration of the fictional ride of time, thus turning these overfamiliar conditions threatening and menacing, suddenly unfamiliar, inviting examination. Does my occasional impersonating of such a protagonist turn me into a writer engagé?

INTERVIEWER

But your serving two terms as the president of the American Center of P.E.N. International certainly does. Why are you so engagé?

KOSINSKI

Possibly because exclusion, persecution, censorship, and forced anonymity had been a fact of my daily life in Eastern Europe. I am now not only compelled to create a world of fiction to which all have access, but also to defend and fight for everyone's right to such creation and such access. I fear total State. I hate its spokesmen. If I were ever magically to turn into Tarden, the protagonist of *Cockpit*, or George Levanter of *Blind Date*, I would do to the oppressors what my protagonists have done to them. Meanwhile, I must employ other means of remaining engagé: P.E.N., the International League for Human Rights, lecturing.

INTERVIEWER

Could you see yourself starting as a writer all over again—in a new country, in a new language?

KOSINSKI

To leave America, to abandon English? It's a nightmare, but I do think about it. After all, most of the protagonists of my novels are often exposed to the fate of risk taking. Yes, I could. In French perhaps. But the French bureaucracy—the bureaucracy of the French mind as well as that of the state—threatens me a lot.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever think about abandoning writing altogether, be it in English, French, or whatever?

KOSINSKI

I do. What if I found myself again in a police state? Or, to be more exact, what if a police state found me? All my novels are about the self, the characters in the state of becoming, and they all



are passionate enemies of totalitarian oppression—left, center, or right. I would be, clearly, among the writers whose voice would be stilled and declared subversive. I find it very indicative that I keep taking photographs and always have a completely equipped photographic darkroom available, not too far from my apartment. Photography as a profession remains even today my potential escape from a potential political terror.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever used it?

KOSINSKI

Occasionally I develop photographs for friends of mine who don't want to use the neighborhood's photo shop. I haven't done any creative photography. But as it turns out, the darkroom has another use. Recently I learned that my eyesight was in danger. I took another look at my darkroom, and I thought, Oh my God, maybe it will become a metaphor for my American existence as well. I used the darkroom to practice dictating to a tape recorder just in case I would become blind. 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*. Afraid that I would lose my sight any minute, I prevented myself from editing: all I wanted to do was to develop the ability to be articulate while dictating. The rest I would somehow learn later. All I wanted to do was to permit my "vision," born in a darkroom, this inner vision, to reach the tape recorder.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have it read back to you?

KOSINSKI

No, I didn't want to be stopped. I just wanted to pour it out.

INTERVIEWER

What do you do with the various drafts of your manuscripts?

KOSINSKI

The last few of each novel I store in the bank vault where I also keep my negatives, letters, and the manuscripts and galleys of my novels (I collect or own not much else). The vault is almost as big as a one-room studio. I am always afraid that some oppressive societal force will go after me and will try to penetrate not only my apartment—let them do it, there is nothing there—but also my inner life, which, they would claim, must be reflected in my writing, in my letters, and in photographs taken by me.

INTERVIEWER

You said once that you rewrote your manuscripts dozens of times. Did you want to be sure that each word had exactly the power and meaning you intended, or was it more a general stylistic thing you were looking for?

KOSINSKI

I keep depressing my text, deescalating the language. I count words the way Western Union does; often, I'm afraid my prose tends to resemble a night letter. Every word is there for a reason, and if not, I cross it out. I do rewrite—often entirely—my galley pages, even page proofs. The publishers complain, but I argue that every new draft keeps improving my own as well as their book. Still, I am never certain whether my English prose is sufficiently clear. Also, I rarely allow myself to use English in an unchecked, spontaneous way. I always have a sense of trembling—but so does a compass, after all.

INTERVIEWER

So you are simply checking and rechecking your use of the language?

KOSINSKI

Rather, the impact of it. Whether my vision will ignite the reader's imagination I will never know. But I constantly attempt to make the language of my fiction as unobtrusive as possible, almost transparent, so that the reader would be drawn right away into each dramatic incident. What I have said carries no value judgment. It is the opposite, for example, of what Nabokov does. His language is made visible . . . like a veil or transparent curtain. You cannot help seeing the curtain as you peek into the intimate rooms behind. My aim, though, is to remove the veil, altogether if possible. It should come to the reader the way it does in life—in an impact during which one is not aware of the form but merely of its content. I think in *Steps* and in *The Devil Tree* I came closest to what I really wanted to do with English. The vision demanded a clear prose, a language as detached as the persona of the novel. For me, a novelist is not a displayer of stylistic bonfires; he is primarily conveying a vision. Of course, whether the vision will “ignite” the reader's mind is something the writer will never know.

