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The Anti-Human Condition: Violence, Identity, and Coming-of-Age in *The Painted Bird*

Malcolm Conner

Jerzy Kosinski's first novel, *The Painted Bird*, (1965) remains one of the most controversial works of Holocaust fiction ever published. A dystopic coming-of-age story set on a Bosch-like backdrop of war-torn eastern Europe, the novel is loosely based off Kosinski's experiences during World War II, when he and his family hid from the Nazis in rural Poland. (Sloan, 7-54) The nameless protagonist – known only as the boy – passes from village to village as an unwanted outsider, often abused and barely surviving. For six years, “the boy's life is an unmitigated series of horrors and atrocities, which though episodic in nature, disclose a sort of patterned movement through various forms of moral and physical evil [. . .] Gradually the child loses all vestiges of civility, of his middle-class nurture, and [by] the end of the war; he has become a creature unfit for a civilized society.” (Meszaros, 232) The novel details the creation of a hellish microcosm of war, enclosed within the victimized boy. Kosinski's declared intent, to “represent the essential anti-human condition” of war and genocide (xii) is successful in forging a child into a warborn creature of chaos.

To describe *The Painted Bird* as remarkably disturbing does little to distinguish the novel from other literary works by survivors of the Shoah. After all, what work of Holocaust literature leaves the reader feeling anything but unsettled? However, *The Painted Bird* disturbs excessively; the novel's relentless scenes of extreme violence and mythic-level depravity batter and exhaust the reader's moral bearings in a way few – if any – other Holocaust novels dare. If Elie Wiesel's *Night* represents the Holocaust's superego, suggests Adam Kirsch, then “*The*

*Painted Bird* is its roiling id.” (Kirsch, 2011) So grotesque is the sexual violence that readers could be forgiven for wondering what the point of it is, if not to “satisfy [Kosinski’s] own peculiar imagination”. (Kosinski, xx.<sup>1</sup>) Yet despite its seeming excessiveness, the incredible brutality successfully magnifies the book’s ultimate achievement: a bitter and terrifying portrait of wartime masculinity. Depraved, unmitigated, and disturbing, the book is a towering anti-war novel.

*The Painted Bird* is a bildungsroman, or ‘education-novel’, which typically recounts the coming of age story of a young person (usually a boy) learning the ways of the world. Kosinski reimagines this genre as a nightmarish initiation into violent chaos: the boy learns the ways of the world, but a world of hatred, terror, and ceaseless persecution. The boy’s age – from mid-childhood to the beginning of puberty – ensures his indoctrination into violent masculinity. The natural fascinations of late boyhood – masculinity, sex, and identity – make the boy horribly susceptible to the ways in which these things become corrupted by war and genocide. The boy’s ‘education’ on manhood asserts the centrality of domination and vengeance; victimhood and womanhood become conflated through profuse sexual violence, and to be feminized is to be victimized; violent power and masculinity become indivisible. As R.W. Connell notes, “masculinity as an object of knowledge is always masculinity-in-relation.” (Connell, p. 44) In the perverted binary of *The Painted Bird*, masculinity exists as the opposite of not only femininity, but of powerlessness and subjugation. The narrator seeks his burgeoning masculinity like any boy, but it becomes confused and then infused with a need for control, vengeance, and victimization of the feminine.

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<sup>1</sup> Page number references the afterword Kosinski added to *The Painted Bird* in 1976, pp xx.

Violence, male power, and sex are barely divisible from the beginning of the boy's ordeal. The boy's introduction to brutal violence takes place in only the fourth chapter, at the house of a miller who has taken him in. First the boy witnesses, through a floorboard crack, the miller viciously whipping his naked wife, accusing her of flirting with a plowboy. Later, the miller gouges out the eyes of this young plowboy, in retribution for the affair the miller suspects his wife and the plowboy of having. Both gruesome acts are motivated by violent sexual anxieties, and the miller's desire to regain sexual control of his wife. The intent is both vengeful and deliberately, sadistically intimidating (the miller gouges the plowboy's eyes in front of the wife). The act is also essentially successful, affirming the miller's dominance and masculine power, as the boy looks on through the crack.

