

Animal Imagery in Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* and Spiegelman's *Maus*

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It is no coincidence that in rendition of the serious theme of the Holocaust, many American writers use rich animal imagery with both metaphorical and allegorical meaning. They find parallels between animals and humans to express animalistic features in human behavior from the terror of World War II. After all, as Susan Fromberg Schaeffer in her Holocaust novel *Anya* (1974) suggests, we are just 'human animals'. The use of animal imagery enables writers to explore the relationship between perpetrators, bystanders, and victims during the Nazi genocide and clearly exemplifies the predatory nature of Nazism.

In American Holocaust fiction we can name especially two works in particular that use animal imagery very distinctly. These are the novel *The Painted Bird* (1965) by Jerzy Kosinski and the two-volume comic book (or graphic novel?) *Maus* (1986, 1991) by Art Spiegelman. The titles themselves call the reader's attention to animals that play very important roles in the novels' structures. Not only do they help to organize and unify the entire work but they also underscore the traumatic ordeal of the main characters and clarify the hierarchy of the war-stricken society.

In Kosinski's novel, the central image of the painted bird appropriately expresses the tension between individualism and collectivism, between both the need to belong and the need to stay independent. According to the author, he took inspiration from Aristophanes' satirical play *The Birds* and also from the natural world. There is a rule that if a caged bird is painted in striking colors and released to freedom, it looks for a flock of the same species to rejoin. But it is not accepted by the flock and is eventually killed by its own species, which considers it as a strange intruder. This natural peculiarity enabled Kosinski to find a very exact metaphor for the narrator of his novel, a nameless uprooted Boy, who also turns out to be a hopeless outsider, rejected by the community. It soon becomes obvious that the protagonist of unclear origin shares the lot of the painted bird. He is trying to incorporate himself into society, but in vain due to his different appearance. There is no room for the dark-skinned boy speaking in urban dialect in the community of coarse, uneducated villagers who seem as if they are taken from Breughel's paintings. Hence he is brutalized for being different in every village he comes to. For these primitive people, living in a world where life has no value and cruelty seems unlimited, he becomes an outlaw on the margins of society. According to Robert Coles, 'the author obviously sees him [the Boy] as a representative of all refugees, all outcasts, all suffering and debased people' (Coles 1998: 54). In this context the recurring image of the painted bird expresses the otherness of a stranger who does not belong.

The emblematic metaphor carries more meanings. Apart from the idea of mirroring, in other words of the idea of obedience or following others, it also includes the aspect of violence. The painted bird becomes the victim of a fierce attack from birds of its own kind, which peck it to death. Kosinski introduces this image for the first time in chapter five, in

which the hero stays with the birdcatcher Lekh, a strange man who, in a fit of depression or rage, paints a bird and sends it to certain death.

A bird is also an archetypal symbol of freedom. If the protagonist, unlike the painted bird, survives in the end, it is because of his growing independence. For the Boy, freedom becomes more precious than gregariousness. He realizes that woods offer him a better chance of survival than the cruel society obsessed with violence. Consequently he is permanently on the run. Yet his freedom is limited by basic existential needs: if he is to survive hunger and cold, he has to search for the company of man, even if this puts his life at risk. Although he does his best to achieve his self-reliance, he cannot be completely independent of other people.

Kosinski's title metaphor undergoes progress during the work. If this recurring image suggests the Boy's willingness to merge into his own species at the beginning of the novel and thus to satisfy his herd instinct, at the novel's end it expresses his high esteem for freedom and self-reliance. He is frightened by family life and the prospect of staying with his parents after the war makes him feel 'like Lekh's painted bird, which some unknown force was pulling toward his kind' (Kosinski 1978 [1965]: 241).

The connection between the title image and the narrator is the most discernable, but the metaphor of the painted bird can also be applied to some other characters, particularly to Lekh and his mistress Stupid Ludmila. Both of them live in isolation outside the village community for which they are, by their extravagance, freaks, if not aliens. They live in their own exile, and in their loneliness and their unconventional lifestyle they resemble the Boy. Lekh's history is similar to the narrator's experience: 'One day he [Lekh] escaped from his father's hut and began to wander from village to village, from forest to forest, like a wild and abandoned bird. In time he began to catch birds' (Kosinski 42). It is significant that Kosinski explicitly associates Lekh with bird, in his simile and in the description of the birdcatcher's life. Stupid Ludmila has common experience with the Boy too; both of them were often abused. We can see that Kosinski's metaphor of the painted bird is very rich in its implications and, among other things, it expresses state of loneliness, frustration, estrangement, and vulnerability.

