

*Being there, being There:
Postmodernism and Post-Colonialism:
Kosinsky and Malouf*

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THE ACCIDENTAL, THE apparently contingent, the less (or more) than logical, the fact refusing to be contained, the fortuitous occurrence, the “random” event, the unplaceable object (in time or in space): all these seem to be features which the post-colonial text continually engages with and seeks to bring out from behind the silencing effect of imperialist discourse.

It is this concern with the extra-real, the “magical” and the illogical to which J. S. Alexis called attention in his brilliant and innovative address to the first Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in September 1956. In this address Alexis argued, amongst other things, that order, beauty, logic, controlled sensitivity have all been received, but will be surpassed in Haitian art which presents the “real” along with its accompaniment of “the strange and fantastic, of dreams and half-light, of the mysterious and the marvellous” (267).

In making this assertion that the post-colonial text would seek to push down the false barriers to the full experience imposed on post-European expression by the hidden universalist assumptions of “objective” realism Alexis was also careful to insist on the political dimension of the new claims of his “marvellous realism” and to distinguish it from what he called the “cold-blooded surrealist researches” and “analytical games” of Europe. Along with his mentor Césaire he wanted to insist that the art which he sought to encourage would “lead always to man, to the fight for hope and not to free art and the ivory tower” (268).

Postmodern texts, too, concern themselves with the accidental, the apparently contingent, the less (or more) than logical, the fact refusing to be contained, the fortuitous occurrence, the “random” event, the unplaceable object (in time or in space); that is to say, the postmodern text and its concerns overlap considerably with those of the post-colonial in these respects. Yet, as Alexis’s address seems to suggest, and as Césaire before him had asserted, the post-colonial critic and author have sought to resist the tendency of the postmodern to incorporate their project and subsume it into a concern which lays claim to being wider, more pervasive and less “provincial” (it is the term often used) in its provenance and aims (cf. Brydon). Above all they have expressed concern at the degree to which postmodernism has seemed to them to be at odds with the social and political aims of their projects, and the degree to which seemingly it has wedded itself to apolitical goals, stressing the individual existential impasse and answering it not even with the *angst* of modernism but with the black humour and *jouissance* of contemporary post-structuralist theories of “powerful” play.

It is in the light of these aims and distinctions that I want to speculate on the similarities and differences which underlie and are made apparent in the texts of those two modern projects, post-modernism and post-colonialism. To prevent the speculation from becoming totally diffuse and abstract, and to allow the arguments to encounter the particular densities and colorations of specific texts I have used the texts of two writers as examples, the Lebanese-descended Australian writer David Malouf and the Polish expatriate United States writer Jerzy Kosinsky. The selection of these two writers itself incorporates something of the questioning of fixed causality, of overarching and determining extra-textual logic inherent, it seems to me, in the texts of both projects. It embraces contingency, chance, in the final sense, openness, as a dominant feature of both kinds of text, and, in a playful sense, in the selection of these particular writers. Finally, of course, like any selection it engages with the question of what qualifies or disqualifies a text for inclusion in either of these two very diffuse and disputed categories, and why.

Malouf's work, especially the text I want to concentrate on, *An Imaginary Life*, dealing as it does with the final part of the life of the poet Ovid and his death in exile from Rome in a remote and "barbarous" province at the edge of the known world, clearly offers a challenge to the conventional idea of what a post-colonial text ought to be about. Malouf's novel is post-colonial in provenance, as an Australian work, though to complicate matters, one written like most of his recent work from a voluntary partial "exile" in Italy. It is not, however, overtly concerned with the post-colonial experience, or place. Nevertheless it can be cited as a work central to the view that post-coloniality of a text depends not on any simple qualification of theme or subject matter, but on the degree to which it displays post-colonial discursive features. What these features may be is again open to interpretation as are those of any discourse which seeks to constitute itself as discrete, but I might suggest that such concerns as linguistic displacement, physical exile, cross-culturality and authenticity or inauthenticity of experience are among the features which one might identify as characteristically post-colonial.

