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The Phenomenological Self in the Works of Jerzy Kosinski

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**THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL SELF IN THE WORKS
OF JERZY KOSINSKI**

By

Tracy Allen Houston

B.A. University of Maine, 2001

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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(in English)

The Graduate School

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Welch Everman

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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A scholar who wishes to examine the works of Jerzy Kosinski faces a problem not found in the study of many other authors: Kosinski's personal history, critical to many approaches to the study of literature, is filled with fictions, contradictions, and unverifiable events. For years Kosinski's first novel, *The Painted Bird*, was taken to be autobiographical. However, as interest in Kosinski's work grew, inconsistencies and obvious falsehoods contradicted this accepted autobiographical reading. *The Painted Bird* describes the wanderings of a young boy in Eastern Europe during WWII, yet Kosinski was not separated from his parents as had been previously believed.

However, within Kosinski's texts there are many events that can be related to his personal life: the loss of nearly his entire family to the Nazis, his first marriage, and many other elements are verifiable. Because fact and fiction blend into one another in Kosinski's personal history, it is difficult to know how to address his work.

This thesis posits that Kosinski's personal life constitutes a tenth text, a text available for study, which can inform Kosinski's novels. By drawing parallels between

his life as reported and his written work, Kosinskian scholars can examine emergent patterns of behavior and the philosophical foundations of his project. These foundations provide a tool for examining Kosinski's novels, allowing a greater understanding of those texts typically considered problematic, especially *Being There* and *The Hermit of 69th Street*.

This examination focuses on Kosinski's concept of the Self, dividing the Self into two parts: the interior "subjective Self" and the Self available for examination, the "phenomenological Self." The subjective Self is defined as that which is typically known as the "true Self," that which is unavailable to the Other. However, the phenomenological Self is often constructed by the Other, through the use of labels, prejudice, and habit. Kosinski's philosophy of the Self emerges as a willful attempt at Self-authorship, a determination to willfully create a phenomenological Self, that set of behaviors, appearance, and affiliations that can provide advantage in dealing with the Other.

This thesis contends that Kosinski's project was to influence the Other's perception of the Self to protect the subjective Self. Kosinski's metaphor of the painted bird becomes important in this reading. Within this framework, the bird is always painted by perceptions; for Kosinski the choice was whether the painting of the bird was to be done by the Other or the Self.

This theory is then applied to Kosinski's texts, showing how *Being There* and *The Hermit of 69th Street* are, in fact, consistent with this philosophy. Both show an emphasis on the perceptions of the Other and the Self's struggle with those perceptions. The thesis does not attempt an in-depth study of Kosinski's canon, but the creation of a critical tool that may be useful in Kosinskian studies.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
THE SELF.....	11
THIS PHILOSOPHY OF SELF IN KOSINSKI'S WORKS.....	21
READING KOSINSKI'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL SELF.....	31
WORKS CITED.....	41
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR.....	42

INTRODUCTION

It is common in the study of literature to relate the works that an author writes to his or her personal and historical contexts. It has become a tradition, casting light on the works of such writers as Milton, Fitzgerald, Shalamov, Conrad, and countless others. It therefore poses a unique problem for critics and readers when details of an author's life are absent or in question. The ability to comprehend Milton's *Paradise Lost* without an understanding of the author's blindness, not to mention his role in the Interregnum, would be greatly hampered. If Shalamov's presence in the work camps of the former Soviet Union were in question, *The Kolyma Tales* would be addressed far more as fiction than it is, though many episodes in that work are fictive renderings of actual events. The Polish-American author Jerzy Kosinski poses just that problem. He purposefully clouded the issue, obscured facts, and presented multiple, and often contradictory, versions of his history. Without an accurate understanding of his life, how is a critic to address Kosinski's canon? One important key lies in an examination of his life *as he reported it*.

At the end of almost all of Jerzy Kosinski's paperback editions there is a blurb titled "On Kosinski." Not all of the paperbacks carrying his name have this stock piece, but if the novel you're holding was published in the seventies or early eighties, you'll probably find it. It runs about four pages, varying only slightly from novel to novel, and cites reviews and articles written about him. It also includes biographical information. The blurb at the end of *The Devil Tree*, his fourth novel, opens with the following: "To appreciate the violent, ironic, suspenseful, morally demanding world of Jerzy Kosinski's novels, one must first acknowledge the random succession of pain and joy, wealth and poverty, persecution and approbation, that have made his own life often as eventful as

those of his fictional creations” (*The Devil Tree* 207). One of the ironies of this opening passage is that, because Kosinski “has long made a practice of smudging the borders between his biography and his storytelling” (Schiff 222), it is difficult to know what details about his history ought or ought not be acknowledged.

Should we, as readers, accept the next paragraph’s assertion that “When he was six, all but two members of his once numerous and distinguished family were lost in the Holocaust of World War II?” (*The Devil Tree* 207). Yes, we should. Kosinski and his parents survived World War II, unlike countless Jews, Gypsies, Soviet prisoners of war, and sympathetic gentiles.

Yet, following this factual statement, the piece says, “Abandoned, suspected of being a Jew or Gypsy, he fled alone from village to village in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe” (207). This echoes the story of the young boy in Kosinski’s first novel, *The Painted Bird*, often taken as autobiographical; yet this is not *factually* what happened to young Jerzy Kosinski. His father, Mojzesz Lewinkopf, was a fore-sighted man. He was able to secure papers, changing the family name to the less Jewish-sounding “Kosinski.” He was also able to get his family out of Lodz before it was too late. The family then moved several times, experiencing many close calls, but remaining free of the ghettos and camps and, more importantly in regards to his history, remaining together.

Immediately following this fiction of his wandering the countryside is yet another: “At the age of nine, in a traumatic confrontation with a hostile peasant crowd he lost the power of speech, and was unable to talk for over five years” (207). This is another event directly out of *The Painted Bird*. This too does not line up with personal

historical events, as Kosinski admitted when he “suggested that the boy [in *The Painted Bird*]’s muteness was best described as symbolic” (Lupack 6).

The standardized “On Kosinski” blurb goes on to relate that Kosinski’s “father was a scholar of ancient linguistics, his mother was a pianist” (*The Devil Tree* 207), a claim that, while not technically a direct lie, is still very misleading (Lupack 6). It says that his position in Poland’s Academy of Sciences was that of associate professor (*The Devil Tree* 207), a statement he later revised to assistant professor, but in actuality he was a graduate teaching assistant (Lupack 6). It relates his daring plan to escape Poland by inventing four distinguished professors who then provided him with letters of support, a story also without any basis in fact (Sloan 94-6). The jobs he held upon arriving in America, the details of his marriage to Mary Weir (his first wife), his history with horses, and other tidbits are slanted, misleading, or inaccurate.

However, the piece contains as much fact as fiction. It says: “On [Kosinski’s] way from Paris to the Beverly Hills home of his friend, film director Roman Polanski, and his wife, Sharon Tate, Kosinski’s luggage was unloaded by mistake in New York. ... Kosinski reluctantly stayed overnight in New York. That very night in Polanski’s household the Charles Manson Helter-Skelter gang murdered five people - among them Kosinski’s closest friends” (*The Devil Tree* 210). Though this scene appeared in *Blind Date*, and there was some strong controversy surrounding its plausibility, it is, in Kosinski’s biographer’s as well as this author’s opinion, “essentially the truth” (Sloan 278).