With the central metaphor of the painted bird Kosinski managed to create a universal story about our intolerance of anything different. It expresses experience very close to that of ethnic writers and warns us against the victimization of minorities. In the pervading atmosphere of intolerance the painted bird must be destroyed or suppressed because it is seen as a stranger. The analogy with the victims of the Holocaust is clear: they were also perceived as "others". And otherness is an unpardonable crime in any totalitarian system; it is the Boy's "birthmark", his "scarlet letter" for which he must be isolated from society or, in deranged times, condemned to death. Kosinski's novel teaches the reader to respect diversity and to take into consideration even one single voice. Only then we can understand the motto of the novel taken from Mayakovsky's poem: 'and only God, | omnipotent indeed, | knew they were mammals | of a different breed' (in Kosinski unpaginated).

The central metaphor is only one aspect of the animal imagery which is employed throughout the novel and significantly contributes to its peculiarity. In Kosinski's novel we can find many examples of juxtaposition of animal images and episodes with human characters. Accordingly Kosinski's novel is populated by birds, butterflies, squirrels, and other species from fauna.

As soon as chapter one there is an episode in which a hawk attacks a pigeon. This inconspicuous motif parallels the situation in wartime Europe where aggression against small, defenseless states becomes the rule and where predators gain decisive power at the expense of their victims. The burning of the speaker's favorite squirrel by malicious boys in the same chapter can be understood as a prologue to the protagonist's suffering, and it anticipates

general atmosphere of the hatred and violence. It also parallels the similar death of millions of victims in death camp crematoria.

The reader will hardly forget the lurid scene with the cannibalistic rats in chapter six; it becomes a parable of the whole war period and the self-destruction of mankind, which devoured itself with the same vehemence as the hungry rats devoured their own kin.

The protagonist often identifies himself with the animals since his mere existence is reduced to their level. He is especially attached to small, helpless animals with which he shares his vulnerability. Thus Kosinski lets his narrator use many comparisons taken from the animal world. When he is whipped by a coarse peasant, he feels like a squirrel, and in the moments of danger he dreams about being this tiny animal so that he may easily find shelter for his body. Many similes indicate that the narrator has a positive attitude to animals. During the fire of his foster-mother Marta's hut the flames 'lick her dangling hands as might an affectionate dog' (Kosinski 10). The Boy's approach to animals is understandable: in his exposure to dangers and in his muteness he is like them. Actually he *is* one of them: in his imagination he becomes an animal. There is a touching scene in chapter two in which the Boy is buried up to his neck in the pit as a part of a special curing ceremony prescribed by his healer Olga to beat his plague. A flock of ravens settles on his head protruding from the earth: the narrator merges with them and in his fantasy he too changes into a bird.

In some passages, however, animal images evoke peasants' animalistic behavior, particularly in the scenes connected with their perverse sexuality that includes incest and even sodomy. They contribute to the Boy's premature loss of his romantic ideal of love.

Employing the animal imagery, Kosinski even inserts fables and parables, with their allegoric messages, into his narrative text, and thus his novel represents a peculiar mixture of genres. The most illustrative example of this type of genre is the story in chapter 19, dealing with a hare that, after escaping from a cage to freedom, voluntarily returns to confinement. In this allusion to the new postwar political systems in Eastern Europe, Kosinski points to a society that becomes easily frightened by freedom and willingly exchanges it for another kind of totality.

Since animal imagery plays such an important role in Kosinski's novel, it is not surprising that it is also sometimes referred to as 'a modern bestiary' (Skau et al. 1982: 45-54). It is true that the natural world as portrayed in the book receives an allegorical meaning. But if in bestiaries human attributes are ascribed to animals, Kosinski's text seems to use an inverse method: animal qualities and conduct are attributed to humans. In fact, the peasants surpass the beasts in their cruel behavior. The Boy himself is treated like an animal and if he wants to survive he has to adopt many behavioral patterns from nature.