INTERVIEWER

What about your working habits? Are you Protestant and disciplined, or European and dissolute?

KOSINSKI

I guess both. I still wake up around 8 A.M. ready for the day, and sleep again for four hours in the afternoon, which allows me to remain mentally and physically active until the early dawn, when again I go to sleep. Being part of the Protestant ethos for less than one-third of my life, I acquired only some Protestant habits, while maintaining some of my former ones. Among the ones I acquired is the belief that I ought to answer my mail—a belief not shared by many happy intellectuals in Rome. In terms of my actual writing habits, I am an old member of the Russian and Polish intelligentsia—neither a professional intellectual nor a café-society hedonist. I love writing more than anything else. Like the heart-

beat, each novel I write is inseparable from my life. I write when I feel like it and wherever I feel like it, and I feel like it most of the time: day, night, and during twilight. I write in a restaurant, on a plane, between skiing and horseback riding, when I take my night walks in Manhattan, Paris, or in any other town. I wake up in the middle of the night or the afternoon to make notes and never know when I'll sit down at the typewriter.

INTERVIEWER

How long is the time of actually putting words to paper?

KOSINSKI

It varies. I think the longest uninterrupted stretch I ever had was twenty-seven hours. I wrote nineteen pages of *The Painted Bird* which in the drafts that followed shrank to one page. On an average I probably “produce” about a page, maybe a page and a half, in a sitting. I write very much the way some of my poet friends do. I select from the novel's master plan, from its topography, a fragment of a scene I find most inspiring at the given time, and then write it moving either “above it” or “below it.” Since I start with an image, let's say, of a man being driven in his car through the West Virginia countryside—I might first write about the rain, or his car, or what he felt at the end of the drive, and only then confront the scene's dramatic center. I usually start a novel by writing its opening and its end, which seem to survive relatively unchanged through all the following drafts and galley-proof changes.

INTERVIEWER

Have all your books had code words?

KOSINSKI

Yes: every book had a code name before I had a title for it.

INTERVIEWER

What was *The Painted Bird's*?

KOSINSKI

Its code name was *The Jungle Book*. *Steps* was *The Two*. 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 has to be careful with titles. If I had kept to that initial code name, it would have connected the book, possibly, with the philosophy of Heidegger. As a matter of fact, 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.

INTERVIEWER

Unlike many writers, who are forever denying that they read their reviews, you seem to be rather interested in criticism.

KOSINSKI

I am attracted to literary criticism. In fact, as if to test this interest I wrote a series of critical comments on *The Painted Bird* and on *Steps*. They were initially letters I wrote in English to one of my foreign publishers, but when to please and surprise me he decided to translate them and have them published in his country, to secure my American copyright I was forced to have them published as two separate collections of short essays (*Notes of the Author* and *The Art of the Self*). I think that literary criticism can be just as creative as writing novels or poetry. It is unfortunate that in this country it has often been assumed that it is more glamorous to be a novelist than a critic because as a novelist you are assumed to have lived your novels. The Hollywood movies that at one time sentimentalized the novelist might have contributed to this notion. Conversely, being a literary critic is often considered “intellectual”

and parasitic, living off the “hard gut” experiences of the novelist. One day I might be tempted to turn into a full-time literary critic.

INTERVIEWER

Are you upset by adverse criticism of your work?

KOSINSKI

I am, but only when it is also bad art: poorly written, unimaginative, ad hominem. When it chooses to denounce the author rather than to illuminate his vision. Among my favorite critics are also some who claimed all my work to be inferior, over-rated, crude, amoral; but they wrote all this creatively, dissecting the philosophy and the character of my protagonists—not mine.

INTERVIEWER

To what do you attribute the success of your books?