While the boy does not applaud the miller's violence, he does not condemn him either. Conversely, a degree of victim-blaming is discernable in regards to the wife. Before her beating, the boy observes that the miller's wife "did not deny [flirting with the plowboy]" (34) when her husband accuses her, instead she sits "passive and still," (34) and later "crawled towards her husband's legs, begging forgiveness." (35) Additionally, the narration recounts the rumors of the woman's disloyalty:

It was said that she changed when she gazed into the boy's blue eyes. Heedless of the risk of being noticed by her husband, she impulsively hiked her skirt high above her knees with one hand, and with the other pushed down the bodice of her dress to display her breasts, all the time staring into the boy's eyes. (35)

The inherent suggestion of the phrase "heedless of the risk" implies the woman's culpability for her abuse, as if it were her own lustful carelessness and not her husband's jealous wrath that perverted her house with violence. The extended description of the woman's rumored flirtations only serves to reinforce this suggestion. This passage betrays the anxious logic of a young child trying to make sense of senseless violence: She was a bad wife, and that is why her husband

punished her. Understanding that he is equally vulnerable, the boy constructs a comforting but factitious reality, where he can avoid such violence if only he distances himself from the feminine and the abused. The wife was tortured because she was lustful and careless, the plowboy feminized by being dominated by the miler and losing his eyes, which had attracted the wife; a symbolic castration. The boy stays separate and observes that miller was triumphant because of his violence, and his masculinity was affirmed by his victory. Control and power are thus closely associated with a subjugating, vengeful masculinity from the first instance of *The Painted Bird's* extreme and sexualized violence.

Sex and violence become even more closely fused through the boy's encounter with Stupid Ludmila, only one chapter later. Stupid Ludmila lives in the woods after having lost her mind when she was gang raped as a girl for rejecting a suitor. At the end of the chapter, Ludmila, drunk and unable to find Lekh, her lover, "orders [the boy] to lie down between her thighs" (53) and whips him with a belt when he tries to escape. This act alone is sexually violent. However, it lasts only briefly, interrupted when a gang of peasant men appear and throw themselves on Ludmila (whether Ludmila consents to this sex is unclear) and then by the men's jealous wives, who beat Ludmila to death. The boy's sexual initiation is paired with extreme violence, fusing the two in his mind.

Evidence for this fusing can be seen in the language of the boy's narration. During the beating, "she groaned loudly, arched her back, trembled," (55) and later she begins to "moan and howl" (55) when a peasant woman violates her with a bottle of manure. The language is patently sexual. (Oster, 109) Furthermore, the descriptions closely mirror those of the preceding page, when Ludmila has sex with the gang of peasant men. The text suggests that orgasmic pleasure

and debasing violence have merged in the eyes of the boy. Sharon Oster examines the scene further, and elucidates the boy's complicated role within it:

Does the boy come to understand this heinous rape and murder as Ludmila's punishment for how she tried to humiliate him? Sex and violence are inextricable here, as understood and retold by the boy. Though the boy sees Lekh sob over his dead lover's body at the scene's conclusion, the boy leaves without comment. The narrator, as witness, assumes Ludmila's suffering as his own, as Ludmila is denied any voice other than her groaning in pain; her only agency come from her ability, if you will, to fuck and to suffer. These two attributes become conflated in her death [. . .] Ludmila's sexually violent death serves as a sacrificial subterfuge through which the boy undergoes a critical rite of sexual initiation, simultaneously traumatized and unharmed, both subject and object of such violence. (Oster, 109)

Oster arrives at an important point: the boy is indisputably traumatized by the event, but while he is initiated, someone else –the feminine Other - is murdered. Both the sexual initiation and sexual violence of the scene are acted out on the stage of Ludmila's body. Rebecca Scherr, in her study on the eroticization of the Holocaust in Holocaust fiction, remarks that “it is on the bodies of the female characters that the authors project a kind of sexual paranoia, and it is through watching these sexualized bodies that the reader/viewer participates in navigating between sex and violence and sex and death.”(Scherr, 279) Scherr specifies the role of the audience, but her insight applies also to the boy's voyeuristic position.<sup>2</sup> He, too, navigates between sex and violence and sex and death in watching, his witnessing helpless but participatory. His coming-of-age involves the unification of sexual initiation and violence, but in watching the subjugation of a victim –a victim like him, but not him – the boy ‘learns’ that the penetrable is the destroyable.

How this education in violence and subjugation advances in *The Painted Bird* becomes disturbingly apparent in the scene where Rainbow, a peasant, rapes a young Jewish girl who has escaped from a Nazi transport train. The boy watches the assault through a knothole in the wall.

