

The Search for Human Dignity in Kosinski's The Painted Bird

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The Search for Human Dignity in Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*

Brian Quinn

The Painted Bird is a death defying tale which graphically depicts the horrors that befall the protagonist, an unnamed boy, as he wanders alone across the countryside of war-torn Eastern Poland for some six years while using his wits and instincts to survive. It is a story of one child's stark education in the darkest realms of human nature, dealing with those aspects most often hidden from children by protective adults. The unfortunate boy was born of highly educated Russian-Polish parents who were forced to send him away from their Polish city at the outbreak of World War Two for his own "safety" when the boy was a mere six years old. However, fate turns out to be a consistently cruel companion to the boy and after only two months of living with an old peasant woman, the foster-mother suddenly dies leaving the child to wander, like a wild animal, from one village to another for six long years with the boy occasionally finding shelter and, more often than not, frequently being chased away and mistreated by vicious, uneducated peasants.

The boy was olive-skinned, dark-haired and black-eyed and as a result he was always considered either a Gypsy or a Jew stray at a time when harboring such a person in an occupied country such as Poland meant immediate execution for the guilty parties by the German army. The Polish peasants that the child came across were highly inbred, fair-skinned with blond hair and blue or gray eyes. Such peasants were almost universally uneducated and full of superstitions. On the other hand, the boy spoke the language of the educated class, a language which was barely intelligible to the ignorant peasants of the eastern farmlands, which helped to make the boy appear doubly suspicious in the eyes of the backward villagers

As the reader follows the adventures and escapades of this brave young lad it grows increasingly more difficult to actually believe that such an innocent child could really have made it through the entire war. Our doubts are soundly put to rest, however, when we discover that the author's life as a child in Poland almost perfectly parallels that of the wandering waif.

The Painted Bird is Jerzy Kosinski's first novel published in 1965 only eight years after emigrating to the United States from his native Poland with only a rudimentary knowledge of the English language. Before this work, Kosinski had published two highly popular nonfiction works about life in the USSR, based on his experiences there as a graduate student in sociology in the mid 1950's. These works consist of *The Future is Ours, Comrade* (1960), and *No Third Path* (1962), both written under the pen name of Joseph Novak, in order to protect his parents who had remained behind in Poland. In his first novel, *The Painted Bird*, as in all his ensuing fiction, the reader faces the constant question of to what extent the author's own autobiography has become intertwined with the fabric of his fictional tale.

Jerzy Nikodem Kosinski was born in Lodz, Poland in 1933 of a Russian-reared Polish father and a Jewish-Polish mother. His father was a philologist of ancient languages, while his mother was a concert pianist. Kosinski was six when the Second World War broke out, just like the boy in the novel. Kosinski has the same dark hair and spent the same six years wandering throughout the villages of Eastern Poland after becoming separated from his parents. Just as the boy in the novel, Kosinski lost his speech at age 9, was found by his parents, both speechless and half-mad at an orphanage in 1945 at the age of twelve. Slowly he began to readjust himself towards civilization and at the age of fourteen, after suffering a serious ski accident, Kosinski was able to regain his speech while convalescing in the hospital. Therefore, the outline of Kosinski's life almost exactly matches that of the boy in the novel. However, the reader must be very careful not to look at *The Painted Bird* as a mere autobiographical account. Despite the similar

outline, the essence of the work remains fiction as the author himself explained in an interview with George Plimpton : “Well, to say that *The Painted Bird*, for example, is nonfiction, or even autobiographical, may be convenient for classification, but it’s not easily justified. What we remember lacks the hard edge of fact. To help us along we create little fictions, highly subtle and individual scenarios which clarify and shape our experience. The remembered event becomes a fiction, a structure made to accommodate certain feelings. This is obvious to me. if it weren’t for these structures, art would be too personal for the artist to create, much less for the audience to grasp.” (Plimpton : 189). Therefore, Kosinski is clearly stating that even our memory records its own experiences as a type of fiction, omitting some details and embellishing others as it goes along.