The narrator's identification with the helpless animals is underscored by his temporary muteness that affects him after one extraordinarily violent incident. The motif of aphasia precisely suggests the wartime, during which millions of innocent victims were silenced just for their racial origin. It relates to unuttered testimonies of suffering and terror in the Jewish ghettos or in death camps. In silence we can hear the shriek of vanished lives, of people who were denied the right of existence, or of those whose voice was suppressed. In muteness we can also hear a lack of freedom. The imprisonment of the masses of people in the name of the perverted Nazi ideology is metaphorically expressed by the motif of the protagonist's voice that becomes imprisoned in his throat. Kosinski's variation on the theme of loss of voice (as in the work of other writers) indicates that the whole Holocaust experience is unutterable.

David Patterson in his book *The Shriek of Silence: A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel* sees word in Kosinski's novel as being in exile, and suggests that 'the word in exile is the word torn from its meaning, like a tongue torn from mouth; the collision with silence is a collision with meaninglessness' (Patterson 1992: 37). The form of the novel corresponds to the speaker's loss of voice. Literary critics analyzing *The Painted Bird* have noticed that it

lacks dialogue, and that throughout the novel Kosinski uses direct speech only several times. For the renowned specialist in Holocaust literature Lawrence Langer, *The Painted Bird* is 'literally a speechless novel' (qtd. in Patterson 37).

Yet silence in which the Boy lives can be also interpreted as a sign of his resistance. Kosinski's hero rejects the chance to become a part of an evil system producing violence. His silence becomes a shield, a way of protection against aggressors. As Sara R. Horowitz suggests, 'in a sense, muteness becomes his vocation' (Horowitz 1997: 74). This idea is accentuated in chapter 18, in which Kosinski introduces the character of the boy called the Silent One whose muteness is voluntary. Like Ken Kesey's Indian Chief Bromden in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* the Silent One feigns muteness to avoid all potential trouble. For him speechlessness becomes a choice, a defense mechanism against persecution.

When Art Spiegelman decided to delineate the Holocaust experience of his parents Vladek and Anja in the form of cartoon book, many people were shocked. And as if this was not enough, Spiegelman prepared another shock for the reader: all nations acting in his book are conceived as animals. The Jews are depicted as mice, Germans as cats, pigs represent gentile Poles, dogs stand for Americans, frogs for the French, reindeer for the Swedes, bees for the Gypsies... His *Maus* is like a modern secularized bestiary.

The representation of nations as animals is by no means artificial. Jews facing Nazi's genocide were as helpless as a mouse caught by a cat. And like mice, they became toys in the Nazis' hands.

Spiegelman's idea of the presentation of mice in the role of the Jews seems to come from the initial mottoes that introduce both parts of *Maus*. The first part is introduced by a quotation from Hitler in which he deprives the Jews of human qualities and reduces them to mere vermin: 'The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human' (Spiegelman I 1986: 4). Spiegelman took the meaning of Hitler's quotation literally and by its graphic realization he caricatured it to reveal its absurdity.

Mice can be also perceived as Spiegelman's ironic response to the introductory quotation in the second part of *Maus* that was reprinted from a German newspaper article published in Pomerania in the mid-1930s:

Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed [...] Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honorable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal. [...] Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross! (Spiegelman II 1991: 3)

Moreover, in addition to being seen as Spiegelman's reaction to primitive Nazi propaganda equating mice with Jews, *Maus* may also be understood as the cartoonist's unconventional, alternative *comics* response to Disney's comic character of Mickey Mouse and all cartoons embraced by popular culture. In so doing, Spiegelman expanded the possibilities of comics as a genre and contributed to its artistic emancipation as a respectable literary form.

Let us point out another function of the use of animal figures in *Maus*. In Spiegelman's artistic rendition, animals seem to serve as a simple, yet very impressive means for the delineation of racism, based on biased, trivial generalizations and stereotyped constructions. Racist ideology is intolerant to otherness, a feature that is visible among animal species at first sight. On the other hand, Spiegelman's mice and other animals are not individualized; their faces lack distinct features because they are portrayed uniformly. They look as if all of them were cloned. Accordingly Spiegelman reflected the essence of the Nazi racist theory that reduced the whole nation to one anonymous mass (deprived of individual

features) destined for annihilation. In the name of the master race the rich diversity of a nation was reduced to an inferior oneness without the right to exist.