Likewise, other details in the “On Kosinski” piece are verifiably true, such as his efforts as a humanitarian, his teaching career in the United States (at Wesleyan,

Princeton, and Yale), his unusual sleep pattern, his love of skiing and polo, and his impressive list of awards. They are impressive, too: *The Painted Bird* won the French Best Foreign Book Award in 1966; *Steps* earned the National Book Award in 1969; he received the Award in Literature of the American Academy and the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1970, as well as the Brith Sholom Humanitarian Freedom Award in 1974. For writing the screenplay for *Being There*, his third novel, he received the Writer's Guild of America Best Screenplay of the Year Award in 1981.

Before taking his own life in 1991, Jerzy Kosinski wrote nine novels, two non-fiction books, self-published pamphlets, and pages of essays. He appeared as Zinoviev in the movie *Reds*, at the request of his friend, Warren Beatty. He had traveled extensively in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. He was a regular on talk shows, appeared on the cover of magazines, and was interviewed numerous times. His life, without the fictional embellishments, was one of tragedy, triumph, success, loss, superstardom, notoriety, and, ultimately, survival. With a life this varied, this full of experience, this public, and this controversial, why then did Kosinski feel the need to blur "the borders between his biography and his storytelling?" It's important to remember that this history of half fact, half fiction is not the result of misreading his novels or failing to ask him the right questions; Jerzy Kosinski began most of the rumors about himself, fostered their acceptance, and denied ever so few of them. This begs the question of why didn't Kosinski come clean? Of course, when he first arrived in the United States, the invention of an interesting history, filled with danger and spy-novel deeds, may have served a function, giving him a place, a community, a few extra open doors. However, once he was established, the stories served less of an apparent purpose.

In his biography, James Park Sloan points out that Kosinski was rehearsing many parts found in *The Painted Bird* long before he wrote the novel (107-8). That habit of testing out stories on those around him, during interviews, and on talk shows, would continue throughout his life. He told stories that were glaringly inconsistent. He invented new ideas on the spot and embellished old ones to suit his audience. For many years he denied publicly that he was Jewish, the one fact about his life he explicitly set straight. It could be said - and has been elsewhere (Lupack 25-6) - that Kosinski's grand purpose was to promote himself in an effort to manage how his books were received, playing the media to his own ends. While on the surface this seems to be a plausible explanation, it does not answer the questions of why, six years prior to writing his first novel, Kosinski was already practicing, modifying, and spreading his stories. Nor does it explain why some portions of his last novel, *The Hermit of 69th Street: The Working Papers of Norbert Kosky*, contain passages that directly address his fictitious past, admitting in one scene between Kosky and his father's ghost, that portions of his history were his "fairy tale" (*Hermit* 310), while other passages reinforce old fables or generate new ones.

It seems obvious that an understanding of Kosinski's relationship to his history cannot be reached through such a surface reading of his nine novels. I posit, instead, that Kosinski's life constitutes a tenth text, consciously controlled, obsessively revised, and purposefully disseminated. There is substantial support for such a reading, aside from the inconsistencies and verifiable errors. The most telling of these come from Kosinski himself. He, a fan of Proust, shared Proust's distrust of memory; in one essay Kosinski said, "I am not interested in explicit memory because I do not trust it. In my case memory is always clouded by my desire for inventiveness. I am no camera" (*Passing By* 8). He

was aware, and often expressed his view, that memory is less a factual representation of one's actual history, but rather an imaginative re-creation of events, always suspect, subjective, and misleading. This is not to say that he didn't trust his memory about what had occurred to him in his past. Instead, he "often remarked upon the fallibility of memory, which makes every life a fiction created by its own author" (Sloan 108-9). Growing up, as Sloan pointed out, under two very powerful self-authored figures, Hitler and then Stalin, showed a young Kosinski that truth was "whatever one can persuade others to believe" (109). Yet Kosinski was a sociologist by education, and saw the individual in conflict with the collective, a running theme in his novels and the subject of several essays. If, as Sloan suggests, those two powerful figures showed him the relativity of truth, then Kosinski's ultimate goal was to use the techniques of the collective to protect the individual.

Yet, that is still a shallow reading of Kosinski's work. Kosinski was not in direct confrontation with a collective actively attempting to impose itself upon him. His self-authoring was not a reactionary activity, but a conscious choice in defense of his Self, a point of strong belief for him. Sartre explains:

it is in my 'being in the world' that the Other determines me. Our relation is not a *frontal* opposition but rather an *oblique* interdependence. In so far as I make a world exist as a complex of instruments which I use for the ends of my human reality, I cause myself to be determined in my being by a being who makes the world exist ... for the ends of his reality. Moreover it is not necessary to understand this being-with as a pure concomitance which is passively received by my being. For Heidegger, to be is to be

one's own possibilities; that is to make oneself be. ... It is in complete freedom and by an original choice that, for example, I realize my being-with in the anonymous form of 'they.' ... Authenticity and individuality have to be earned (Sartre 331-2, emphasis his).

Kosinski, who was familiar with Sartre and Heidegger, saw the Self as that which must be determined by the individual and not by the Other. In quest of this, Kosinski disallowed the Other to determine who he was by removing the Other's power of knowledge. Instead, he created his Self and the presentation of that Self, which determined the Other's use of him.

This fictional presentation, his personal myth as some have called it (Sloan), becomes his tenth novel, a text available for criticism, not to seek the truth, but to seek the authorial intent - the moral of the parable. This text, much like the nine novels he published, becomes one of the protagonist being-in, but not being-with, society. A surprising benefit of reading Kosinski in this manner is that it reveals much of value about Kosinski the author. The love of disguises, both cosmetic and behavioral, which occurs in several scenes in his novels, such as *Steps*, *Cockpit*, and *The Hermit of 69th Street*, as well as in his real life, directly expresses his belief "that in order to survive, the Self must fool the world, must distract it with false identities, or, failing that, hide in places it can never be found" (Schiff 228).

The constant need for control that also runs strongly through his novels, such as *Steps*, *Blind Date*, and *Cockpit* also manifested itself in his life. Kosinski was well-known as an obsessive editor, infuriating not a few people that had to deal with his last-minute revisions. "As Bantam's Stuart Applebaum says, 'If he had his way, he'd be climbing on

top of the printing press to change the order of the type” (230). Additionally, before publication of his paperback editions, he typically rewrote sections of his hardcover books, sometimes altering significant portions. This provides a potential explanation for his constant revision of his history, modifying and developing his past.

It could be said that a revisionist history reveals a disregard for the actual experience, diminishing the importance of events in his life or revealing a dispassionate attitude toward those events. However, this is not the case. Kosinski’s nine published novels, often compared with his life, illuminate their author’s response to actual events in either a direct or metaphorical way. A reader cannot finish *The Painted Bird* without an understanding of the impact World War II had on Kosinski, whether the events detailed therein are factual or not. *Blind Date*’s description of the murders at Roman Polanski’s home leaves no question about how deeply they touched the author. A scene in *Cockpit*, where the protagonist is unexpectedly attacked by his roommate, has its corollary in Kosinski’s life and reveals the mixed feelings Kosinski had about that encounter. If the occurrence of real-life events in Kosinski’s novels indicates the depth of their relevance to his life, then his first marriage, to Mary Weir, affected him greatly. It is represented, in differing ways and lengths, in three of his novels: *Being There*, *The Devil Tree*, and *Blind Date*. Rather than diminishing the importance of the events of his life, Kosinski revealed a strong tie to his personal history, keeping the importance of events close to himself -- failure to do otherwise would be to allow an external definition of his Self -- but still attempting to portray those events in a manner that captured the deeper, essential truth. The blurring of the borders between his biography and his storytelling allowed events in his life to bleed into his fiction just as fiction masked his life.