Indeed, the basic outline of the story coincides with Kosinski’s life, however, it is interesting to note that the primary image of the novel, that of a “painted bird” originally was described in his second nonfiction work *No Third Path*, where a Russian female student relates her childhood experiences. Therefore, the numerous brutal events that happen to the boy in the course of the story are far more likely a compilation or montage of incidents and experiences either seen first hand or picked up from other people as he wandered across the countryside. When the author himself is asked about the validity of all the scenes he has answered cryptically that every incident is true, however the extent that such episodes actually happened to the author, remains the responsibility of the reader to decide for himself.

The Painted Bird could be classified as picaresque in structure and development, consisting of short, powerful episodes taken from the boy’s life in a rather chronological order over a six-year period. Yet, these episodes are often marked by sudden changes and long passages of time. When reading the episodes, the reader is most impressed by the vivid imagery that the author constantly uses in relating each scene. However, at the same time, the reader is surprised by the almost total absence of any elaborate language usage on the part of the author. Kosinski

forever tries to make his language as invisible as possible while letting the bare power of the words convey the desired effect in each respective scene. Being a Polish/American author, Kosinski cannot help but to be compared with those other great Slavic writers who found their fame after changing over to the English language as their primary means of literary expression, namely Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov. It is interesting to observe that, in great contrast to Kosinski's stripped and plain style of expression, both Conrad and Nabokov were best known for their elegant and elaborate language usage.

The Painted Bird can be regarded as a kind of European "Bildungsroman" or traditional education novel showing the life of a young innocent boy as he slowly learns the cold harsh realities of the world around him and slowly grows into manhood. In its shocking explicitness, the protagonist of Kosinski's novel receives an education by fire that is far different from that which normal boys have received in the classroom of life so popular for this genre. As mentioned earlier, the child has been dealt a bad hand by fate and has to learn to survive or end up "squashed like an insect." In the course of the boy's unorthodox "natural" education, he is gradually able to attain different levels of consciousness throughout the tale. The boy is constantly searching for some moral code or philosophy that will help him to establish some kind of primitive order from the violent chaos that surrounds him. Throughout the story, the boy experiences major flashes of insight into the ways of the world in which he, on several occasions, thinks that he has uncovered the true secret key to living in this harsh world.

When the story opens, the boy feels terribly rejected after having been sent away to the countryside by his parents. While living with old Marta he learns his first important lesson: "He is different." He had never noticed this remarkable fact while in the warmth of his parents' home. But now, in the land of fair-shaded peasants, he quickly learns that he will be drowned like a stray cat if he is ever found by the other villagers. He also begins to believe in the old woman's superstitions in the hope that they might help to save him.

It is also at Marta's hut that the boy first experiences the random and senseless cruelty of the peasants around him, when after befriending a squirrel he observes :

some village boys were chasing my squirrel through the field. Running frantically, it tried to reach the safety of the forest. The boys threw rocks in front of it to cut it off. The tiny creature weakened, its leaps shortened and slowed. The boys finally caught it, but it bravely continued to struggle and to bite. Then the boys, bending over the animal, poured some liquid from a can on it, Feeling that something terrible was about to be done, I tried desperately to think of some way to save my little friend. But it was too late.

(*The Painted Bird*. New York : Bantam, 1969, p. 6)

Thereafter, the boy watches in complete horror as the village boys set his best friend on fire, all the while laughing loudly at the burning creature's suffering.

The irony of this scene is immense for the boy's parent's had sent him to the countryside in order to escape the cruelty of the German invaders. Instead, the boy learns that man's cruelty is everywhere. The implication by the author is that humans always seem to carry a "concentration camp mentality" in their souls.

