Birds of a Different Feather: Nabokov's *Lolita* and Kosinski's Boy

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In a recent article Maurice Couturier observes that the "traumatic event" of World War II had an enormous "impact" on postwar writers, whose knowledge of genocide and the Holocaust led them to question "the sanity of organized and developed societies." Spawning radical doubts about human nature and civilization, the war helped to create the cultural divide that separates postmodernist writers from their literary predecessors. In Professor Couturier's view Nabokov's major English novels, beginning with *Lolita*, are located on the postmodernist side of this juncture or "crossroads." Exposed by the war to "the fragility of the old values," Nabokov discovered "the absence of the real behind the proliferation of images and simulacra" and "the arbitrariness of language." His "archetypal postmodernist novels"— *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Ada* — do not purport to represent any "pre-textual referent" or "reality." Like Humbert's "love object," the nymphet, the only reality is the artist's fantasy, the "work of art" (255, 257-58).

Recasting the postmodernist debate in a historical context, Couturier's assertions are worthy of further consideration. I propose, therefore, to examine the artifice of *Lolita* in light of another postwar novel — by a writer who set out to record the "traumatic" experience of World War II in his fiction. "Could my childhood during World War II be anything but traumatic?" Jerzy Kosinski rhetorically queries in a 1989 essay. "Can one imagine a more traumatic experience?" The novelist adds, "I am still carrying" the "dramatic repercussions" of that experience "in myself" today (*Passing By* 34). Twenty-five years earlier, in 1965, Kosinski registered the trauma of war in his 1965 novel — *The Painted Bird* — a work laden with historical references and, to all appearances, charged with "pre-textual reality."

The Painted Bird opens after the Germans have invaded Poland in 1939, and Kosinski's six-year-old protagonist sent by his parents to the countryside for safety. After a series of mishaps, the Boy, "considered a Gypsy or Jewish stray," wanders alone through the war-torn villages of "Eastern Europe," barely escaping death at the hands of his persecutors — both the blond, blue-eyed peasants and the occupying Germans, charged with rounding up "Gypsies or Jews" for the death-camps (1-2). The density of "pre-textual" references notwithstanding, Kosinski's novel exhibits — in ways unknown to *Lolita* — that radical dispossession of "the real" which Couturier deems the hallmark of postmodernism. Admittedly, *The Painted Bird* is not fraught with the kind of self-reflexive devices often identified with postmodernist narrative. But as Couturier persuasively argues, the a-historical identification of postmodernism with specific stylistic techniques has not proved convincing. Nor is Kosinski's own attempt, in 1972, to characterize his prose-style as "the "opposite" of "what Nabokov does". His language is made visible… like a veil or a transparent curtain with a beautiful design. You cannot help seeing the curtain as you peek into the intimate room behind. "My aim," he adds, "is to remove the veil" (*Conversations* 29. Kosinski's ellipses).

Kosinski's desire to make his prose "transparent" — as though the text were a window through which the reader might gaze directly at the "real" world outside — sounds like the *credo* of a literary realist. But as the novelist also avowed, every "writer constructs one curtain after another" between "external reality and his own imagination." The "locale and setting" of *The Painted Bird* are, he admits, "metaphorical": the "whole journey could actually have taken place in the mind" — the image of "the painted bird" serving as a "symbol" of the novel's protagonist (*Passing By* 201, 206, 211). By exploring the implications of this image — the image of the child as "painted bird" — I hope to clarify what distinguishes Nabokov's self-conscious but metaphysically grounded worlds of fiction from the postmodernist structures they superficially resemble.

“Postmodernism in the arts,” Louis Menand recently pointed out, “is simply anti-essentialism. It is a reaction against the idea, associated by academic critics in the postwar years with modernist literature, painting, and architecture, that the various arts have their own essential qualities.” The modernist poet is one who believes that poetry is “essentially a matter of the organization of language” (16-17). Ignoring the pejorative connotations that have accreted — in this era of the so-called “culture wars” — around the word “essence,” Menand’s brief but useful definition suggests how one may cut through the labyrinthine complexities of Nabokov’s style to consider the vision of art and humanity that lies beneath. First, however, one qualification is necessary: as crucial to the life of any novel as its language is the “organization” of that language into verbal signs identified as characters. More than any other element of the text, I would suggest, it is the particular formation of these images or *dramatis personae* that serves to evoke or to “undermine the real.” As Couturier says, traditional “representation, mimesis, postulates the existence of a reality out there that begs to be described and understood”; postmodernist “simulation,” by contrast, “does not point towards a reality” (256). Similarly, I would suggest, postmodernist *characters* fail to “point towards a reality” beyond their immediate linguistic context; cut off from “the real” — failing to “point towards” or evoke any essential humanity — they exist only as simulacra.