Early in the morning of May 3, 1991, Jerzy Kosinski committed suicide. As with many events in Kosinski's life, a full accounting of the motives for this action can never be known, and to speculate upon them can be considered grotesque and naively futile. However, to treat Kosinski's life as a text, the final chapter deserves consideration. For many this could be interpreted as a defeat, a cessation of the Self in the face of a collective too powerful to battle. This, too, would be a misreading of his life and philosophy. In 1976, Kosinski's friend, Jacques Monod died after deciding to stop receiving the blood transfusions his hemolytic anemia demanded. Monod asked Kosinski to be with him his last few days. Kosinski later related this experience in the essay "Death in Cannes." In many ways, Monod had acted out the philosophy that Kosinski had penned in 1968 in his "The Art of the Self: Essays A Propos *Steps*." Though the essay covers a wide range of topics -- from plot, to montage, to the relationship of emotions to memories -- the most telling for the purposes of this paper is on suicide. Kosinski writes:

In performing suicide a man chooses to escape from his future and from his past, thus overcoming the knowledge that he will die... To die in nature's time is to accede to a denial of man's dignity: to die in one's own time is to affirm that dignity. Suicide proves man's power to choose - his final act if nothing else... In committing suicide, the man makes himself historical ... He is transferring the burden of his past onto the shoulders of the world, onto history. But even in self-destruction, his shadow outlives him. He imposes on other people the necessity for remembering and for judging him, for summarizing him as a character. He creates the means to outlive himself (*Passing By* 231).

This philosophy, written twenty-three years before the deed, deals with the idea of man as character, a character that contains the means for self-authorship and self-determination. Just like a fictional text, a life is preordained to end. Kosinski the author chose to exert the same control over his life as he did over his novels.

Kosinski's tenth novel, in this reading, becomes the context for his work. If memory and history as he viewed them are fictions, then an analysis of his work requires nothing more than the substitution of one fiction for another. In the end, Kosinski places the responsibility for judging him and the authenticity of his work upon his readers and critics. The above quote by Sartre continues: "Authenticity and individuality have to be earned: I shall be my own authenticity only if under the influence of the call of conscience ... I launch out toward death with a resolute-decision ... as toward my own most peculiar possibility. At this moment I reveal myself to myself in authenticity, and I raise others along with myself toward the authentic" (Sartre 332).

This, then, becomes the starting point for an examination of Kosinski's concept and portrayal of the Self. Through Kosinski's writing, and his life, a philosophy of the Self emerges. What, however, *is* the Self?

THE SELF

For the purposes of this discussion, the Self can be broken into two related entities: the interior, or “subjective” Self and the apparent, or “phenomenological” Self. The subjective Self, when dealing with texts, is available only when the reader is exposed to unmediated thoughts from the character examined. An example of this would be Hamlet’s dramatic monologue, which begins with, “To be or not to be.” Of course, the case could be made that any information from a character is suspect, due to mediation by interior censors and language itself, but there are points where the reader is allowed to believe that these thoughts, feelings, and expressions come from a Self which is exposed and vulnerable to interpretation. It is during these moments that the reader is, for example, made privy to information that other characters do not know, allowed access to a character’s motivations, and permitted to see the machinations behind the character’s apparent actions. Thus, the reader/playgoer is aware that Hamlet’s madness is but a ruse, that he has further designs, even if he is unable or unwilling to take action on those designs.

Much more often, however, the reader encounters only, or predominately, the phenomenological Self, that which is manifested by a character’s actions, words, and reactions. Though the interior motives of that Self are unknown, that Self can be interpreted as it is presented. That the presentation can be conscious or unconscious does not matter.

At the very end of *Steps*, the reader is introduced to a scene in which the subjective Self and the phenomenological Self are very divergent. The protagonist has joined a revolution in order to experience it. He does not understand the language, so he

displays a Self which is deaf-mute. This is not the subjective self, except in the most metaphoric way, but he is phenomenologically a deaf-mute. He is with other revolutionaries as they surround a building and bring out prisoners.

The commander of our group ordered the prisoners to turn and face the wall. I was certain that they were about to be shot. Not wanting to participate in the execution, I gestured to the man next to me, offering to exchange my rifle for his long knife. The man agreed (*Steps* 144).

The protagonist's subjective Self desired to participate in the revolution, but has no interest in shooting prisoners in the back. In line with this, he maneuvers the environment to protect him from having to do so. However, he is unsuccessful.

I glanced around me: the armed men, tense and ready, stood at my sides and behind me. Only then did I realize that the prisoners were about to be beheaded. My refusal to obey orders would mean my being executed with those who stood in front of me (144-5).

Events place the protagonist in a position that necessitates his performance of actions contrary to his desires. Realizing that his life is at stake should he fail to continue to live up to his phenomenological Self, he searches for a way to become that Self.

It was inconceivable, I thought, that I would have to slash the neck of another man simply because events has placed me behind his back. What I was about to do was inescapable, yet so unreal that it became senseless: *I had to believe I was not myself any more* and that whatever happened would be imaginary. *I saw myself as someone else* who felt nothing, who stood calm and composed, determined enough to stiffen his arms, to grasp

and raise the weapon, to cut down the obstacle in his path (145, emphasis mine).

The protagonist needs to become another Self, to step from his subjective position, in which he does not want to either die or kill, and step into his phenomenological role, the role of a man who can kill and does not mind doing so.

Survival, in Kosinski's world, governs actions. The reason for the phenomenological Self is to protect the subjective Self. As mentioned above, "Kosinski has worked at proving to his friends what his characters always prove - that in order to survive, the Self must fool the world, must distract it with false identities, or, failing that, hide in places it can never be found" (Schiff 228). The phenomenological Self is that distraction or, failing that, the shield behind which the subjective Self hides. It is presented; it is presented in language, textually, contextually, and consciously.

The Self, or the phenomenological Self, then, is a textual creation. But who creates this textual entity? Is it Jerzy Kosinski, the author of the text? Finally this answer is yes, but not without complications.¹ In the real world, there are many ways of defining the Self. There is the set of social signifiers we all choose: if I wear a football jersey to class, I'm inviting those around me to talk to me about football; if I wear Christian Jewelry, I desire others to interact with me within a certain set of social codes. These may be conscious or unconscious choices, yet they are choices that we make. There is also the overtly conscious presentation of the Self, what one says, how one treats others, what one does for work and leisure. This may be thoughtless or thoughtful, but it is the volition of the being under which these boundaries exist.

¹ The question of Kosinski's authorship of his nine novels, called into question by the *Village Voice* and debated long since, exists outside the realm of this thesis. As this thesis is dealing with the question of criticizing Kosinski's canon from a nearly a-authorial perspective, it is also quite moot.

For the Kosinskian character, the Self is a willful creation. The mode of dress, the manner of intercourse, and the means of communication are all choices made consciously. This demands an understanding of the Other and the Self; my understanding of my Self, phenomenologically if nothing else, comes from an awareness of my actions. That understanding is iconic: within the Kosinskian framework, the phenomenological Self is historical insofar as the individual has learned how to interact with the environment based upon past experiences, but that Self is also a-temporal; it exists in the now. The result is that the historical that informs the Self's actions is non-teleological. It is a process of rotation, one mask before another mask before another mask, like the Russian dolls, one within the other.