After Marta's death, the boy returns to the village, hungry and cold after spending the night in the freezing forest. He soon discovers that he is indeed different as the villagers all roar with laughter while taking turns kicking and beating him. Luckily he is sold off to a witch doctor, Olga the Wise, to work as her helper. In the course of the next few months he learns many more valuable lessons which later allow him to survive the severe climate on his own. Thanks to Olga, he slowly acquires a broad knowledge of plants and animals, as well as a good familiarity with poisons and medicinal herbs, which Olga used whenever treating patients for various ills. Yet, most importantly, the boy learned the special secret of owning one's own "comet" as the key to survival in the harsh wilder-

ness. The possession of a comet soon became absolutely necessary to maintain his freedom from the cruel villagers and enables him to live. The comet :

consisted merely of a one-quart preserve can, open at one end and with a lot of small nail holes punched in the sides. A threefoot loop of wire was hooked to the top of the can by way of a handle, so that one could swing it either like a lasso or like a censer in church. Such a small portable stove could serve as a constant source of heat and as a miniature kitchen. One filled it with any kind of fuel available. . . . By swinging the can energetically, one pumped air through the holes, as the blacksmith does with his bellows. . . . The comet was also indispensable protection against dogs and people. Even the most vicious dogs stopped short when they saw a wildly swinging object showering sparks. . . . Not even the boldest man wanted to risk his sight or having his face burned. . . . That is why the extinction of a comet was an extremely serious thing. . . . Matches were very scarce. (p. 27-28)

In the above manner, the boy learned that possession of a comet was the one item essential to survival without any human help. Later, during his many temporary stays at various places of shelter, where he is almost invariably abused, he comes to realize that man's independence and freedom are not only necessary for a stray boy like himself to survive, but can even be the sources of one's greatest happiness. Thanks to the comet he later is able to happily survive the cold winters alone in the forest, safe from the wild animals and warm from the comet's heat. The winters are ironically the easiest times for him to survive because few people venture outside of their homes. It is at such moments that the boy truly feels alive and happy. Yet, the spring always brings the people out and he is forced to return to the villages where he must once again find shelter.

The cruelty around him steadily increases as he lives with a jealous

Miller, who the boy observes pluck the eyes out of a farmboy just for looking lustfully at his wife. Later a violent carpenter is about to drown the boy in a burlap bag like a cat when he musters up all his wit and courage to trick the greedy man into a deserted army pillbox infested with rats that devour the man alive while enabling the boy to once again escape.

The boy does, on rare instants, happen to meet an occasional human being who shows him at least some traces of human kindness. In one early episode, the boy is suddenly living with Lekh the birdman, a man who collects all kinds of birds. Lekh's lover is the mentally feeble Ludmilla, who first teaches the boy some of the secrets of sexual pleasure. It is Lekh, whenever in a jealous rage, who paints birds rainbow colors, only to release them into the sky to watch the colorful birds be attacked and killed by birds of their own species. This becomes the overriding image of the entire novel. A bird of a different color is never tolerated by the flock and must be destroyed. It is from Lekh that the boy realizes that he too is a painted bird—to be attacked by people wherever he goes—because his hair, eyes and skin are a different color from those around him. He simply resigns himself to this fact and blames no one but himself for his continual misfortune. His brief experience in the world has never taught him any concept of fairness—only the hard reality that those who are different are eternally condemned to suffer.

The boy also learns with time that luck and chance have a lot to do with one's survival after being captured twice by the Germans and awaiting certain death. Yet, each time the boy manages to escape unharmed. When he is caught for the second time by the Germans and brought before a local SS Officer, the boy reflects on all his experiences of beatings and torture and undergoes his first enlightenment as to what principles rule the universe. The SS man appears superhuman as the boy closely observes :

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 I had never experienced before, and I admired the glittering death's-head and crossbones that embellished his tall cap. I thought how good it would be to have such a gleaming and hairless skull instead of my Gypsy face which was feared and disliked by decent people. . . . I was genuinely ashamed of my appearance. I had nothing against his killing me. . . . I placed infinite confidence in the decision of the man facing me. I knew that he possessed powers unattainable by ordinary people. (119)

The above passage echoes a phenomenon that is quite often found in holocaust literature, where the suffering prisoners begin to identify with and emulate their torturers. From mere living, the boy has come to realize that he is dirt and that the Germans are the lords of the land and, consequently, their methods must be correct as interpolated from his primitive observation that "might makes right" and that cruelty gives great power to these men.