In Nabokov’s artifice, we know, consciousness plays so vital a role, embodies so essential a principle, that on its evidence alone readers are invited to distinguish between those characters connected to “the real” beyond the text and those who are — like Cincinnatus C.’s puppetlike jailers or Paduk’s minions — mere parodies or simulacra. In Kosinski’s world, on the other hand, the source of “the real” strikes one as having disappeared altogether. What Nabokov points to as essential in human life and consciousness — its radiant, indivisible, creative *reality* — emerges in Kosinski’s text as merely another (anti-essentialist) construct, symbolized by “the painted bird.”

The contrast between Nabokov’s and Kosinski’s artistic vision is conveniently highlighted by the way that Nabokov himself formulated, for his own purposes, the metaphor of a “painted bird.” In the early 1950s — a decade before Kosinski’s novel was published and the years during which Nabokov was composing *Lolita* — he delivered a lecture on Dickens to his students at Cornell. In *Bleak House*, Professor Nabokov declared, Harold Skimpole “is a painted bird with a clockwork arrangement for mechanical song. His cage is an imitation, just as his childishness is an imitation.” Skimpole, in other words, is only an imitation or *simulacrum* of the creature he purports to be. Adopting the role of a misunderstood child denied his true freedom, Skimpole is a fake. Pretending to be trapped by circumstance, Skimpole is, in Nabokov’s words, “not really caged” at all (*Lectures* 89).

A lecturer’s passing reference obviously does not carry the same weight or intensity of effect as a novelistic character or symbol. Still, the contrast between Nabokov’s formulation of the “painted bird” and Kosinski’s much more extensive model helps to suggest the moral and metaphysical divide separating their fiction. Nabokov’s relegation of Skimpole to the category of a “painted bird” posits a universe in which the difference between truth and its imitation, reality and its simulation, is essential. To apply Baudrillard’s terms, Nabokov belongs to the category of writers engaged with representing “the real” in their work. Here “representation,” says Baudrillard, “still attempt[s] to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a sham representation, [whereas] simulation encompasses the whole field of representation itself and makes of it a simulacrum” (cited in Couturier 256). For Nabokov as both writer and reader, the difference between true “childishness” and its mere simulation is as fundamental as that between a real bird and a “painted” one. Skimpole plays at being a victim, pretending to be held captive by an unfeeling society that imprisons his “free” spirit. The lie by which he attempts to preserve his laziness is, to Nabokov, a betrayal of the child’s essential innocence and vulnerability.

The distinctions to which Nabokov’s metaphor of the “painted bird” draws attention — the polarities of nature and culture, spontaneity and artificiality, freedom and imprisonment — are systematically dismantled in *The Painted Bird*. The novel’s central symbol is introduced via a

bird-catcher named Lekh, who from boyhood has been "drawn to the forests" by his love and admiration for birds. But the birds that inspire Lekh and provide the source of his livelihood are also the object of his envy and frustration. Whenever he grows sad or angry, Lekh takes his "revenge" by choosing a scapegoat to persecute (41, 43). Singling out the "strongest" of his captives, Lekh removes the bird from its cage, paints "its wings, head, and breast" with bright colors, and — "when a sufficient number of birds" belonging to "the same species" gather in the skies overhead — releases "the prisoner" to join its fellows. Confused by the bright hues of the painted bird's feathers, the other birds quickly turn against it. Unable to identify the outsider as one of their own, they fiercely attack and kill it (49-50).

Alienated and attacked for his "otherness" or difference, the "painted bird" presents a clear analogy to the novel's protagonist. Wandering through the landscape of Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe, Kosinski's Boy arouses fear and hatred in the surrounding population. Because of his dark features and complexion, the Boy is persecuted and nearly killed by the human "flock" or mob in all its guises — superstitious, militant, religious or ideological. Kosinski employs the symbol of the "painted bird" not to underscore but to "undermine the real" — dissolving the distinction, so honored by Nabokov, between authenticity and truth, essence and imitation. Once Lekh, the bird-catcher, paints the bird's feathers, the other members of the flock cannot distinguish between the bird's original identity and his painted one. Nor, as Kosinski's novel proceeds to illustrate, can human beings — particularly as a group or collective — distinguish between culturally constructed human identity and that which is innate, authentic, essential or "real."