To approach the Kosinskian Self from another angle, what the critic deals with are texts: novels, novellas, poems, letters, biographical information. Kosinski the author, the man from Poland, wrote texts: novels, essays, letters, and his own biographical information. Embedded within these texts are more texts: the characters that act as subjects and objects. These texts exist outside of linear time.

The truth of time is not temporal. Analogously (analogously only), time as irreversible succession, is, according to Claudel, only the phenomenon, the epidermis, the surface image of the essential truth of the universe as it is conceived and created by God. This truth is absolute *simultaneity*. ... In particular, a structuralist reading, by its own activity, always presupposes and appeals to the theological simultaneity of the book, and considers itself deprived of the essential when this simultaneity is not accessible (Derrida 24).

It is Derrida's contention, through a reading of Proust and Claudel, that the text exists as an a-temporal truth, containing its possibilities simultaneously as the acorn contains the oak. Likewise, the texts of the Jerzy Kosinski contain all historical and future possibilities in the moment.

The protagonist in *Steps* is a clear example of this, highlighted by the structure of the text: he is victimizer, victim, soldier, archaeologist, truck driver, Communist, student, liberator, juror, thief, and dockworker. The reader does not know in what order these events happened, nor even may the protagonist himself, but these facets of his Self come into play as needed. "Aware of its value as a restorative, I stole only black caviar" (*Steps* 111). The reader does not know how the protagonist is aware of the benefits of caviar, but that knowledge informs his actions and, in consequence, his Self.

Chance, from *Being There*, is another example of the character of the moment. He is truly an organism that responds to the environment. The amount of exertion that Chance expends in influencing his environment is almost non-existent. He is swept along by other people's perceptions and expectations. When told to leave, he leaves; when offered a place to stay, he stays; when asked a question, he answers; but, Chance does not attempt to manipulate his environment, the Other, toward his own ends. In many ways, Chance does not recognize his own ends. He desires to see television, the one impulse he acts upon, and he becomes hungry or scared or pained, but he has no conception of how to meet these other needs. In many ways, this is because those needs require a conception of futurity, the impetus to influence the environment, to manipulate the Other. Though *Being There* has been studied as a text condemning television and an examination of the

efficacy of expectations, it is also a valuable presentation of the Self living in the perpetual moment - Derrida's simultaneous text.²

The Self, in this sense, is always *becoming*. The Self cannot choose or know what it is, for being is a process. It can know what it was, insofar as it can examine the phenomenological actions of its own past, including its thoughts about those actions, even the thoughts that the Self experienced while performing those actions and thoughts about actions never performed, but this knowledge is still phenomenological. The Self has access to greater evidence, but this knowledge mandates neither understanding nor consistency. The Self can also determine what it *will* be. If history informs the Self's actions, it does not determine them. Kosinski was a practitioner and portrayer of the will of the individual, instead of, and in opposition to, the will of the collective. This implies and demands conscious and mindful free will of actions, and how those actions could influence or modify perceptions. The Self can determine what it will exhibit for behaviors and continue to become. For Kosinski, this becoming was not a movement toward a state, moving closer to some mode of being or perfection. Rather, this becoming was a state unto itself; the becoming became the method of interacting with his (and his protagonists') environment.

Early in *Steps*, the protagonist finds himself without money, food or shelter in a land where he does not speak the language. He is hungry and tries to gain favor with the locals by smiling; he tries to ask for assistance at the police station. Nobody helps him and he returns to the beach.

² We'll revisit *Being There* later in this work as a sociological commentary on the Self created almost exclusively by television.

I was famished and exhausted. The sun had brought on a pounding headache, I felt waves of vertigo. Unexpectedly I caught the sound of people talking in an alien language. Turning, I saw two women sitting close to the water. Folds of gray, heavily veined fat hung from their thighs and upper arms; their full, pendulous breasts were squashed in outsize brassieres.

They sunbathed sprawling on their beach towels surrounded by picnic equipment: food baskets, thermos flasks, parasols, and nets full of fruit. ... I approached them slowly but directly, anxious not to alarm them. ... We had no common language, but I was very conscious of the proximity of food (*Steps 10*).

As always, for Kosinski and his protagonists, survival is the rule. Harsh events teach them that, in the end, survival is the only thing that matters. Maslow posited that the hierarchy of needs began with the essentials: food, shelter, and safety. Not until these needs have been met can the individual begin to concern itself with concepts of love, status, or being. For Kosinski, survival takes precedence.

Before I could finish the meal, they had drawn the curtains and torn off their bathing suits. Naked they fell upon me. I was buried beneath their heavy bellies and broad backs; my arms were pinioned; my body was manipulated, squeezed, pressed, and thumped (11).

The protagonist lets the alien women use his body for sex in order to get the food he needs to survive.

Kosinski's works are episodic: the scenes in *Steps* do not occur in a linear chronological order. In *Cockpit*, the adventures of the protagonist, known as Tarden, though that is not his real name, move back and forth in time, linked by association rather than chronology. The story works as memory works, beginning at one point and moving to a related point, without concern for movement forward or backward across time. The scenes in Kosinski's other works, such as *The Painted Bird*, *The Devil Tree*, and *Blind Date* are more coherent, but even within these texts, there are bits and pieces that do not fit in the chronology; each scene moves backwards or forwards from the previous moment. This serves two functions: the chronology becomes confused and fragmented, operating more like memory, and it reveals the pattern of associations that the protagonist/narrator experiences. This is Kosinski's history in its iconic form.

This iconic, fluid, malleable sense of the Self, the phenomenological representation of the inner Self, seems to be false, enacted, and utilitarian instead of a true *being*. How can this apparent Self, which we know is not the real, interior Self, inform us of the characters, the texts, and their motivations? Kosinski and his characters play a dangerous game of distraction and illusion, and it is toward this end that the subterfuge manifests itself. To understand this, we must again turn to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*:

How then shall I experience the objective limits of my being: Jew, Aryan, ugly, handsome, kind, a civil servant, untouchable, *etc.* - when will speech have informed me as to which of these are *my* limits? ... It is not that these objective characteristics must necessarily be *abstract*; some are abstract, others are not. ... Therefore we are not dealing with an abstraction but

with an ensemble of structures, of which certain are abstract but whose totality is an absolute concrete, an ensemble which simply is indicated to me as on principle escaping me. This ensemble is in fact what I *am* (Sartre 675, emphasis his).

What Sartre describes here is the phenomenology of the Self, including the textual: that which can be proven by document (place of birth, country of origin, etc), or by interrogation of the subject, where the subject is forced into identifying with the answer despite potentially unwanted repercussions.³ These are a set of structures, apparent to the Other, that determine the Other's perception of the being. If the individual is kind, rude, eloquent, or rash then the individual *is* that *for* the Other.

This concretized knowledge of the being is based on the perception of the Other. If Bill visits John's house and later speaks with Frank, he may tell him, "I saw John's place. It's a nice place and very tidy. John is a neat person." Yet, if John knew of Bill's visit beforehand, he may have cleaned his place up, vacuumed, taken out the trash, hidden the piles of paperwork, and made the bed. John is a neat person only because Bill perceives him as such. Frank may reply, having visited John without forewarning, "Really? I thought he was a slob. There were pizza boxes on the floor and dirty dishes in the sink." To Frank, John is a slob, because he has perceived him as such. Which is true? Because John cleaned his apartment, does that make him neat, a slob, or neither? Does it make him a slob who wishes to appear neat or a person who wants to provide a clean place for his friends? In the end, it doesn't matter. John is as John is, and the Other's

³ For many in the Holocaust, it was unthinkable to lie about religion or culture, despite the persecution that could result from telling the truth.

perception of him has weight only so long as the phenomenological experience of John confirms that perception.