To the boy's great disappointment, the SS Officer decides to let the boy go, leaving the boy feeling disgusted that he did not merit an elaborate execution. He is saved by a village priest and is sent to live with his meanest of all keepers, the despicable farmer Garbos and his vicious dog Judas. It is at this point in the boy's life, while undergoing constant beatings and unimaginable tortures at the hands of Garbos, that the boy turns to religion and the power of prayer for salvation. The priest who helped save the boy takes him to church twice a week and teaches him several prayers which promise eventual salvation from God. The boy thinks that he must have hit upon the secret to happiness and is thrilled to have finally discovered the key to finally seeking some measure of justice and hope in the world of violence that surrounds him. The boy starts to devote every waking minute to prayer in the hope that God will hear him and save him from his suffering :

. . . I understood that those who say more prayers earn more days of

indulgence, and that this was also supposed to have immediate influence on their lives ; in fact, the greater the number of prayers offered, the better one would live, and the smaller the number, the more troubles and pain one would have to endure. (131-132)

At this point the boy blames himself for having been too blind to have previously noticed that there was such order in the universe :

Suddenly the ruling pattern of the world was revealed to me with beautiful clarity. I understood why some people were strong and others weak, some free and others enslaved, some rich and others poor, some well and others sick. . . . I stopped blaming others ; the fault was mine alone, I thought. I had been too stupid to find the governing principle of the world of people, animals and events. But now there was order in the human world and justice too. One only had to recite prayers, concentrating on the ones carrying the greatest number of days of indulgence. (132)

The boy is now filled with confidence and begins to use prayers as a kind of weapon against his evil master Garbos. However, after months of solemn prayer Garbos beatings and torture only steadily become worse and then even the village priest falls deathly ill which leaves the boy wondering if God really did take care of those who prayed :

I was astonished. The priest must have accumulated an extraordinary number of days of indulgence during his pious life, yet here he was lying sick like anybody else. (135)

Finally, on the feast of Corpus Christi the boy was assigned to altarboy duties and after dropping the holy missal on such a major religious celebration, the entire congregation commenced to beat him and then threw him into a festering outhouse human manure pit. Even though the boy managed to escape to a nearby forest, the trauma had been too much.

Besides his numerous injuries, the boy discovers that he had completely lost his voice. Now, suddenly, a new realization came to the boy :

God had no reason to inflict such terrible punishment on me. I had probably incurred the wrath of some other forces, which spread their tentacles over those God had abandoned for some reason or other. (147)

After losing his faith in God as his redeemer, the boy goes to live with a new master, the farmer Makar, and his daughter Ewka. During this relatively peaceful interlude the boy begins to think that love might be the main power of the universe as he spends his nights learning how to touch and kiss Ewka's body until her passion flows. He falls in love with her but when he one day happens to see her having sex with her own brother and a farm goat while being watched by the father, Makar, he thus feels crushed. This event, coupled with his loss of voice, push him to the brink of despair and begins to turn his own soul towards evil :

Something suddenly collapsed inside me. . . . All these events became suddenly clear and obvious. . . . They explained the expression I had often heard people use about people who were very successful in life : "He is in league with the Devil." (157)

The boy has lost faith in the humanity around him and decides that it is high time for him to finally take his proper place in the world and follow the path of evil :