The distinction that Nabokov draws between true and false "childishness" does not obtain in *The Painted Bird*. Instead of signifying essential reality or truth, "childishness" means, for Kosinski, "what we see in children" — what, in other words, we as a culture care to make *of* them. Admittedly, children begin life with an imagination still "uncensored" in its "mental mobility"; but youthful agility only speeds up the process of "adapation" (*Passing By* 5). With startling alacrity Kosinski's Boy takes up one dogma or ideology after another in hopes of making sense of the world. When folk-magic and superstition fail, he moves on to prayer and the worship of God, only to discover the superior power of Evil. Convinced that love is a sign of weakness, the victim develops a fierce longing for power and revenge. All notions of creative innocence vanish as the victimized child becomes the victimizer — and reveals his "painted," rather than essential, identity.

So accustomed is the Boy to a world of violence and death that, when the war is over, he experiences a deep sense of loss and regret. Then, sometime later, he and another youngster come across an abandoned train-switch lying hidden in the grasses next to the railroad track. "Overcome by a sense of great power," the Boy exults in his newfound ability to destroy hundreds of unknowing passengers. More horrifying than the wholesale destruction the two boys carry out — more horrifying, even, than the accumulated acts of murder, rape and torture crowding the novel's pages — is this final revelation of the victim's assumption of the persecutor's identity. Any notion of the child's essential innocence, of his plight as a helpless victim, is shattered by the intensity of the Boy's identification with the Nazi oppressors:

> 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 […] All they had to do was issue orders and in countless towns and villages trained squads of troops and police would start rounding up people destined for ghettos and death camps […] To be capable of deciding the fate of many people whom one did not even know was a magnificent sensation (233-34).

The image of "the painted bird," with all its anti-essentialist implications, sums up for Kosinski the human being's profound alienation from essence. It "manifests," as he says in his published "Notes" on the novel, "the author's awareness, perhaps unconscious, of his break with the wholeness of self" (*Passing By* 210). Orphaned and victimized by a society brutally at war, Kosinski's Boy is likewise alienated by a world that strips him, as Humbert strips Lolita, of parental love and protection; but the Boy is its creature — its product or

construct — in a way that Lolita is not. For Nabokov, certainly, a child is easily made to play the role of a helpless "painted bird," pecked to death by the flock for being alien or "other." But for Kosinski, the child is already a "painted bird," one whose nature proves indiscernible from the colors that coat and construct it. Undermining "the idyll of childhood," the protagonist of *The Painted Bird* fails, in Couturier's words, "to point toward a reality" beyond the construct of the text, or world, he inhabits.[1]

In Nabokov's self-reflexive universe, on the other hand, the "painting" or construction of novelistic characters invokes, paradoxically, a world of human freedom and aesthetic delight. "All art is deception," says Nabokov, but "so is nature; all is deception in that good cheat, from the insect that mimics a leaf to the popular enticements of procreation" (*Strong Opinions* 11). Beneath or beyond the ceaseless play of forms, and of the novelist's artful language, lies a more essential reality — one that the child's image, in particular, suggestively evokes. As I have elsewhere discussed in detail, the image of childhood that Nabokov celebrates throughout his *œuvre* is a legacy inherited from his Romantic predecessors and given new life in his work.[2] For Nabokov as for Wordsworth, Blake and Dickens, the child embodies the human being's original innocence and creativity. Boldly echoing Rousseau, Nabokov even declares his "irrational belief in the goodness of man" (Lectures 372-73).[3] Evincing their author's belief in "universal values" and "the possibility of transcendence," Nabokov's texts frequently invoke those "metanarratives" that the postmodernist — according to Lyotard and others — regards with "incredulity" (Gelfant 48n.3).[4] More than a matter of authorial assertion, Nabokov's vision of the child's essence and innocence effects, in *Lolita*, an image of extraordinary human resilience. Violated in every way by insatiable Humbert, young Dolly Haze has an inner life that remains remarkably intact. It is the secret "garden," as Humbert later comes to realize, which even he could not penetrate (284).

It is this refuge of the self — this preserve of "the real" — to which "the painted bird" cannot lay claim. Exposed to a world of human cruelty and injustice, Kosinski's Boy cannot find within nature or his own nature what that other quintessential boy, Huckleberry Finn, discovers on the mighty Mississippi, in his bond with Jim, and within the depths of his own heart: a more profound reality than anything the sad, sorry state of human affairs can conjure. In "undermining the real," Kosinski's novel also shatters "the idyll of childhood" — and with it, any belief in the human being's power to transcend the deterministic forces of nature and culture.[5] For Nabokov, on the other hand, this power to transcend is the child's birthright. In *Lolita*, it is the child's autonomous being — not Humbert's fantasized "love object," the nymphet — that points to the existence of "the real."