Kosinski highlights this fluid perception in a passage from *Steps*. The dialogue between the unnamed man and woman, which provides the appearance of tying the episodes together, touches on many themes. In one, the two are discussing why the man has used prostitutes:

But why would you want a prostitute? What could she do that I don't? Is she more willing than I am?

I do with her what you would find unacceptable.

How do you know I would?

Because you know me only in a certain way. And because our relationship is based on your acceptance of what I have been with you.

Then what I assume to be you is only one side of you.

You also offer only the side of yourself which you think is most acceptable to me. So far neither of us has revealed anything which contradicts what we have both always assumed (Steps 60-1).⁴

The man realizes, and tries to explain to the woman, that neither can be contained by the limited experience of one another. What she knows about him is not exhaustive, just as he knows only what he knows about her. This is the phenomenological experience of the Other. Kosinski realizes that he is Other to the Other. This provided the opportunity to influence the Other by modifying the phenomenological experience he presented to the Other.

⁴ Within *Steps*, the narrative dialogue entries are all in italics.

THIS PHILOSOPHY OF SELF IN KOSINSKI'S WORKS

For Kosinski, the malleability of the phenomenological Self, that of his characters as well as himself, provided the opportunity to influence the Other's response to the individual. Perceptions may be formed and dissolved without conscious effort, but they could be influenced by the perceived. Tarden, in *Cockpit*, reveals many ways that perceptions could be manipulated. At one point Tarden buys a pair of custom-made military uniforms. They belong to no nation or branch of service. He has them tailored, using the lapels from one nation, the epaulets from another, the collar from a third, and so on. The Other began responding to this new, calculated presentation immediately:

I had a chance to use the salute frequently during later fittings: any time a military man caught sight of my uniform, he promptly saluted. One... heavily decorated general... took a look at my costume and saluted me with the warm smile of an old soldier passing the torch to a younger man. I was saluted deferentially by a young captain... The captain paid me the respect that the new guard shows toward the veteran (*Cockpit* 133).

The other soldiers at the tailor's saw what they wanted to see: a fellow military man. Once the uniforms were done, the chance to influence the Other became even greater. The concierge at the hotel, the parking lot attendant, policemen, head waiters, and airlines personnel all give him preferential treatment. They do not know who he is, what his rank is, or what country he is from, yet they see the uniform and automatically defer to it.

This experience of allowing the Other to see what the Self wants runs through Kosinski's work and life. In *Steps*, the protagonist imitates a deaf-mute. He becomes, for the Other, "a silent, gesturing spastic [who] was not a threat to callers - [he] could be

given a task, a few coins, and then dismissed” (*Steps* 137-8). Not surprisingly, Kosinski told a story once about performing this same act. He told of a small industrial town where he would visit when he played polo. “And, so, over the years, I would go there to the little town, and since I’m not Latin, and I would like to be Latin, I pretended I was deaf-mute. I didn’t really lie. I don’t speak Spanish, which means I’m mute. And I don’t understand Spanish, which means I’m deaf” (*Passing By* 249-50). For some time he lived as a deaf-mute from another town, accepted and welcomed. This was no more who he was than who the protagonist in *Steps* was, but a persona designed to make the Other’s eye label and move on.

In *Blind Date* Levanter uses an ID from the American Council for Global Security to evade a ticket for double-parking (*Blind Date* 113-4). The ID came from a small educational society, but the police officer sees what he wants to see: an identification card that places Levanter in a role not dissimilar from his own. Like Tarden’s uniform, the card allows the protagonist to influence the Other’s perceptions treatment of him.

Not all of Kosinski’s books display this theme in the same manner. Most critics notice a substantial difference between *Being There* and the rest of Kosinski’s work. However, this theme is played out similarly in *Being There* and *The Devil Tree*.⁵ Chance, as discussed earlier, is the “Blank Page” upon which the Other projects its expectations. Probably one of the best-known scenes by Kosinski is the one in which Chance tells the President, “In a garden, ... 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” (*Being There* 57). The President takes this

⁵ Though my thesis does not address Kosinski’s full canon, touching only tangentially on *Pinball* and *Passion Play*, the themes explored here can be found, in various forms, in all of his texts. Notably, *Passion Play* will be referenced later in connection with Kosinski’s fascination with other Self-Authoring people.

statement as sage advice about the endurance of American economy. Chance does not understand economics. He understands gardening, and his words are taken metaphorically. He is the text interpreted by the reader, the phenomenological Self created by the Other.

Echoes of this portrayal can be found in *The Devil Tree*. Whalen is a rich orphan, who is attractive, self-analytical, and intelligent. He also lacks direction, stability, and focus. Out of this mix comes the anti-Chance character. While Chance is not cognizant of the Other in the way most people are, Whalen is very aware of the Other and the Other's perceptions of him. Yet, Whalen finds himself in a role not dissimilar from Chance. Because of Whalen's wealth, he is assumed to be a particular type of person. Because he is attractive he is expected to have certain characteristics. The Other projects a Self onto Whalen as easily, and as readily, as the Other projects a Self onto Chance. Both Chance and Whalen allow the Other to do this, Chance because this is the way he has learned to interact with the Other, Whalen because he can, at any time, contradict the Other's perceptions.

The thought that tortures Whalen is actually found in *Being There*. It is the understanding of the distinction between the interior Self and the phenomenological Self. "Whatever one did would then be interpreted by the others in the same way that one interpreted what they did. They could never know more about one than one knew about them" (37). For Chance, this is the rule by which he engages with the world, the laws of intercourse. For Whalen, this is the great tragedy; he can never know Karen, his (for a lack of better description) love interest, in the manner he wishes, and he can never reveal himself completely to her.

Kosinski and his protagonists consciously and unconsciously thwart the Other's attempt to understand, label, and know the Self. Tarden and the other characters use the Other's habit of perception to turn the collective against itself. However, this does little to illuminate why the Self in the predominance of Kosinski's work needs to present a fictional persona. The key to Kosinski's obsession with this apparent/inner dislocation is in his first novel, *The Painted Bird*. In many ways, the rest of Kosinski's canon, in this reading, is a continual playing out of themes begun there.⁶

In *The Painted Bird*, the young boy who wanders Eastern Europe during the Holocaust goes through many stages of understanding and interaction with the Other. One factor that makes his life so difficult, aside from being alone and at the whim of a culture with which he is unfamiliar, is his dark "gypsy" eyes and hair. This marks him in a part of the world where most are fair. Because he cannot hide this about himself, he is constantly suspected of using the "evil eye" on people and their livelihood. "Whenever I attempted to walk through the village alone, people would turn their heads and make the sign of the cross. What is more, pregnant women would run away from me in panic. The bolder peasants unleashed dogs on me" (*The Painted Bird* 21). The young boy is feared, and the fear results in a particular treatment, in this case, persecution.