Yet it is arguable that Jerzy Kosinsky's work shares many of these features. Novels like the early work *The Painted Bird* deal with exile (internal exile at least), with linguistic dislocation and traumatic silencing, with marginalization and prejudice in cross-cultural encounters and so forth. Later novels repeat and develop these themes, and add to them the theme of exile in the external sense. In this sense they illustrate the argument frequently advanced recently that the project identified as characteristically post-colonial is really no more nor less than a local version of the wider twentieth-century projects associated with the term post-modern. Postmodernism, it is argued, also rejects the simple closures of realism and the ideological factors such closures hide; it embraces a radical openness which emphasizes itself in the text at the level of theme as well as formal feature. Postmodern texts, too, the argument continues, characteristically concern themselves with the ideological falsity of universal values, with the results of linguistic dislocation, with exile in its various manifestations (physical and spiritual, external and internal) and with the inability of modern life to authenticate itself without simultaneously

revealing the “authentic” as merely reflexive and self-constructed. Both then are also, it is argued, characteristically subversive projects, founded in counter-discursive processes, often working either by direct and violent confrontation with expected norms of language or form, or, conversely, by parody or appropriation, by the re-incorporation of the classic and normative and by the juxtaposition of widely diffuse and contrasting styles and modes. Texts which share such features fall, so the argument goes, on both sides of the fence and have been claimed, at various times, by both groups. To quote Voltaire, for such texts “Te Deums have been sung in both camps.” Examples of texts variously claimed in this way might include Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* or many of the recent South American novelists; for example, Gábril Gárcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Augusto Roa Bastos’s *I, the Supreme*.

Of course, just as Malouf from one perspective may be regarded as only marginally central to the immediate concerns of post-colonialism, so arguably Kosinsky is only marginally postmodern in so far as his texts do not display the most obvious kinds of reflexivity; though the fragmented structure, the disconnected and episodic narrative, the absence of closure, and the displacement of concern from the author to the reader (in so far as the reader is clearly challenged, indeed at times it seems virtually threatened, to risk avoiding responding to the horrific activities of the text) may be held to be postmodern in a wider and, I believe, more telling way.¹ The texts, especially *The Painted Bird* and the six less well-known texts which have followed, challenge the reader to reject a world peopled with figures whose boundaries are limited morally by an ethic of personal revenge, whose sexuality is at best distorted and at worse bestial, and whose final judgement on their action resolves itself in the words of the rapist from one of Kosinsky’s most violent texts into a decision as to whether the activity serves effectively “man’s obligation to himself” (*Blind Date* 61). This philosophy of brutal amorality is defended, in the only full-length study of Kosinsky’s work to have emerged so far, as a strategy of moral displacement:

the charge is often made that Kosinsky’s characters and situations are marginal and exaggerated. Kosinsky would reply that we are

being naïve, that violence and disarray are the experience of many and the expectation of most: "It depends, I think primarily on your outlook. If you look upon the incidents in *The Painted Bird* and *Steps* and *Being There* as peripheral and insane and not too common, then you are bound to have a shock almost every day; but if you will see yourself as part of the larger community, if you will not keep yourself in a locked compartment marked 'for sane only', then you won't be very surprised when confronted by murder, persecution, or old age. Perhaps such an attitude would make you 'less sensitive' — but, conversely, that would mean that the least aware, the most provincial among us, is also the most sensitive."

Kosinsky's writing is aimed directly at eliminating our provincial "sensitivity." The longer we blandly assume that death and pain is the experience of the other guy, the marginal image on television, but no part of our own lives, the less we will be able to cope with those things when they do enter our lives. (Lavers 154-55)

Such a defence seems to me to be peculiar, seeking to reimport some of the containing strategies of realism back into what is surely the more radically subversive project of Kosinsky's text, which is to make the text in effect an act of terrorism, an act which by its very randomness, its inconsequentiality and its lack of purpose radically questions the claims of normal society to order and coherence by refusing at the fundamental ontological level to participate in the normative process of logic and reason. The nature of this "terrorism" is, interestingly, the concern too of Malouf's short novella, *Child's Play*,² in which the young terrorist protagonist about to assassinate the ageing great writer speculates thus:

The crime becomes real because it is reported, because it is called an *act of terrorism*, an *assassination*, because it threatens *mindless violence* and *anarchy*, because it breaks into the mind of the reader as a set of explosive syllables. These are the language murders we are committing. What more appropriate victim, then, than our man of letters? And what more ironical, or more in his line of deadly playfulness, than this subjection of his being to the most vulgar and exploitive terms, this entry into the heart of that reality (that un-reality) that is the war of words. (91)

The sentiment, of course, is that of Conrad's secret agent, the target similarly selected for its symbolic rather than its "real"

value. Blowing up the site of Greenwich Mean Time, like shooting the great liberal humanist writer, is an act of aggression against the idea that stable authorized and universal values exist outside the social and political forces which underpin them, forces which, from the terrorist perspective constitute that deeper and more permanent violence embedded in society itself. The act of terrorism is an act, then, of unmasking, of forcing into the open the arbitrary nature of signification, and the false representation of power as natural process. It is at this level that the projects of the two texts share certain similarities.