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<sup>2</sup> The audience's role as witnesses/voyeurs to sexual violence in Holocaust literature is a profoundly important question, but will not be examined more in this essay. Further discussion can be found in Scherr's analysis, as well as research by Adam Brown, Deb Waterhouse-Watson, and Lynn Rapaport. (See references)

An examination of the narration reveals the boy's focus on Rainbow, not the girl. Oster notes that "given the boy's visual, almost cinematic gaze, we are directed to identify with Rainbow," (Oster, 110) and while this is certainly true, Oster overlooks a crucial aspect; we are directed to identify with Rainbow because we are following the narrative perspective of the boy, and the boy identifies with Rainbow. The boy's description of the rape is primarily descriptions of Rainbow; where he is, what he is doing, how he is doing it. Descriptions of the girl are nearly all to do with the sounds she is making, and little else. The boy's interest lies with the male, the dominant figure, the man who victimizes rather than being victimized. In the boy's prepubescent development of the masculine concept, sexual violence is mingled with manhood; being a man means not being a victim, it means being powerful instead of powerless, the penetrator rather than the penetrated.

The boy's identification with Rainbow is as much a coping mechanism as it is an illustration of a young boy's search for manhood. The girl Rainbow rapes unnervingly parallels our protagonist; both young, black haired, presumably Jewish<sup>3</sup>, having avoided a concentration camp only to find themselves at the mercy of xenophobic rural Poland. Why does the boy not identify with her? It appears he senses their similarity, and quietly –or perhaps, unconsciously– rejects it. The boy's coping strategy to handle his own helplessness and persecution is to identify with the persecutor, to reject and distance himself from his own reflection in the girl.

Penetration in *The Painted Bird* becomes synonymous with victimhood and weakness. Despite the profuse sexual content of the book, consensual sex is exceedingly rare, and even the women who have consensual sex (Stupid Ludmila, and Labina, a prostitute) are still presented as

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<sup>3</sup> Although the boy is seen ambiguously as a "Jewish or Gypsy stray" (4) by the Polish peasants, it can be deduced that he is not likely Gypsy/Romani, as he comes from a family with the financial means to afford the "substantial payment" (3) of the man who agreed to take him into the countryside and find a family that would hide him. Additionally, he speaks the dialect of the urban, educated class at the beginning of the novel, which would be unusual for a Romani boy.

victimized. And it is not only women who are presented as victims; penetration appears in the threatening stories a peasant tells the boy, describing a man who was forced onto a sharpened stake as a punishment, and the rape of strangers by gangs of boys is mentioned when the boy narrowly escapes this himself. Nearly every man in *The Painted Bird* who experiences violence is castrated as part of the attack; the boy learns that “defeat in war is [. . .] inherently feminizing,” (Jones, 454) and the feminine and the feminized are assaulted and degraded. Sexualized power pervades the book; those who are penetrated are weak and doomed, while the penetrators are dominant, powerful, and retain their power by subjugating the penetrated.

The boy’s unconscious identification with violent masculinity eventually develops into something more explicit. As the boy ages, his desire for powerful male role models becomes more persistent; when he encounters an SS officer, this is exemplified in disturbing and telling ways. Huddled at the feet of the man, the boy perceives him to be “superhuman” (113) and regards him with awe:

He seemed an example of neat perfection that could not be sullied: the smooth, polished skin of his face, the bright golden hair showing under his peaked cap, his pure metal eyes. Every movement of his body seemed propelled by some tremendous internal force. The granite sound of his language was ideally suited to order the death of inferior, forlorn creatures. I was stung by a twinge of envy. . .(113)

Although the boy is aware that the Nazi is deciding whether or not to kill him, he stares at the officer with respect and admiration. The officer is powerful and in control, full of “might and majesty” (114); the officer is a dominator, a penetrator, and a shiny, clean emblem of masculinity. The boy yearns to be in his position, to be the one deciding on his own fate. Oster observes that,

If the boy is to maintain his status above and apart from the villagers, his only other choices for models of identification remains the Jews – who, as the



example of the “Jewess”<sup>4</sup> suggests, are feminine, weak victims, rapable and reducible to animals – or the German officers. (Oster, 111)

The boy’s response to the Nazi reveals the disturbing merger of a young boy’s natural attraction to masculine authority and a traumatized child’s yearning for safety and control. Control then becomes synonymous with violent power in the boy’s world, because the only people who seem to have control retain that control through violence. The ones without control are the “feminine, weak victims” that the boy senses himself to be among, and desperately rejects this commonality in favor of the powerful, masculine identity he envies. The paradox of the boy’s idolization of his own oppressors demonstrates how his perception of masculine power is warped by the chronic persecution and horror from which he yearns to escape.