The boy recognizes that his appearance, his phenomenon, makes the Other do this, enables the Other to do this. In response to this he tries to find ways of reducing the threat to his health and life. He attempts to survive, the original and only rule. He hides, he dresses in a manner that conceals his difference at a distance, he avoids contact, he develops means of dissuading others from attacking him by use of his "comet" -- a can on

⁶ *The Hermit of 69th Street* is, at first, problematic in this reading. However, as will be shown, this too is an extension discussed later in this thesis.

the end of a string, used as a portable stove -- or other advantage, and he dreams. "I dozed off thinking of the inventions I would like to make. For example, a fuse for the human body which, when lighted, would change old skin for new and alter the color of the eyes and hair. ... A fuse which could protect anybody from an evil eye. Then nobody would fear me and my life would become easier and pleasant" (91). The boy dreams of fitting in, being less noticeable, of a better means of survival. The boy wants to change into the Other, to become one with the collective because he believes that if he can just find the right means of fitting in, he will survive.

He tries several tactics for fitting in: being a good worker, imitating the local dialect, learning the ways of spirits, praying to God, and immersing himself in Communism. None of these brings him any closer to his goal, though each time he feels as though he has finally found the right way. What he doesn't realize is that he cannot fit in because he *is* the painted bird. Unlike the birds that Lekh paints with his brush, the boy is painted by the perceptions of the Other. He is seen as a dark child, unlike the people of the area. His appearance and dialect mark him as foreign, different, and dangerous. Whether he is Jewish or not is of no concern because he *looks* Jewish. Each time he tries to join the flock he invites abuse, attacks, and the threat of death. He is the bird of difference.

Toward the end of *The Painted Bird*, the boy begins to realize this. Mitka had taught him lessons about justice, about the interior ethical judge that determines responses and punishment for offense.

All the time I thought of Mitka's teachings: a man should never let himself be mistreated, for he would then lose his self-respect and his life would

become meaningless. ... Only the conviction that one was as strong as the enemy and that one could pay him back double, enabled people to survive, Mitka said. A man should take revenge according to his own nature and the means at his disposal (214).

This philosophy presents an ethical foundation that allows the subjective Self to determine justice and judge the Other's treatment of the Self. The boy learns this and finds that this provides a framework through which the subjective Self can modify and use the phenomenological Self according to those ethical rules. This generalizes to include a treatment of the Other that is not determined solely by insult. It begins a determination of the Other's *right* to knowledge, a right protected in the name of survival.

The boy learns that he can determine Other's reactions by modifying his presentation, by lying. He modifies the Other's right to know, so that the Other knows only so much, or only what he wishes the Other to know. Near the end of the novel, the boy is placed in an orphanage, mixed with hundreds of other children who have been affected by the war. Wearing his specially-tailored Soviet uniform attracts attention, from peers as well as adults. When the adults try to take it away, either to wash it or destroy it, the boy begins to exercise this power:

After a while my long-unwashed uniform began to smell, but I still refused to part with it even for a day. The principal, annoyed by this insubordination, called two nurses and had them take it away by force. A jubilant crowd of boys witnessed the struggle.

I broke from the clumsy women and ran out into the street. There I accosted four quietly strolling Soviet soldiers. ... Then I wrote in careful

language that the principal was the daughter of a landlord, that she hated the Red Army, and that she, together with the nurses exploited by her, beat me daily because of my uniform.

As I expected, my message aroused the young soldiers. They followed me inside, and while one of them systematically smashed the flowerpots in the principal's office, the others chased the nurses, slapping them and pinching their bottoms. The frightened women yelled and screamed.

After that the staff left me alone (211).

The boy recognizes a means of gaining his end, that of keeping his uniform, which he feels attached to, not only as a memento of an experience, but also as a talisman of future desires, and he portrays the information that he needs to in order to achieve this result. The boy lies, but that lie is tied to survival; without the uniform he would lose a piece of his identity and perhaps the possibility of being reunited with Garvrila, his dominant goal. The boy has, by this point, learned a survival skill which includes the fluidity of truth. The other texts to follow, most notably *Steps*, *Blind Date*, *Cockpit*, and Kosinski's personal life, develop this theme further, playing out possibilities.

Kosinski's personal life is filled with examples of this fluidity. There are countless examples besides those detailed above that show that Kosinski actively practiced this philosophy in his own life. Were his reasons as grounded as those of the boy in *The Painted Bird*? One effect of his careful Self-protection is that the answer to that question may never be known. However, what is known may well be enough: Jerzy Kosinski was a Holocaust survivor. This goes a long way to explain why, within the

Kosinskian framework, survival is always the goal. Every survivor needed to develop a way of continuing to be. Failure to do so meant death, ashes.

Again, in *The Painted Bird* we find reasons. “Once I pretended to pick up a mushroom which had dropped out of my basket and grasped a handful of this human dust. It stuck to my fingers and smelled of gasoline. *I looked at it closely but could find no trace of a person.* Yet this ash was not like ash left in kitchen ovens where wood, dried peat, and moss were burned” (101, emphasis mine). The Nazis would find the bodies by the side of the railroad tracks, bodies of Jews who had leapt from the trains, hoping for survival or preferring a quick death over the camps. When the bodies were found, the Nazi soldiers would pour gasoline over them and burn them on the spot. The boy knows this, and realizes that to be caught by the Nazis can mean to be no more. Those caught by the Nazis cease to be people, cease to resemble people, cease to have Self. For Kosinski, as for the little boy, this must not be allowed to happen.

In a world where a village can be razed, looted, destroyed, and exterminated for hiding a Jew or Gypsy, where the law demands that one individual sacrifice another individual simply due to religion, culture, or appearance, where appearance is enough to convict and sentence an individual, an interior ethical model like that described above becomes necessary.

One of the two epigrams in *Blind Date* is by Kosinski’s friend, Jacques Monod. It says,

But henceforth who is to define crime? Who shall decide what is good and what is evil? All the traditional systems have placed ethics and values

beyond man's reach. Values did not belong to him; he belonged to them.

He now knows that they are his and his alone...

This echoes a Nietzsche's call to avoid mediocrity and assert the individual. "The 'individual' stands ready, needing a set of laws of his own, needing his own skills and wiles for self-preservation, self-heightening, self-liberation" (Nietzsche 210). To be a Jew during the Holocaust and know the law was to be a Jew who must make a choice: follow the law and Self-extinguish or create an interior law. Not surprisingly, Kosinski chose the latter, following his father's lead. Kosinski's father determined that hiding the Jewishness of his family was the best option for their survival. His plan worked, and Kosinski learned from that.

Different cultures have different notions of what constitutes mastery, macho, panache - cool. ... But for a Holocaust survivor, mastery may mean something very different. For Kosinski it has to do with the ability to escape or vanish, or to make people believe you are not the Jew or Gypsy they think you are (Schiff 228).

For Kosinski, hiding and deception are viable and acceptable means for survival.

In this light, the option for Kosinski and his protagonists is to be either the Other-painted bird or the Self-painted bird. In either case, the Self, the subjective Self, that is, cannot be known. Kosinski's proclaimed favorite definition of the Self came from Gerard Manley Hopkins, who said, "[M]y self being, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of I and me above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale and alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnut leaf or camphor, and is *incommunicable by any means to another man* ... this self being of my own" (qtd. in

Schiff 235, emphasis mine). Because the subjective Self cannot be communicated to the Other by any means, even if it desires to be, it becomes merely the determination of who will paint or create the phenomenological Self. As Sartre said, "... for human reality there is no difference between existing and choosing for itself" (Sartre 731). Kosinski, who revealed the dangers in *The Painted Bird* of allowing the Other to create the phenomenological Self, saw that willful determination of the Other's perceptions was the only option.