Only those with a sufficient powerful passion for hatred, greed, revenge, or torture to obtain some objective seemed to make a good bargain with the Powers of Evil. . . . I felt stronger and more confident. The time of passivity was over; the belief in good, the power of prayer, altars, priests, and God had deprived me of my speech. My love for Ewka, my desire to do anything I could for her, also met

with its proper reward. Now I would join those who were helped by the Evil Ones. (158-159)

At this point in the narrative, the boy comes to the totally negative realization that all men must be inherently bad and that God is not really paying any attention to people's suffering. He comes to the conclusion that wherever he goes it is continually the evil people that have all the power and success, and the Germans have the most power and success of anyone. Soon after, the boy even starts to dream of becoming a German :

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. (153)

Gradually, the boy understands that it is always evil that rules the world and he must either join the forces of evil or perish:

I felt annoyed with myself for not having understood sooner the real rules of this world. The Evil Ones surely picked only those who had already displayed a sufficient supply of inner hatred and maliciousness. . . . I myself hated many people. How many times had I dreamed of the time when I would be strong enough to return, set their settlements on fire, poison their children and cattle, lure them into deadly swamps. In a sense I had already been recruited by the Powers of Evil. . . . I felt stronger and more confident. The time of passivity was over; the belief in good, the power of prayer, altars, priests, and Gods had deprived me of my speech. . . . Now I would join those who were helped by the Evil Ones. I had not yet made any real contribution to their work, but in time I could become as prominent as any of the leading Germans. (159-160)

Now convinced of the world's darkness, the boy once again escapes. Soon after he is almost drowned "for fun" by some peasant boys who push

him through the ice. Yet, the half frozen boy finds that there is still a glimmer of kindness left in the world as he is saved by the widow Labina. His peaceful interval with her, however, soon ends with her own heart attack. It seems to the boy that kind people never last very long in this world.

The boy later witnesses the most horrendous display of evil in his life when a band of Kalmuks, who are Soviet Army deserters, rampage into the boy's village in order to loot, rape and pillage in their time-honored tradition. In what is, without a doubt, the most sickening passages of the novel, the bandits wantonly murder the men while raping and torturing the women and children. The boy is able to observe all this while lying hidden in some bushes, and even his ribs are broken by one of the bandits, but the boy does manage to escape. The Kalmuks are amazingly dark and look much like him and thus the boy further understands why all the people must hate him so much since he looks like one of them.

The boy is soon happy to observe the Soviet Red Army arrive on the scene, round up the Kalmuks and immediately exact a measure of revenge by executing all of them by hanging the criminals upside down from trees until they suffocate from the blood swelling into their heads.

The next stage in the boy's inner development is perhaps his most important one. After having lived through so much senseless suffering and having suffered an excruciating injury at the hands of the Kalmuks, the boy has personally reached his mental and physical nadir. For the first time in the story he desires to die and he feels the pervading spirit of death in the air calling out to him :

I was not afraid of it ; I hoped it would take me along to the other side of the forest. . . . I reached out my hand, but the ghost vanished among the trees with their burden of rustling leaves and heavy crop of hanging corpses. (193)

But the boy is not yet meant to die. Still suffering from the unbearable pain in his chest, the boy decides to approach the Red Army soldiers who

take good care of the boy after treating him at a field hospital for several weeks.

The war is now almost over, but after having learned how to survive in the chaos of war for almost six year, the boy, unexpectedly, feels somewhat disappointed for now he must start to learn all over again how to survive in drastically changed conditions. However, at this confusing point in his life he is luckily adopted by a Red Army regiment after which he is cared for by primarily two of the soldiers : Gavrila, who was a political officer of the regiment and Mitka, a sharpshooting instructor who is also a highly decorated sniper. Both of the soldiers are good and kind people who are also, perhaps, the first people to actually treat the boy with decency and love since he was separated from his parents at the outbreak of the war. The boy soon idolizes them both as his heroes and drinks in everything they teach him while trying to emulate them as much as possible. He responds to their love and compassion for him with unbridled loyalty and respect. However, here the novel takes a strange twist in that it becomes progressively clear to the reader that the boy can never be just like both his heroes because they are complete opposites. Gradually, the two men become engaged in a kind of competition to win over the boy's soul, and it finally becomes evident to the boy as well, if only on a somewhat subconscious level, that he must chose between them and their diametrically opposed views of the world.