KOSINSKI

Let's call it their temporary survival. Judging by the reviews, letters, students' essays and term papers as well as by direct contact with my reading public at my public lectures, in schools and colleges where my novels are taught, the younger Americans seem to read *The Painted Bird* as a symbolic novel about their own lives: they are “the painted birds” in the hostile environment of industrial America. *Steps*, on the other hand, typifies to many the complexity of a man who has been a product of an indifferent, automatized society, a society in which he is not only manipulated by others, but cannot help manipulating them. As for *Being There*, the reaction focuses on Chauncey Gardiner, a formidable tribute to corporate image making. There is more and more preoccupation with the visual aspects of American political life. Think of the priority given to the looks of our candidates. They all come across well on TV. Do we have have a hunchback? A man with a missing jaw? A man with a nervous tic? No, he simply wouldn't make it. Can you imagine an American politician, however bright, with a

damaged face, or with one eye? Moshe Dayan, all right, he's up there; he's theirs, not ours. As for *The Devil Tree*, that is to many of them a reflection of what it takes to become "one's own event" even when, like Jonathan Whalen, one is American, young, handsome, and rich. *Cockpit* presents the dilemma of aging—even when, like Tarden, one is a former intelligence agent trained to survive at any cost. And *Blind Date* seems to be to them about life's various dichotomies, destiny and chance in the world of power abuse.

INTERVIEWER

What has been the reaction to your books in England?

KOSINSKI

*The Future Is Ours, Comrade* was generally praised for its insights into collective mentality, but the British were upset by the cruelties of *The Painted Bird*, abhorred the coldness of *Steps*, accorded *Being There* the status of the best novel of the year, liked *The Devil Tree*, and highly praised *Cockpit* and *Blind Date*. So the reception seems to vary from book to book, from country to country, and from period to period. I like to think that at different times different people read books for different reasons. Or don't read them.

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't it bother you that there are so many different reactions and interpretations?

KOSINSKI

It doesn't. After all, if the writer's imagination is free enough to crystallize his vision in a novel, why shouldn't the reader's imagination be equally free in decoding it? Like any other societal event or artifact, the novel confronts the reader arbitrarily, designed to involve and to manipulate him. My fiction portrays the self in a state of recoil against the all-pervasive, all-powerful, ever-present forces—State, other people, language, sexual mores, et cetera—

that render man's existence dependent upon arbitrarily imposed notions of life and destiny. As my fiction does not impose itself on the reader in an easily detectable, predigested manner, it aims for the impact, for the ethical collision. By engaging my reader, on one hand, in the concrete, visible acts of cunning, violence, assault, and disguise (as opposed to the diluted, camouflaged violence of our total environment), my fiction is, on the other, purging his emotions, enraging him, polarizing his anger, his moral climate, turning him against such acts (and often against the author as well). In a word, it is generating a uniquely private moral judgment. To generate such judgment, to evoke affirmation of the man's unique moral stand, is for me the supreme—and supremely didactic—role of good art, of true art. And as for the writer, he is not superior to anyone: in his work he merely particularizes our collective ability to evoke, to create situations and images entirely via our language.

INTERVIEWER

After the success of your “Joseph Novak” nonfiction, did you find it difficult to get your first novel, *The Painted Bird*, published?

KOSINSKI

Yes, I did. When I had the finished manuscript, I showed it to four friends of mine, all editors in very large, respectable publishing houses in New York. All four had an interest in my work because of my two nonfiction books, and all four told me in very plain language that in their view my first novel was simply not publishable in America.

INTERVIEWER

What were their reasons?

KOSINSKI

That it was a novel about a reality which is alien to Americans, set in an environment that Americans cannot comprehend, and



portraying situations, particularly the cruelty to animals, that Americans cannot bear. No work of fiction could possibly survive all this, they said, and certainly not *The Painted Bird*. The verdict was: go back to writing your best-selling nonfiction under the pen name of Joseph Novak. I asked them who, in their view, would be the *least* likely publisher for my novel. They said short of Vatican City, I should try the distinguished and venerable Houghton Mifflin in Boston. I sent the manuscript to Houghton Mifflin, and a few weeks later they called that they wanted to publish *The Painted Bird*. It appeared in the fall of 1965. Years later, I had similar difficulties finding a publisher for *Steps, Being There*, and *Cockpit*.

#### INTERVIEWER

Since you often teach English, what is your feeling about the future of the written word?

#### KOSINSKI

I think its place has always been at the edge of popular culture. Indeed, it is the proper place for it. Reading novels—serious novels, anyhow—is an experience limited to a very small percentage of the so-called enlightened public. Increasingly, it's going to be a pursuit for those who seek unusual experiences, moral fetishists perhaps, people of heightened imagination, the troubled pursuers of the ambiguous self.

#### INTERVIEWER

Why such a limited audience?