That Self-Authorship held a strong fascination for Kosinski is evident in much of his work. Characters other than the protagonists also find themselves in the position of painting or being painted. The most striking example, found in Kosinski's life, *Steps*, *Passion Play*, and *Blind Date*, is the transsexual. Transsexuality is, in a sense, the ultimate Self-Authorship: a willful decision to modify the body itself, not just through exercise, hair style, or colored contact lenses, but through surgery on an aspect of the body that is strongly tied to a conception of Self. Where Kosinski made use of language to modify the perceptions of the Other, making the Other see what it expected or wanted to see, the transsexual creates the phenomenological Self that can be known experientially like no other Self.

Thus far we have isolated four facets of the Kosinskian world: the division between the subjective and the phenomenological Self, the role of the subjective Self and the Other in the creation of the phenomenological Self, the demand for an interiorized ethical framework, and the motivation for willful presentation of the phenomenological Self: survival. With these tools in hand, we turn to a brief discussion of the implications of reading Kosinski's work through this lens.

READING KOSINSKI'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL SELF

Reading Kosinski's work on the basis of a subjective/phenomenological Self division requires a two-step process. First the actions must be seen as manifestations of a willful Self. Secondly, those manifestations have a motivation, often hidden from the reader. This may seem obvious, even to the casual reader, yet all too often a reader will see the action a character performs and not recognize the motivation behind it.

Reviewers often remarked upon Kosinski's sadistic scenes, the frequent sexual encounters, and the estrangement of the protagonists from any meaningful relationship. However, few reviewers were able to recognize that this montage of action, the perpetuation of themes throughout Kosinski's work, was exactly what Kosinski was trying to portray. The sex was not a gratuitous attempt to titillate readers, but a sharp spotlight on the futile desire to become a subjective Self that can be known within a collective of two (or more). To be with another person is not to be able to reveal the subjective Self, but to reveal that the subjective Self is forever isolated and hidden from the Other.

The sadistic element, often criticized for its inclusion in his continuing work, was not just "kink" or a migration of Kosinski the author's desires into his text, but a metaphor for the constant struggle of dominance between Self and Other, as well as a manifestation of the frustration generated by a failure to intersubjectively connect.

Kosinski attempted to explain this in his *The Art of Self*:

"Hell is other people" (Sartre). Hell is the inability to escape from others who prove and prove again to you that you are as they see you. Hell is also the inability to be alone, to see yourself as your self sees you. Both convert

the subjectivity of the other into a menacing object and originate the sadomasochistic struggle to impose our will upon the Other more dominantly than the Other can impose his or her will on us. At stake is the retention of the dominant position. This enables one to pronounce judgment, for only the subject can judge; the object can only be chosen.

To choose is to manifest individuality (*Passing By* 239).

This brief passage explains the metaphor of Kosinski's "kink," or at least justifies its presence within his continuing work: allegorical, parabolic, metaphorical, and realistic.

That Kosinski himself visited S&M clubs as a voyeur should come as no surprise. In one sense, the existence of the clubs allowed Kosinski to witness the manifestation of that drive for dominance. In another, the willful participation in that lifestyle, by the club-goers, is another version of Self-Authorship. The phenomenological Self at its most willful and directed can be seen in a lifestyle that demands adherence to established roles. This is true in many facets of interpersonal relationships, but the S&M lifestyle is non-normative; it demands the portrayal of a role that is in conflict with the collective's acceptance. That makes it a willful authorship, rather than the often passive, unconscious adoption of traditional roles.

That the people in Kosinski's novels, particularly the secondary characters, are flat and clichéd is in keeping with Kosinski's phenomenology of the Self. They are revealed to the reader as beings measured across a set of dimensions, whose dimensions are determined by the perceiver, either the protagonist or the author. In most cases, these are transitory cases, people met for an evening or on a subway, strangers.

While we certainly do not know strangers better than we know those with whom we are intimate, we do know strangers in more neatly defined terms. We see strangers as blocks of objective traits identified with what lies in our past. We see them in theatrical terms; the complexity of mutual identification still lies ahead, since we are not yet involved; we respond to them now as to characters in the early stages of a play. We are still discovering; we are not empathizing. Not yet. The barrier between the illusory and the real, between sympathy and empathy, is still definite. At this point, we have not yet begun to care (228).

This objectification, the flatness of perception of the Other, is due to two major factors: the need to experience the Other to a sufficient extent to begin to develop impressions that go beyond the surface, and habit. In regards to habit, Walter Benjamin has this to say, “[H]abit determines to a large extent even optical reception. The latter, too, occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion.” And later, “The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one” (Benjamin 240-1). Kosinski made use of the lack of public awareness, in his texts as well as his life, to direct attention away from what he wished to hide toward what he wished to portray. This was his method of painting.

Thus far, in developing this critical tool, this thesis has cited or referred to most of Kosinski’s work: his novels, essays, and life. As this thesis is not intended to address Kosinski’s full canon, little mention has been made of *Passion Play* and none of *Pinball*. Both, in this author’s opinion, operate within this philosophy and a close reading of either will make that apparent. They are not so different from Kosinski’s earlier work,

philosophically. Kosinski's ninth novel, *The Hermit of 69th Street: The Working Papers of Norbert Kosky*, has not been addressed for a different reason. Any attempt to develop a theory applicable to an author's canon should be able to account for that which is initially seen as an aberration, a change in style, or a movement in a new direction.

Until the publication of *The Hermit of 69th Street*, most reviewers saw Kosinski's major aberration as *Being There*: Chance does not manipulate Others, he does not exert the level of control on his environment that Kosinski's other protagonists do, and he is not wracked with anxiety over either hiding or revealing himself. After the powerful imagery and violence of *Steps* and *The Painted Bird*, Kosinski's third book caught many people unawares.

However, *Being There* fits squarely within the Kosinskian framework. Chance is merely the object of Other's perceptions. He does little to influence Others, and his reception, treatment, and success is due solely to, well, chance. Though there is far more working within the text of *Being There* than just an examination of the Other-painted Self, it is perhaps in this text that it is so prevalent. That every word and action that comes from Chance is interpreted by the listener/viewer is fore-grounded strongly, and it is this that defines it as a Kosinskian work.

However, in 1988 Kosinski published *The Hermit of 69th Street*, a novel significantly different than any he had written before. It is 529 pages long, and the pages are often arduous. Each is filled with quotes, stream of consciousness reflection, puns, word-play, and footnotes. The quotes come from Joseph Conrad, Jean-Paul Sartre, Joseph P. Schultz, George Steiner, Albert Einstein, Roland Barthes, Araham Joshua Heschel, Victor Schlovsky, Victor Hugo, John Adams, Thomas Wolfe, Anaïs Nin, Emily Brontë,

himself, the fictional characters from his earlier novels, and hundreds of other sources. Jewish theology, Tantric wisdom, adult magazines, and other diverse texts are quoted, referenced, or recommended to the reader.

Kosinski cited everything, drew from a wide range of thought, and constructed a text that is massive in its breadth. The result has been called many things: a defense against the charges leveled by the *Village Voice*, a commentary on the creative process, an apology to his readers and fans, a self-absorbed and self-interested project, and a postmodern work with history as its primary concern. Larry McCaffery gets close to the text when he says,

Georges Bataille once made the useful distinction between the avant-garde novel whose experiments seem to be made for the sake of experiments versus the novel whose peculiar features seem born out of necessity. *The Hermit of 69th Street* is a work so excessive and self-involved, so obviously written by Kosinski for himself, that it seems born out of precisely that sense of necessity and compulsiveness. It is a sense that is rare among writers but common among survivors (McCaffery 115).