The political officer teaches the boy to read and write while continually espousing the Soviet philosophy of life. First, the boy learns that his belief in religion had been a false one :

From him I learned that the order of the world had nothing to do with God, and that God had nothing to do with the world. The reason for this was quite simple. God did not exist. The cunning priests had invented Him so they could trick stupid, superstitious people. (197)

It was also from Gavrila's teaching that the boy learned the true meaning of Soviet collectivist society :

In the Soviet world a man was rated according to others opinion of him, not according to his own. Only the group, which they called “the collective”, was qualified to determine a man’s worth and importance. The group decided what could make him more useful and what could reduce his usefulness to others. He himself became the composite of everything others said about him. (202)

Even though this life of grueling party meetings seemed complicated, the boy did his best to mold himself into such a person. However, even though the boy’s heart was full of love and admiration for Gavrila, he could not avoid wondering if such a way of life was really the best suited for himself :

I was worried. What would happen to me when I grew up ? How would I look when seen through the many eyes of the Party ? What was my deepest core : a healthy core like that of a fresh apple or a rotten one like the maggoty stone of a withered plum. (202)

Thus, the boy had learned that it was no easy task to be a Soviet man. He even imagined it might even be as hard as the one he had experienced wandering from village to village and being taken for a Gypsy. Yet, in spite of his doubts, he did his best to absorb all that Gavrila advocated :

I tried to memorize Gavrila’s teaching, not to lose a single word. He maintained that to be happy and useful one should join the march of the working people, keeping in step with the others in the place assigned in the column. Pushing too close to the head of the column was as bad as lagging behind. It could mean a loss of contact with the masses, and would lead to decadence and degeneracy. Every stumble could slow down the whole column, and those who fell risked being trampled by the others. (205)

Mitka the sniper became the boy’s other important teacher. Mitka

was nicknamed “the Cuckoo”, which reminds the reader of the book’s main theme of a “painted bird.” Mitka, too, was a bird of a different color, who followed his own quiet path in life. Mitka had become a great hero by spending years going behind the German lines, always alone, and quietly waiting in trees to shoot numerous enemy officers while always in constant danger of his own safety. The boy could not help but admire Mitka’s former solitary existence, which seemed almost like the life the boy had spent himself ‘behind the enemy lines.’ Mitka no longer went out on dangerous missions since being crippled by a German bullet but the boy observes :

At night I sometimes saw his wide-open, bright, piercing eyes staring at the triangular roof of the tent. he was probably reliving those days and nights. . . . Special German squads with trained dogs had searched for his hiding places, and the manhunts had covered wide circles. How many times he must have thought he would never return! Yet I knew that these must have been the happiest days of Mitka’s life. (210-211)

This last passage reminds us, once again, of the boy living alone in the terrible forest through long winter nights with only his comet to survive. The boy, too, somehow yearns for that feeling of freedom and control over his own life and destiny. Therefore, in the end, it is Mitka that makes the deepest and most lasting impression on the boy by showing him the importance of the individual over the collective. The boy overhears Mitka’s friend say :

Human being—that’s a proud title. Man carries in himself his own private war, which he has to wage, win or lose, himself—his own justice, which is his alone to administer. (217)

This philosophy is in stark contrast to that of Gavril, but the reader is in no doubt as to which man will eventually win over the boy’s allegiance.