The fortuitous moment which made me yoke these two writers together in this arbitrary fashion in a critical essay stems, however, from the similarity between the images at the end of Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* and Kosinsky's *Being There*. Or, in more specific terms, between the Malouf novel and an amalgam of the written text of *Being There* and the film version (of which Kosinsky wrote the script).

Let me set the two endings side by side for comparison; first the Malouf:

The Child is there.

He turns for a moment to gaze at me across his shoulder, which is touched with sunlight, then stoops to gather another snail from the edge of the stream. He rises and goes on. The stream shakes out its light around his ankles as he wades deeper, then climbs on to a smooth stone and balances for a moment in the sun, leaps, leaps again, then wanders upstream on the other bank, which is gravel, every pebble of it, white, black, gray, picked out and glittering in the late sunlight as in a mosaic, where he pauses, gathers one, two, four snails, and with the stream rippling as he steps in and out of it, walks on, kicking at the gravel with his toes and lost for a moment in his own childlike pleasure at being free.

I might call to him. I have the voice for that. But do not. To call him back might be to miss the fullness of this moment as it is about to be revealed, and I want so much, at the very end here, to be open to all that it holds for me.

The fullness is in the Child's moving away from me, in his stepping so lightly, so joyfully, naked, into his own distance at last as he fades in and out of the dazzle of light off the water and stoops to gather — what? Pebbles? Is that what his eye is attracted by now, the grayest, most delicately veined of them? Or has he already forgotten all purpose, moving simply for the joy of it, wading deeper

into the light and letting them fall from his hands, the living and edible snails that are no longer necessary to my life and may be left now to return to their own, the useless pebbles that where they strike the ground suddenly flare up as butterflies, whose bright wings rainbow the stream.

He is walking on the water's light. And as I watch, he takes the first step off it, moving slowly away now into the deepest distance, above the earth, above the water, on air.

It is summer. It is spring. I am unmeasurably, unbearably happy. I am three years old. I am sixty. I am six.

I am there. (*Life* 151-52)

Here, by contrast, is Kosinsky's ending:

Chance pushed his way through the throng of dancing couples toward the exit. In his eyes there lingered yet a faint, blurred image of the grand ballroom, of the trays of refreshments at the buffet, the multicoloured flowers, brilliant bottles, rows upon rows of shining glasses on the table. He caught sight of EE as she was embraced by a tall, heavily decorated general. He passed through a blaze of photographers' flash-guns as though through a cloud. The image of all he had seen outside the garden faded.

Chance was bewildered. He reflected and saw the withered image of Chauncey Gardiner: it was cut by the stroke of a stick through a stagnant pool of rain water. His own image was gone as well.

He crossed the hall. Chilled air streamed in through an open window. Chance pushed the heavy glass door open and stepped out into the garden. Taut branches laden with fresh shoots, slender stems with tiny sprouting buds shot upward. The garden lay calm, still sunk in repose. Wisps of clouds floated by and left the moon polished. Now and then, boughs rustled and gently shook off their drops of water. A breeze fell upon the foliage and nestled under the cover of its moist leaves. Not a thought lifted itself from Chance's brain. Peace filled his chest. (*Being There* 135-36)

It is, perhaps, necessary to add that in the film the final image is of Chance walking out to the foreshore of a lake and beginning to walk across its surface, into which he delicately thrusts, with a child-like experimentation, the end of his umbrella before strolling across towards the far bank.