McCaffery understands much of what moved Kosinski to write such a complex and difficult novel. Kosinski did not write *The Hermit of 69th Street* to just create an experimental novel, though he did do so, but because he was compelled to find a form that would say what it was he needed to say.

Like *Being There*, as well as the rest of Kosinski's canon, *The Hermit of 69th Street* does many things. It proves to the world, in a very clear way, that Kosinski could write and, moreover, was comfortable enough with his adoptive language to play with it.

It questions the ability of an author to create a truly original text; the use of footnotes and quotes, especially from other writers who had had accusations leveled against them, not to mention dialogue between characters, serves to show the wealth of sources every author uses, consciously and unconsciously, in writing, and the impossibility of accounting for them all. It creates a metaphor for the *Village Voice* exposé, using the question of whether Norbert Kosky can float in water as its central question.

Yet, it does more than that. *The Hermit of 69th Street* is a close examination of the Self. It is also, of course, a willful presentation of the phenomenological Self. The casual reader who picks up *The Hermit of 69th Street*, without any, or at best minimal, knowledge of Kosinski's writings or life, will find it jumps from scene to scene and dialogue to dialogue, interspersed with quotes and footnotes, footnotes that often have no apparent relationship to the text. However, for the Kosinski scholar, *The Hermit of 69th Street* is a dense and jarring view of Kosinski. Within the confines of 529 pages (633 in the revised paperback edition, published in 1991), Kosinski addresses his entire life: his childhood in Poland, his relationship with his mother and father, his dream of success, sudden fame, his acting career, the movie version of *Being There*, his efforts to release political prisoners, his work with PEN, the *Village Voice* scandal, his late enthusiasm for floating motionless in water, his return to and study of the Judaic faith, the pranks he pulled at social gatherings, his voyeuristic interests, his relationship with Halina Poswiatowska (and other women), his dealings with publishers. The list goes on. But that is not all; it also includes his fictional characters: Levanter, Chance, the boy from *The Painted Bird*. All this weight, this history and dense intertextuality, bear down on the reader, in an apparent effort to reveal what it is to be Jerzy Kosinski. That Kosinski lived

within this set of relationships, thinly fictionalized, is undoubted. There is much of the man in the fiction.

Yet, *The Hermit of 69th Street* does not contain all. Notably, Kosinski's marriage to his second wife, Katherina von Fraunhofer ("Kiki") never appears. To be sure, there are many things that happened in Kosinski's life that did not find their way into the life of Kosky in *The Hermit of 69th Street*, yet it would appear that, for reasons unknown, Kosinski made the decision not to include his marriage. That details that *one would expect* to be of less importance found their way into the text indicates that Kosinski's painting was still ongoing.

In a particularly moving moment in the novel, Kosky meets and speaks with the ghost of his father, Israel Kosky. At one point in the dialogue, Kosinski brings up the popular story that he, like the boy in *The Painted Bird*, had once been thrown into a pit of manure:

"Stop talking like Billy Sidis," says his father, "And stop talking about floating. In any case, what do you need floating for?"

"To save myself again from drowning, as I almost did - in a pit of manure."

"What pond of manure? What did you say?" his father recoils. "I can't read your lips. What do you mean by 'again' and 'I almost did'? Who threw you into the pond of manure?"

"Nobody," says our little Hippocampus. "It was just my new fairy tale" (*Hermit* 310).

This passage would seem revelatory, an open admission, often questioned, about his past during World War II. His father, who knew better, who knew that they were all together during the war, could not be lied to about exploits elsewhere accepted as truth, and Kosinski seemed to use this point to “come clean” with the reader.

Unfortunately, this is not clear. Within the same passage, Kosinski brings up his speechlessness and polo playing, both points of contention (Lupack 6, Klinkowitz 197). Of course, *The Hermit of 69th Street* is fiction. As Kosinski explained it, “Auto fiction (or ‘eye to I,’ as it is sometimes called) is a literary genre, generous enough to let the author adopt the nature of his fictional protagonist - not the other way around” (*Passing By* 15). So, in this case, there is nothing of Jerzy Kosinski in the novel, but there is novel in Jerzy Kosinski. But there is, but there isn’t. In the confusion created by this paradox, one need look no further than the last page of the text, where he lists five quotes by, in order, Joseph Conrad, Jerzy Kosinski, Freud, Mark Twain, and William James Sidis. Kosinski’s quote is the only one entirely in capital letters. It says, “THIS BOOK IS WHOLLY FICTION” (*Hermit* 529). Once again, Kosinski succeeds in pulling in the reader, making the reader identify the author with the fictional protagonist, inviting the comparison, and then moving away when the reader isn’t looking.

Ultimately, *The Hermit of 69th Street* is very much about Jerzy Kosinski, but it is about his phenomenological Self. The subjective Self, as always, as it must, remains hidden, undiscoverable, elusive, and, finally, incommunicable. There is no way to know Jerzy Kosinski as Jerzy Kosinski knew himself. We can only know him, his texts, and the characters that people his texts by their actions, their phenomenology.

One last point about Kosinski, his canon, and specifically *The Hermit of 69th Street*: once again we need to turn to the quote by Sartre that states, “Authenticity and individuality have to be earned: I shall be my own authenticity only if under the influence of the call of conscience ... I launch out toward death with a resolute-decision ... as toward my own most peculiar possibility. At this moment I reveal myself to myself in authenticity, and I raise others along with myself toward the authentic” (Sartre 332). At the end of *The Hermit of 69th Street*, Norbert Kosky, who has battled most of the novel with accusations that he was a “false floater,” a charlatan who could not make good on his claims to float by regulating his breathing, is accosted by four men who knock him senseless.

Now, picking our man up as if he were a detached handle and manhandling him a bit, two of them drag him by his feet, and by his feet alone ...

They keep on dragging him all the way to the end of the pier. ...

They drag him beyond that sign IMPASSE, all the way to the end of the dockyard. ...

Now, these faceless men - faceless since what matters in a tale is a moral - pick him up as if he were a doll. First they grab him by his arms, legs and torso; then they swing him back and forth, forth and back - then they toss him - toss him out of an invisible hammock suspended in the invisible air, toss him up, not down.

When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness. (F. Scott Fitzgerald) He flies

up like a bird, but up only for a moment so short it already seems ago - then, he starts falling down. He: the unsinkable Lotus Man disguised as the American Unsinkable Molly Brown.

The end came suddenly. (Thomas Wolfe) (*Hermit* 527).

He is tossed into the water at the end of the pier, that much is obvious. Yet, Kosinski wants the reader to think about this scene. That's why he said "what matters in a tale is a moral." The reader who has been paying attention (which several reviewers were not), will know that Kosky believes that he can float, and that his detractors believe he can not.

Again, a part of the essay Kosinski wrote on suicide in "The Art of Self:" "He imposes on other people the necessity for remembering and for judging him, for summarizing him as a character. He creates the means to outlive himself" (*Passing By* 231). Kosinski does not tell the reader whether Kosky lives or dies, floats or sinks, was a liar or authentic. He leaves that up to the reader to decide. Ultimately, Kosinski left his life and work up for the Other to judge, probably because the Other would anyway. He had painted as much as he could.

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Tracy Allen Houston was born in Waldo, Maine on December 26, 1967. He graduated from Mount View High School in Thorndike, Maine in 1987. Following several years away from school he attended The University of Maine, graduating in May of 2001 with a B.A. in English with a Concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Psychology. He immediately entered the graduate program at The University of Maine, taking his first class that summer.

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