Later, in one of the pivotal events of the novel, some of Mitka's best friends are beaten to death by drunken Polish peasants but the commander of the regiment is powerless to do anything about it. Early one morning, a few days later, Mitka awakens the boy and they sneak out to a tree near the peasant village. There Mitka gains his revenge by killing several men from the village from his observation post. From this experience the boy learns that :

a man, no matter how popular and admired, lives mainly with himself. If he is not at peace with himself, if he is harassed by something he did not do but should have done to preserve his own image of himself, he is like the 'unhappy Demon' (218)

It is here that the boy learns of the overwhelming power of revenge to soothe an injured man's aching soul. As a result of Mitka's teaching, the boy realizes that there must be another path to happiness in life for him besides that of the collective :

I also understood something else. There were many paths and many ascents leading to the summit. But one could reach the summit alone, with the help at most of a single friend, the way Mitka and I had climbed the tree. This was a different summit, apart from the march of the working masses. (218)

After experiencing Mitka's revenge, the boy begins to formulate his own moral code which helps him to survive after having to leave the Red Army regiment and live in an orphanage. The boy's code included the basic precepts of Mitka's teachings along with the boy's hardened first hand experience at the hands of numerous cruel individuals. His first rule was :

a man should never let himself be mistreated, for he would then lose his self-respect and his life would become meaningless. What would

preserve his self-respect and determine his worth was his ability to take revenge on those who wronged him. (227)

Unfortunately, lacking Mitka's wisdom and understanding, the reader soon sees how the boy's fixation with revenge later leads to various problems with trying to reenter normal civilized life. However, the boy remains absolutely convinced that it is revenge that ultimately helps a man to survive :

A person should take revenge for every wrong or humiliation. There were far too many injustices in the world to have them all weighed and judged. 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, Mitka said. . . . A man should take revenge according to his own nature and the means at his disposal. . . . The revenge should be proportionate to all the pain, bitterness, and humiliation felt as a result of an opponent's action. (227)

Such a philosophy of revenge often led the boy to worry at the orphanage, not so much of being attacked by other boys, but of possibly seriously injuring someone in self-defense. The fact that the boy has so wholeheartedly embraced revenge is not surprising to the reader who has seen the theme of ugly, violent revenge developed constantly throughout the work. The boy has merely come to a natural conclusion from watching the world around him and has concluded that revenge is man's most effective device to insure his survival and sense of dignity in such a brutal world. Included in the boy's philosophy of revenge is the belief that every man is ultimately alone in the end, and we really have no one to rely on but ourselves.

One of the last major "enlightenments" that the boy learns on his own during his days at the orphanage is when he learns that the essence of life is in the complete awareness of being alive. He had gloriously experi-

enced such a feeling many times before whenever he was able to escape an angry mob of peasants, but at the orphanage with his new friend “the Silent One” he had to artificially create the feeling by recklessly lying down on the middle of railroad cross ties as a train passed by at full speed :

After the train had passed I would rise on trembling hands and weak legs and look around with greater satisfaction than I had ever experienced in exacting the most vicious revenge from one of my enemies. (231-232)

It is this heart throbbing intensity of life that he loves and now feels is lost to him at the orphanage. Thus, this feeling of freedom and life become one concept for the boy. It is when he is most alone and directly engaged in merely trying to survive, no matter what the danger, that the boy is most happy and feels the most truly alive.

When the boy’s parents miraculously find him at the orphanage, instead of feeling great joy he feels completely smothered by his loss of freedom and the heavy unexpected burden of familial love. He soon spends his days sleeping and his nights prowling the streets like a wild animal. He thinks his parents are kind enough but he sees no place for him in their world. He frequently yearns to be alone again, wandering from village to village. The boy also soon discovers that his basic maxims of life dealing with revenge and freedom no longer fit so easily into his new world. This is graphically demonstrated by his inability to clearly distinguish between right and wrong such as when he attempts to kill an old movie attendant who wronged him and later when he thoughtlessly breaks his little brother’s arm for bothering him while reading a newspaper. For some strange reason, however, the boy never runs away from his parents, just carefully maintains his distance from them while they wait patiently for him to adjust. The boy has grown extremely cynical of people and the world in general. After a year in the city, his parents take him to the mountains for his health and he spends his days

learning to ski from an old ski instructor. The boy immediately ridicules the man as being foolish for being such a devout believer in God :