#### KOSINSKI

Today, people are absorbed in the most common denominator, the *visual*. It requires no education to watch TV. It knows no age limit. Your infant child can watch the same program you do. Witness its role in the homes of the old and incurably sick. Television is everywhere. It has the immediacy which the evocative

medium of language doesn't. 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 us from trauma. Television actually does so. It "proves" that you can always be an observer of the tragedies of others. The fact that one day you will die in front of the live show is irrelevant—you are reminded about it no more than you are reminded about real weather existing outside the TV weather program. You're not told to open your window and take a look; television will never say that. It says, instead, "The weather today is . . ." and so forth. The weatherman never says, "If you don't believe me, go find out."

From way back, our major development as a race of frightened beings has been toward how to avoid facing the discomfort of our existence, primarily the possibility of an accident, immediate death, ugliness, and the ultimate departure. In terms of all this, television is a very pleasing medium: one is always the observer. The life of discomfort is always accorded to others, and even *this* is disqualified, since one program immediately disqualifies the preceding one. Literature does not have this ability to soothe. You have to evoke, and by evoking, you yourself have to provide your own inner setting. When you read about a man who dies, part of you dies with him because you have to recreate his dying inside your head.

#### INTERVIEWER

That doesn't happen with the visual?

#### KOSINSKI

No, because he dies on the screen in front of you, and at any time you can turn it off or select another program. The evocative power is torpedoed by the fact that this is another man; your eye somehow perceives him as a visual object. Thus, of course, television

is my ultimate enemy and it will push reading matter—including *The Paris Review*—to the extreme margin of human experience. Ultimately it's going to be a pursuit for those who seek the unusual, masochists probably, who *want* sensations. They will all read *The Painted Bird*, I hope.

INTERVIEWER

But couldn't the masochists get enormous pleasure out of watching *The Painted Bird* as a film?

KOSINSKI

No. At best they would become voyeurs, which is a low level of experience. No. The very fact that it is happening on the screen tells the viewer two things: one, it is *not* about him; and two, it is not real. It is already *there*, it is artificial, it is about someone else.

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't one identify with Gary Cooper or John Wayne?

KOSINSKI

Very fleetingly. It's merely recognizing the symbol, saying, "This is John Wayne playing so and so." The optimum that the visual medium can aim at is the moment when the observer decodes what he sees on the screen. In a curious way, the better the film the more it reminds the observer that he is only observing; in the moment of ultimate terror on the screen the man in the audience says to himself, Come on, hang on, it's only a film. With the novel, you cannot escape the evoking that is done within you since the screen is inside—and that is a very real and often painful process. But I never considered literature to be as important as the public highway system, for instance. Reading fiction is an esoteric pursuit; it aims at the blind and at those who can evoke, and the majority today don't have to. They are all provided with TV sets. I don't think literature ought to compete with cinema or television, though indeed it performs the essential function of the highest art

. . . to bring man closer to what he is. The old Aristotelian idea: to *purge* him of his emotion—not merely to *show* him the emotion.

INTERVIEWER

You say that literature demands more involvement and more effort from the reader than the visual media. Is this why your last two novels have been so spare?

KOSINSKI

Yes. I do trust the reader. I think he is perfectly capable of filling in the blank spaces, of supplying what I purposefully withdrew. *Steps* attempts to involve the reader through nonuse of the clear and discernible plot. From the first sentence of the book, “I was traveling further south,” when the reader starts traveling down the page, he is promised nothing, since there is no obvious plot to seduce him. He has to make the same decisions my protagonist is making: Will he continue? Is he interested in the next incident?

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 my novels don’t provide easy moral guidelines. Does life? The reader must ask himself questions about what is good or what is evil about my characters. Was it his curiosity that dragged him into the midst of my story? Was it recognition of his complicity? For me this is the ultimate purpose of literature.

INTERVIEWER

Do you want to be remembered as . . .

KOSINSKI

No bookkeeper is as false and fraudulent as collective memory. It's best to be forgotten.

INTERVIEWER

Yet you file things away; you're very meticulous about preserving your work.

KOSINSKI

I merely facilitate the work of executors of my last will. They will follow its text, and thanks to its clarity (a new draft written every year), they will know where to find what I asked them to destroy. Meanwhile, living my life, I take care of its prefaces, footnotes, postscripts, et cetera.

INTERVIEWER

You always expect the worst?

KOSINSKI

No: the unexpected. I look forward to it.

INTERVIEWER

But all the preparations against the future . . .

KOSINSKI

The future? So far all my plans have always turned out to be for yesterday.