Although his encounter with the Nazi is brief, the boy recalls the officer frequently as a dream of what he wishes to be, and this masculine fantasizing is combined with sexual fantasizing:

In my dreams I turned into a tall, handsome man, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, with hair like pale autumn leaves. I became a German officer in a tight, black uniform . . . my artful hands induced wild passions in the village girls, turning them into wanton Ludmilas who chased me through flowery glades, lying with me on beds of wild thyme, among fields of golden rod. (147)

The boy’s sexual fantasies – otherwise rather standard – incorporate an agent of genocide as the masculine ideal the boy dreams of being. The integration of self-hatred (hating being the victim) and idolization of a dominant, masculine ideal with the boy’s developing sexuality creates a troubling picture of a pervasively traumatic bildungsroman. Oster notes, “That [the boy] dreams this in the context of a sexual relationship emphasizes what he has learned: the power to victimize, to control the fate of others, is intimately tied to his burgeoning masculinity and sexuality.” (Oster, 113) Years of witnessing the sexual subjugation and victimization of women

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<sup>4</sup> The Jewish girl raped by Rainbow.

and weaker men has imprinted the boy with a vision of dominating, violent masculinity that is epitomized by the SS officer.

Silke Hesse's *Fascism and the Hypertrophy of Male Adolescence* identifies many of the aspects that contributed to the popularization of fascism among German boys. The qualities she identifies resemble the boy in *The Painted Bird* in unsettling ways:

. . . the adolescent is the unattached person. He has outgrown the family of his childhood and has not yet acquired new commitments; he is responsible for no one but himself. . . he is still at a formative stage in which he seeks role models to imitate. He will follow a leader and identify with him[. . .] His sexuality is awaked but not yet firmly focused; it can easily be directed towards ideals and heroes. All these characteristics tend to make him a dedicated follower of whichever hero he has chosen. (Hesse, 172)

Although our protagonist has been separated from his family, instead of having outgrown it, the similarities are still striking. His position as an isolated, young male makes him susceptible to precisely the sort of enchantment with powerful, masculine men that helped consolidate the Nazi party's authority. (Hesse, 171) This comparison is not meant to conflate the boy and members of the *Hitlerjugend*, but to highlight the deep and twisted ironies of the boy's coming-of-age, and Kosinski's shrewdness in choosing the character of a young boy to illustrate the distortions of war upon a developing manhood. A young adolescent's identity formation is heavily dependent on observing and imitating role models; when the only role model of a victorious man, a man in control, is a man whose job is to kill the boy and people like him, the boy cannot help but look to his would-be murderer as a role model.

When the Nazis are defeated, the boy loses his reverence for them and begins to idolize the liberating Russian soldiers instead, particularly Mitka, an accomplished sniper. While Mitka is not an agent of the Holocaust like the SS officer, the boy's admiration of Mitka's masculinity is still deeply rooted in Mitka's ability to kill and control. The boy regards Mitka's martial abilities with great reverence, describing his military honors, his medals, his heroism when he

“parachuted in alone and then sniped at officers and couriers of the German Army with extraordinary long-range marksmanship.”(198) Although he was wounded a year before, Mitka is the epitome of the masculine non-victim; he is powerful and respected in his regiment, he kills his enemies with precision, he seeks vengeance and gets it. The boy parrots his teachings even after they have parted ways:

All the time I thought of Mitka’s teachings: A person should take revenge for every wrong or humiliation [. . .] A man should consider every wrong he had suffered and decide on the appropriate revenge. Only the conviction that one was as strong as the enemy and that one could pay him back double, enabled people to survive [. . .] the revenge should be proportionate to all the pain, bitterness, and humiliation felt. (214)

Violent vengeance becomes central to the boy’s concept of masculinity and survival; the only way to make up for the ways he has been wronged, the only way to reclaim the title of non-victim, is to seek revenge upon those who made him suffer. Vengeance appeals to him precisely because he is a victim; vengeance is the only kind of justice the boy can imagine.