Here was a grown man, educated in the city, who acted like a simple peasant and could not accept the idea that he was alone in the world and could expect no assistance from anyone. (249)

At this stage, even though the boy had recovered physically, he was still mute and deeply scarred psychologically, convinced of man's hopeless solitude in a world where no one really listens to each other :

Every one of us stood alone, and the sooner a man realized that all Gavrilas, Mitkas and Silent Ones were expendable, the better for him. It mattered little if one was mute ; people did not understand one another anyway. They collided with or charmed one another, hugged or trampled one another, but everyone knew only himself.

Even though the boy still rejected humanity, he grew to like the instructor for his skill and calm patience. By the end of the novel the boy has grown to be almost fifteen years old and after a serious skiing accident, he finds himself all alone in a hospital room but by now the pain of all those years has finally begun to recede. By himself in the room, the boy hears the phone ringing and goes to pick up the receiver. He suddenly realizes that he does perhaps need humanity after all. There was someone at the other end of the phone who wanted to speak to him. The boy is suddenly overcome with a desire to speak with the world once again and then for the first time in over five long years his lost voice comes back to him—never to leave again. At long last the “painted bird” is finally ready to return to the flock and start learning how to live again.

Conclusion

Throughout the numerous trials and tribulations endured over many years, the central character of the novel is unceasingly trying to search

for some reason and meaning behind his suffering. In addition, except for the very first pages when the six-year-old child expectantly waits for his parents to save him, the boy realizes that he has no one but himself to rely on and no matter how much suffering and humiliation he is repeatedly subjected to, he constantly strives to maintain some sense of self-worth and human dignity throughout it all. As he learns the cold hard realities of war, prejudice and wanton ignorance, he is always searching for some way to organize the events around him into some kind of logical system. Yet, most of the beliefs the boy internalizes are shattered one by one, such as faith in man's kindness, superstitions and religion. In total despair he casts his fate to the power of evil until he is saved by the Soviet soldiers. It is from Mitka that the boy learns his most important lesson, the ultimate importance of the individual over the group, whether it be the collective or a group of peasants. Therefore, even if the group rejects someone, it is the individual alone who must, in the end, be the one who decides his own true worth as a human being. It is this belief that is most crucial in both the boy's survival and in his eventual return to the world that had previously abandoned him. Finally, at the orphanage, he comes to understand the essential importance of just being alive and enjoying the thrill of feeling your heart beat in the aftermath of a harrowing experience.

After being saved by his parents the boy leads, perhaps, the most troubled portion of his entire existence since being abandoned at the age of six. He no longer knows how to live in the civilized world and has a terrible time adjusting. He still is unable to speak which keeps him even further away from other people. He is confused by the meaning of revenge and unable to draw the line between right and wrong in normal society. It is mostly due to his parents understanding patience that the boy is able to eventually recover.

The boy undergoes constant transformations in the course of the novel and even though he has been terribly hardened by his experiences, he, at last, rejects the idea that evil is the overpowering force of the world. He knows that he had no one but himself to depend on for many years, but

after having befriended Mitka, the Silent One and been found again by his parents, he slowly comes to understand the importance of having people there to help a person in life. By the end of the novel the boy has started to overcome his cold cynicism and desires to communicate again with the world. Having already both proven to himself the importance of his life and having comprehended how courageously he had fought to both survive and maintain his self-respect, he is now clearly aware of his own dignity as a human being. The war the boy had spent years fighting had not been the one the Germans were waging, thanks to Mitka, he now understood that the war had indeed been his own private war, one that he had fought gallantly and won. The time had finally arrived to return from the battlefield—and start to live again.

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