We should bear in mind that Spiegelman's cartoon characters are simultaneously the projections of man's stereotyped images of animals. Mice are vulnerable victims, cats embody aggressive perpetrators (how many animated cartoons are based on these antagonistic characters, e.g. 'Tom & Jerry'!) and pigs may evoke dirt, laziness, a liking for comfort, and indifference. Here Spiegelman appears to be in a certain amount of trouble; if we apply our stereotyped projections of animals, we can understand why the Polish public in particular felt insulted. Of course, the sensitive reader knows that Spiegelman did not intend to imply that all the Poles behaved like pigs, though he could not ignore a strong anti-Semitism in Poland and the indifference of many Poles to Jewish suffering. After all, in his book there are several episodes in which pigs try to help mice. Even Spiegelman realizes the pitfall of his use of the animal imagery. At the beginning of the second volume of *Maus* the autobiographical character Artie worries about the way his French wife Françoise should be depicted. The French are conceived as frogs, another stereotyped image since, in the English-speaking world, 'frog' is used as a slang expression for the French. Despite Françoise's conversion to Judaism Artie is at first reluctant to portray her as a mouse, since even France was marked by a certain degree of anti-Semitism. Eventually he decides to turn her from a frog into a mouse by the magic words of a mouse rabbi. In one episode the artist is even afraid of spoiling his animal figure, when during Artie's visit to his Czech psychoanalyst Pavel—who looks after stray dogs and cats—these animals are meant in their literal, not figurative meaning. Thus Artie asks: 'Can I mention this, or does it completely louse up my metaphor?' (Spiegelman II 43).

No, the narrator's (Spiegelman's) worries are pointless because his animals behave like human beings with all their virtues and vices so convincingly that readers soon forget they are looking at the pictures of mice, cats, pigs and other animals. Paradoxically they view them as human types, even in moments of the total dehumanization of mankind. We can only ask, together with Sheng-mei Ma: '[D]o human beings wear animal masks or do animals wear human masks?' (Ma 1997: 120).

As a matter of fact, in the *Maus* books there are several parts in which Spiegelman works with animal masks explicitly. In the case of the worst danger, when the Nazi noose around Jews is tightening, mice put masks of other animals over their faces just to survive. In the sixth chapter of the first volume, called 'Mouse Trap', Vladek and other Jews wear the mask of pigs, which is the only possible way to secure some substantial food for their families. Masks, symbolizing a change of ethnic identity, are necessitated by existential need and are justified by historical reality—when many Jews disguised their Jewishness and posed as Christians. The use of masks becomes a means of defense against persecution. However it can also convey the crisis of Jewish identity as in the case of the narrator. Sheng-mei Ma in *Studies in American Jewish Literature* claims that 'in "Time Flies", Spiegelman the cartoonist wears the mask of a mouse, as if Jewishness is a portable item which can be taken off rather easily. Irrefutably, Spiegelman's Jewish identity, particularly as a child of the Holocaust, is central to *Maus*' (Ma 118).

Obviously masks serve the author to express problems of identity and they also make us think about the sincerity or falseness of individual deeds. Is, for example, a German journalist with the mask of a cat on his face and interviewing Artie honest in his interest in the cartoonist's *Maus*, or is it just professional routine or even false pretense? And what does the figure with the mask of a mouse coming from Israel have in common with the figures of mice in Auschwitz? As we can see, it is not easy to penetrate the multiple layers of Spiegelman's masks.

If we compare both the works under discussion, we can see that Kosinski and Spiegelman work with animal images in different ways. Whereas Kosinski's use of them is more metaphorical, Spiegelman's images of animals serve as an allegory. While Spiegelman blurs the differences between his animal and human characters to the maximum and his mice, cats or pigs are perceived as real concrete persons, Kosinski rather prefers using animal motifs in their metaphoric and symbolic meanings to illustrate (in)human society. Nevertheless it is rather problematic to set the exact boundaries between the metaphoric and allegorical approaches of both authors. Spiegelman's *Maus* employs the methods of a fable featuring animals that behave and speak like human beings. To a certain extent, we can say that Spiegelman's animals behave like humans, whereas Kosinski's humans behave like animals. However, both authors attribute to people animal characteristics underlying the animal instincts hidden in every person, in each of us. Drawing parallels between human society and the animal kingdom, they point at our follies which, in deranged times, can lead to unimaginable brutality. And this was exactly the case with the Holocaust, the "animal" chapter of world history to which both works related.

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