Let me begin by drawing some relatively crude distinctions, distinctions which in practice might be modified by many readers but which seem to me to have nevertheless a certain force. Both

texts are concerned to delineate the thin line between the real and the marvellous, to graphically, but not conclusively, dramatize how the mythic, the imaginary, the transfiguring idea interweaves with and creates the world we speak of usually as "being there" in some real, objective sense. Yet within this shared purpose Kosinsky's text stresses the existential and Malouf's the material elements in this exchange of levels of perception. If you like, Kosinsky's text is more concerned with the "being" and Malouf's with the "there," though neither to the exclusion of the other term in the whole equation. Malouf's text is grounded (the metaphor is an appropriate one) in a sense of the materiality of the conditions under which the perception of his narrator (the aged, dying Ovid) is formed. Kosinsky's narrator, significantly undramatized in the text, a "free-floating" and omniscient narrator, is not involved in the process of creating the final image in the same direct way. In Malouf's text we are concerned with the coming into being of this perception, and its significance in terms of Ovid's physical (and so cultural) displacement in a geography of perception. In Kosinsky's we are more concerned with the role of Chance and his radical innocent detachment from purpose or consequence, from here and now, concerned with it, that is, as a metaphor for the function of contingency in creating the ever-present, existential choice, arguably the major concern of Kosinsky's text.

Kosinsky has maintained (though this, too, as we shall see has in practice resolved itself into a form of fiction) that the writer ought not to speak by commentary or in any other way to directly intervene between the completed text and the reader. Significantly Malouf, on the other hand, provides us with an Afterword, a device which resists the more decisively "open" claims of Kosinsky's text. This Afterword, as one might expect, throws light on the text to which it is appended. In many ways it forms the real "final chapter" of the book, even though it is couched in an "objective" even "academic" style.³

In the Afterword Malouf tells us that his project has been to "make this glib fabulist of 'the changes' live out in reality what had been, in his previous existence, merely the occasion for dazzling literary display" (154).

The image Malouf employs here picks up the contrastive force of material and transcendent elements which divide themselves out in the image Ovid applies to the Child as they journey out from the remote settlement across the endless steppe.

It is as if he moved simultaneously in two separate worlds. I watch him kneel at one of his humble tasks, feeding me, or cleaning up my old man's mess. And at the same time when I look up, he is standing feet away, as when I first saw him in the pinewood, a slight, incandescent figure, naked against the dusk, already moving away from me in his mind, already straining forward to whatever life it is that lies out there beyond our moment together, some life I have not taken into account, and which he will be free to enter only when our journey together is done. (149-50)

Even here at what appears to be a moment of perception in which the absolute categories by which Ovid has lived are radically and irrevocably disrupted by his experience of the Child's alienness and by the conditions and displacements of his own exile, a moment which, perhaps, not too fancifully, might be described as the abrogative moment, corresponding with that moment of denial common to early writing in the post-colonial world (the moment of colonial discourse [Griffiths]), the perception is still locked into the essentially Eurocentric opposition, that binary polarity on which Wilson Harris has commented so well and extensively (Harris). This moment contrasts powerfully with the final section of the text when, coming at last to "it, the place" (150), Ovid loses the ability to characterize this either exclusively as the end of time (the place of his death) or as exclusively the end of the world (the furthest place he reaches on his [life's] journey). At this point in the text such distinctions (or rather the meaningfulness of them) breaks down. Without any preciousness of reference, or any specific invocation or allusion, we are in a discourse in which the post-colonial and post-European categories invoked have at least as much in common with pre-colonial and pre-European formulations such as Aboriginal dreaming or pre-Columbian cyclical notions of time and space as with the space-time coordinates of a contemporary European physics. At such a textual point something very central to post-colonial discourse seems to me to be in the process of being created, a refusal of the privileging

of certain categories over others in the establishing "evidence" for reality and meaningfulness.⁴ If a privileging, though, does occur, and I believe it does at least as a form of negative discrimination against the dominance of the category of time (history) in Eurocentric formulations, then place, space, landscape dominates time, and obliterates it, at least in so far as it claims the transcendence of objective history. The insistence on the "there" of place reveals time at a personal and historical level to be a persistent and yet hidden construction in the Eurocentric picture of "reality."

Paradoxically, the post-colonial text (in this case, specifically, Malouf's) achieves this not by setting up "landscape" (space) as a sealed alternative but by revealing this, too, as a construct, by placing the narrator in a place where all signs (which are conceivable as always already there, as it were) are obliterated. Geography, like history — landscape, like time — is shown to be "imaginary," and so empowered not to fixity but to change. It is this imaginary life which Malouf constructs through his displaced narrator, cut adrift from the anchoring historicity of a fixed "Roman" geographical context by his journey beyond the known and so "real" world. Here in the text's final paragraphs he is pictured as cut adrift too from the identifiable features of a world in which he can categorize even the elements in a neat and stable way, as earth, as water, or as air.