When asked how he came to write *Lolita*, Nabokov liked to say that his novel was inspired by the image of "an ape in the Paris Zoo," which, having been taught to draw, mournfully

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[1] In *The Painted Birds*, says Kosinksi, "familiar fictive structures" including the "idyll of childhood" are "totally inverted" and "blackened" — or, to put it another way, "the black roots of the fairy tale" are exposed (*Passing By*, p. 211-212).

[2] See my recent chapter on "Lolita", as well as my earlier "Innocence and Experience Replayed".

[3] To Nabokov, only "goodness" has essential reality ; "badness" is "a stranger to our inner world". He adds, "'badness' is in fact the lack of something rather than a noxious presence ; and thus being abstract and bodiless it occupies no real space in our inner world" (*Lectures*, pp. 375-76).

[4] Lyotard defines the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives", the most "grand" of which is truth (xxiv). Citing Lyotard's admittedly "simplified" definition, Blanche Gelfant observes : "While critics may differ in their definitions of *postmodern*, they generally agree that the term implies a fundamental questioning, if not outright dismissal, of the grounds upon which belief in truth has traditionally been established. This dismissal would invalidate claims, however circumstanced, for the absoluteness or universality of human values, for essentialism, and for the possibility of transcendence" (48n.3, Gelfant's italics).

[5] In contrast to Nabokov's faith in the primacy of "goodness", Kosinski believes that the "poison hatred" is as "virulent and as vital as life itself". In *The painted Birds*", the Boy "desires and thirsts to hate others for all that ha[s] happened to him". His "desires for revenge and his capacity for hatred cease being directed at *any single person or group* ; now they become attitudes, deeply ingrained, […] the wellspring of the purpose of his life, the basis of his behavior *in all situations*". According to Kosinski's deterministic vision, all "the children, the painted birds themselves", who survived the war are destined to pay the "blood debt of revenge" with a hatred to which "no death is granted" (*Passing By*, pp. 219-22, Kosinski's italics).

reproduced on paper “the bars of [its own] cage” (*Strong Opinions* 16). If that caged creature says something about the novel’s solipsistic narrator, it says nothing of the child’s enduring power. After three years and against all odds — odds no commonsensical adult would venture to bet against — pregnant Dolly Schiller greets Humbert, the man who robbed her of her childhood, with both “wonder and welcome.” With “cheerful” and “humorous courtesy,” seventeen-year-old Dolly invites her former oppressor into the dismal “clapboard shack” where she now lives with her husband — and is, by her own account, “quite happy” in her new life (271-72, 274).

Just as Humbert is struck by the ease with which Dolly casts off, “like a bit of dry mud caking her childhood,” their “poor “romance,” Nabokov’s readers marvel at the cheerful indifference with which she dismisses her sordid past: the years she endured, like one of Lekh’s doomed birds, the caged circle of Humbert’s will and desire (274).[6] Against all odds — odds made even greater by her sordid experience with Quilty — Dolores Haze proves capable not only of laughter and love but of compassion for the man who abused her. Moved to pity by Humbert’s tears, she even asks *him* for forgiveness: “Stop crying, please,” she pleads. “Oh, don’t cry, I’m so sorry I cheated so much, but that’s the way things are” (281). So touching is Lolita in her simplicity and directness, even Humbert the Terrible is moved. Dolly Schiller is “only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo” of that maddening “nymphet” who bewitched him; yet it is *this* Lolita, changed almost beyond recognition, who serves as the catalyst for the major discovery of Humbert’s narrated life (279). For a moment, at least, the nympholept divines a larger universe of truth and feeling. Revelation, like a butterfly, flies free of the cocoon spun by desire and obsession — and Humbert, peering beyond the bars of his local cage, gains a glimpse of “the real.”

In *Lolita* and throughout Nabokov’s universe, the child’s radiance shines like a beacon: a beacon that serves, among other things, to highlight this writer’s unique position in the development of twentieth-century fiction. Nabokov’s novels are as self-conscious and self-reflexive as any work of postmodernist fabulation; at the same time, however, they manifest a mysterious connection — a connection as impalpable but radiant as a beam of light — to a world that lies beyond the alleged “prisonhouse of language” and the confines of the text. Readers attentive to this beam or beacon will, I believe, discover the extent to which Nabokov’s art both engages and defies appearance. Like the magician whose deft fingers pluck a live bird from his hat, Nabokov summons “the real” in the very act of creating illusion.

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[6] In marked contrast to Dolly Haze, the girls whom Kosinski’s Boy meets in the orphanage after the war are, like him, thoroughly conditioned by their sordid experiences. According to the narrator, “They stripped and asked boys to touch them. They discussed blatantly the sexual demands which scores of men had made on them during the war. There were some who said they could not go to sleep without having had a man. They ran out into the parks at night and picked up drunken soldiers” (pp. 228-29).

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