When four Russian soldiers are killed by villagers, Mitka shoots an equal number of villagers from a tree, bringing the boy with him. The boy’s unhinged desire for vengeance becomes apparent when he requests that Mitka also shoot a hound that reminds him of Judas, the dog that terrorized him years ago. Killing the dog, as the boy sees it, would be an act of vengeance, asserting his power to hurt the enemies that have hurt him, and control his fate with violence. Yet, here the ways in which his logic has been distorted by trauma are highlighted; Mitka refuses to kill the dog, “looking at [the boy] with disapproval” (207) when the boy insists. Mitka did not grow up in the violent chaos the boy has, and his reasoning is comparatively sound, while the boy’s is exposed as being warped and needlessly violent.

After the end of the war, the boy’s trauma becomes more apparent. At the orphanage, he refuses to wear anything but the miniature Red Army uniform Mitka had made for him; a

revealing example of trauma response combined with boyish hero-worship. On one level, the boy is essentially playing dress-up as his hero, Mitka. Given the context and the history, however, the wearing of the uniform infers the boy's desperate need to feel like a non-victim, even after the war has ended. The uniform acts as a disguise for the boy's abuse and persecution; when he wears it, he is no longer a tiny, traumatized twelve-year-old, he is a fearsome Russian soldier, endlessly loyal to Stalin, capable of great and worthy acts of violence. When the uniform is forcibly taken away, the boy lies to a couple of Russian soldiers about being abused at the orphanage, inciting them to come to the building and wreak havoc in revenge. This event illustrates not only the boy's obsessive need to keep his uniform, but also his growing sense of his own power and how to use it to get what he wants.

Discovery of power plays a significant and disturbing role in the boy's postwar experience. When the boy and his companion, the Silent One, soak the switch mechanism of a train track fork in oil, they manage to unjam the joint so that the switch can be thrown to the unfinished arm of the track that leads to a cliff. The boy contemplates his control over the lives of strangers with exhilaration:

I was overcome with a great sense of power. The lives of the people on the train were in my hands . . . I recalled the trains carrying people to the gas chambers and crematories. The men who had ordered and organized all that probably enjoyed a similar feeling of complete power over their uncomprehending victims [ . . . ] To be capable of deciding the fate of many people whom one did not even know was a magnificent sensation. (220)

The boy, who has for so long been powerless and victimized, deeply enjoys his sudden control over other people's lives. Additionally, he feels no repulsion at feeling the same way (he imagines) the Nazis felt. Even though having this power does not offer the boy any control over his own life, power over others is comforting, because it makes him the victimizer, the subjugator, able to control the lives of strangers, and this makes him feel like a non-victim. He

cannot be hurt if he is the one doing the hurting, or so the childlike logic goes. This logic is flawed, of course, and the boy soon discovers he is still easily victimized when a dairy farmer beats him for knocking over milk for sale. The boys' response – using the switch to send the train (which they believed was carrying the dairy farmer) off the cliff – shows the two boys to have been indoctrinated by war trauma with the similar ideas around violence, vengeance, and masculinity.

Even after reuniting with his parents, the boy's desire for violent vengeance continues, signaling the distortions the war inflicted upon his developing masculinity and moral reasoning were made permanent. He breaks his adoptive brother's arm when the brother annoys him too much. He drops bricks on the head of a cinema attendant who embarrassed him. He seeks out nocturnal communities of criminals and prostitutes, proclaiming, "The war continued at night." (232) The boy seeks out the war, because war is the only context in which his worldview is still applicable. Without the war, "his aggressive survival tactics are not only unnecessary but seemingly psychopathic." (Richter, 376) The boy cannot function in regular society; he has been so wholly formed by chaos, the rational world is unintelligible and alienating.

*The Painted Bird* is not a portrait of a shattered survivor. The character is so young at the start of the novel he has no already-formed self to shatter. The novel documents something perhaps even darker, and even more disturbing: the violent manufacture of a disturbed young man. Readers may ache for a happy ending, some vague justice for the abuses he suffered, but these fantasies cannot rationally be entertained. The boy in *The Painted Bird* has been formed into an imprint of the war itself; vengeful and victimized, driven by a distorted belief in authoritative masculinity, sculpted out of innocence by horror. His education on manhood was an education on violence, sexual subjugation, and vengeance, and he carries the war's distortions

like a virus, infecting and slowly destroying him. The novel implies that the war did not end with the end of the war; after such unimaginable devastation, how could it?

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