Of course the perception of the narrator in the final section of the book has, for an Australian readership, a peculiar and local habitation. In Ovid's final description of the Child walking through the stream and up the bank into the mirage of water on which he seems to be balanced and beyond it into, seemingly, thin air, the Australian reader recognizes the physical accuracy of this depiction of perception in the endless flat country of his homeland, and in the distorting heat hazes of the Australian climate; recognizes them, that is, not as unique categories of experience (the setting here is, we presume, the steppes of what is now southern Russia, a landscape with just such features and perceptual possibilities) but as modes which displace the assumptions of immutability in Eurocentric discourses and taxonomies of place and of time, indeed, of even such discourses as the relationship of the "fixed" and "stable" elements themselves in which "to walk on

water” or to “fly through the air” is to leave the world of the real for the imaginary, the world of truth for that of fiction, the world of the adult for that of the child whose categories, however appealing, are not those of the “real.”⁵

Kosinsky’s appropriately named Chance is a beguiling figure, who, at least in so far as the written text is concerned, is not (as represented by the actor Peter Sellers in the film) an intellectual defective or a mental retard but an innocent. Chance’s thought processes are, as the text shows, complex and subtle, they simply do not relate to the cultural expectations around him since for decades since he was a very young child his world has been restricted to that of the house and garden within which his mind has been exclusively formed. In this sense he is like Malouf’s Child who, brought up in the wild before his capture, is the last in a long line of representations of the *enfant sauvage*, amongst which, of course, the most famous is also a post-colonial example, Kipling’s Mowgli. Yet for Kosinsky the circumstances of the child, the specific cultural formations which bring his innocence into being and which simultaneously disable and empower him through the radical difference of his perceptive mode is of little concern. This is borne out by his lack of resistance to the very different characterization brought to the character by Sellers in the film version (Kosinsky was also the scriptwriter for the film version), a difference which by stressing the source of Chance’s innocence as inherent rather than cultural profoundly altered the significance of the original character and text. For Kosinsky the perception of Chance is directed towards the confirmation of his belief that above and beyond all such conditionings, finally, contingency operating through the random and fortuitous individual instance and action is all that we can know.⁶ That this is his position we can surmise from text after text. It is stated as clearly as anywhere in *The Devil Tree* when the protagonist, the young multi-millionaire playboy J. J. Whalen, is being initiated into a secret governing order of rich and powerful men dedicated to the proposition that “the individual comes first, along with his virtues: honorable ambition, fair speech, pure thoughts, and straightforward action.” Whalen, challenged as to whether he objects to the proposition, can only recall the words spoken by the minister over the grave of the young

adventuress with whom he has had one of his numerous brutalized affairs in Rangoon, and who has died as a result of the opium addiction to which he has introduced her. The words are, that "[o]f all living creatures, only the human being carries in himself the ultimate threat to his vital existence: the freedom to say yes or no to it, to reaffirm or to transcend the boundaries set for us by the indifferent world" (197).

Apart from the difficulty of imagining what kind of minister in Rangoon would be likely to make such an existential statement at the grave of a young drug-addict, it seems inadequate to argue that this sort of detached, existential philosophy stated time after time in the text is not finally a close approximation to the position of Kosinsky himself. This is borne out in those non-fictional essays which, disingenuously, he has published from time to time, always after an elaborate excuse that they had been previously pirated and so his speaking out in contradiction to his stated belief that the author has no control or connection with the text once it has left his desk is the result of his being forced to do so. In *The Art of the Self: Essays à propos 'Steps'*, the first of these forced confessions, Kosinsky produces an incredibly narcissistic version of Sartrean Self-Other definition. Defining the role of the protagonist in this novel as being to find out who he is, what self is his, and to avoid the loss or dilution of self into some larger whole, he argues that his fiction seeks to avoid the restriction of such larger wholes not only by its attack on collective institutions of all kinds but also by avoiding imagination itself as one such institution. In the words of Kosinsky's most energetic critic and supporter, Norman Lavers, he seeks to show that imagination itself

can be one of the many enemies of selfhood, because imagination comes between the narrator and "reality" and it is only in reality that the self exists: "for the narrator reality becomes a prerequisite of consciousness of the self." Partly this is because the imagination can tie us to past memory, and reality exists only in the present instant. . . . Modern art attempts to break down the blocks of perception in order to create a reality of pure perception, reality before it is formed into episodes. It objects to the imposing on the present a form of the past, an episode, since it claims that original perception precedes all forms. (73)

This demonstrates very clearly the great gap between a postmodern text such as Kosinsky's and a post-colonial text, despite the similarities of theme and formal structures I have outlined. For Kosinsky the possibility of undoing the control of the oppressive aspects of social and cultural institutions is addressable only at an immediate existential level. He seeks as his project to go behind and beyond cultural formation into some pure existential activity free from all controlling agencies of past or future. Detaching himself from any philosophy which embraces a future project except that of the Heideggerian project of forfeiture, escapable only through the *angst-voll* authentication brought into our present by a contemplation of our future death, he nevertheless in practice stresses a dependency on the fact of existence which if not transcendent in its philosophic credentials is exactly that in its effect. As Lavers points out, Kosinsky is strongly influenced by Heidegger; the Heideggerian term for Being (self-hood), *Dasein*, was, in fact, the working title for the novel *Being There* (125-26). The paradoxical position Kosinsky's text articulates is precisely that of postmodernism as a whole, and of the post-structuralist philosophical positions which underpin it. Claiming that only by scrupulously avoiding the "grounding" of any moment in a larger project can the tyranny of institutionalization and of "foreshadowing" be avoided in practice the texts end by endorsing the most tyrannous of instrumentalities and political conditions. The *angst voll* position, arms thrown up and mouth open in a silent scream, has proved a very ineffective response to the continuing brutalities of personal and institutional violence.

Despite the invocation of freeing the text from oppressive institutions and the "foreshadowed" conclusions involved in any project (such as religion or Marxism), which suggests that "man's destiny is spelled out in the central plot of life" (*Blind Date* 86), the politics of the text is finally to refuse the existence of any determining social or cultural formations, and to postulate for the artist, as for the individual, an absolutely "free" realm of existential choice beyond any such determinants. Whatever its credentials, in the late twentieth-century world this is to walk on water indeed.

The project of the post-colonial text, on the other hand, can never lose sight of the determining cultural factors which bring it

into being, since it is grounded in a perception of how Self and Other are constituted within a discursive matrix which includes the material forces and institutions of cultural production and reproduction, as well as the social and political institutions which give rise to these and to which they lend their support.

Kosinsky's view of Self-Other relations is, as Lavers notes, grounded for the most part in a positive depiction of the establishment and preservation of selfhood by domination of the other. As Kosinsky says:

The only truly satisfying relationship, then, is one of growing domination, one in which the narrator's experience — a certain form of the past — can be projected onto the other person. Until this hold is gained (assuming that the 'prey' has some awareness of the protagonist's purpose), the 'prey' maintains some superiority over the protagonist and remains his rival. (Lavers 73)

Lavers, who characterizes this response as "almost admirable, valiantly preserving his selfhood against all hazards" (*sic*), is forced, reluctantly, to admit that Kosinsky does seem to show a slight acquaintance with Sartre's preference in *Being and Nothingness* for Self-Other relations which display mutuality, and in which as Kosinsky notes there is the attempt to be "simultaneously subject and object, and [in which] the willing relinquishment of the single subject to a new subject created from two single ones, each subject enhanced into one heightened self" (Lavers 74) is achieved. It is significant that such relations appear in the fiction only as negatives, that is, represented to the reader by the depiction of their opposite (in this case, in the sado-masochistic relationship of the ski-instructor in *Steps* with the moribund sanatorium patients). Such representation is again justified by the argument that it is a strategy of moral displacement (as I tried above to characterize it). However that may be, it is certainly a strategy which leads away from any conviction that the Self and its "survival" (read also for this understanding, comprehension and growth) is at the very least dependent upon a network of such mutualities, and that in any meaningful world these must involve the larger constructions of group, of culture, and of society. It leads, that is, away from any belief that the perceived and influential existential crisis of twentieth-century man has itself any limitation or fixedness in

a specific historically determined and geographically limited cultural crisis, and that it is itself corrigible, able to be fruitfully and successfully negotiated. It leads away from even the most limited optimism beyond that vested in the vision of the capacity of each person to survive in the most basic way and to discover any such mutualities beyond the most fleeting present instants. It is precisely against this minimalist and pessimistic vision that the post-colonial text speaks out, perceiving as it does that what is again offered as a universal truth, the negative *angst-voll* vision of post-Heideggerian European thought, is in fact one spoken from a very specific historical and geographical position in the world (Meyer 39-50).

Kosinsky's *Chance* at the end of *Being There* walks out into a world of absolute negation; in the novel to an absolute mindless peace; in the film-script to a deliberately tongue-in-cheek and ironically presented non-world of miracle and flim-flamery. Malouf's *Child*, on the other hand, walks out of the limitations of Ovid's perception, out of the restrictive defining contexts of either the crude society Ovid now inhabits or the false sophistication of that from which he has been exiled, into a possibility of endless alternatives, the formation in different times and places of radically new possibilities for human kind. The optimism of the latter is grounded not in any romantic, apolitical vision but in the directly material perception that human possibility is created and denied not only by the discourses within which it is produced but by the material practices which these discourses express, practices which include the physical world whose landscape and character may form a profound resistant substratum to the discourse which seeks to incorporate it into some transcendent cultural "geography." As one recent critic has argued, the origin of works of art from "New" worlds such as America or any other post-colonial society "can never arise from the de-construction of any historical tradition of bibles/texts but only from the Emersonian command 'Forget the past!' or the Whitmanian transformation of 'pray without ceasing' into 'look for me under your boot-soles'" (Meyer 49). In this sense the site of post-colonial texts is seen to be like the place which, for Malouf's Ovid, is both the end and the beginning of his journey and of the possibilities of his discourse, finally both undeniably there and absolutely boundless.

NOTES

- 1 Kosinsky's texts form what must be one of the most unrelievedly brutal expositions of modern life, studded as they are with scenes of gratuitous brutality, sexual and non-sexual violence, as well as extreme physical and emotional behaviour. Their characters exist frequently on the far edge of "normal" society and behaviour, and often overlap with popular genre types such as young playboys, secret agents, assassins and so forth. In fact so much so that, republished in lurid covers they have, despite their difficulty as "texts," had a signal success as popular "soft-core" pornography, and in this slightly disguised condition can, occasionally, be encountered plying their trade at airport bookshops and other such venues.
- 2 In fact it is in the spirit of coincidence that once embarked on the comparison of the two writers I was, of course, forced to perceive endless abutments between their texts from their frequent incorporation of the personal and autobiographical into the texture of their fictions to specific concerns and themes such as this.
- 3 We have learned, of course, to distrust such fictive objective commentators ever since the pronouncements of that early Nabokovian mask, John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., of Widsworth, Mass.
- 4 In fact, of course, some writers on postmodernism, such as Jean-François Lyotard, acknowledge precisely the inadequacy of the privileging of scientific discourses over customary discourses and distinguish this as one of the primary modes by which imperialist discourses have come into being. Even though their interest in this is displaced to a concern with the "wider" issue of contemporary ways of "knowing" the world and their limitations, it raises a fascinating point for post-colonial theorists, who may feel that precedences of various kinds flow from this perception.
- 5 That European discourses are still profoundly resistant to anything but the most qualified acceptance of such alternative modes of conceiving the world can be seen daily in the Australian press in the way in which Aboriginal claims to a perception of a timeless and physically limitless and indissoluble bond between a spirit presence and a physical site is dealt with in regard to the current Lands Rights issues and the Aboriginal claim to the traditional "sacred sites" of the Dreaming. The well-meaning liberalism (even where this exists) of the journalists and commentators breaks down in the pragmatic way in which they seek to articulate their understanding of the inhabitation of a site by a being whose always and eternal significance is vested in the there-ness of the site, not in some specific appearance or "sighting." Such limitations of the perceptual apparatus of European discursive categories means that even the most liberal commentator seems sometimes to be equating such Aboriginal beings as the Waggyll or the Kunapipi with the yeti or big-foot (themselves, of course, creatures whose "reality" certainly does not depend for the Tibetan or the North American Indian as it seems to do for the European on the existence of so-called objective, scientific proof, i.e., a dead carcass which alone can constitute the incorporation of the being into the category of "specimen" necessary to precede their proper and permanent classification).
- 6 Kosinsky has embraced this both extra- and intra-textually with his long exposition of the philosophy of Jacques Monod in the critical texts and with the introduction of Monod as a character in the novel *Blind Date*.

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