

ANALYSIS

Being There (1970)



Jerzy Kosinski

(1933-1991)

“The minimalist structure Kosinski began with *Steps* continues in *Being There*. More a novella than a novel, it is a parable of sorts, although the basic elements are all variations on one joke: if you say something without elaboration, it will be altered along the way to mean something very different. The media will turn every phrase into an event, the event into a historical moment, the moment into a crisis. Then, all public activity, as Kosinski measures it, is empty: a hole disguised as a pregnancy.

Chance, the protagonist of *Being There*, is a gardener on an estate, a man who exchanges his labor for his keep. There are no records of his employment, and he has failed to acquire and documents. Without a driver’s license and credit cards, he is a nonperson. His life thus far has been spent cultivating the garden of the Old Man and watching television for endless hours. All he knows of the outside world derives from television. His knowledge is a reflection of the real, and he is, in fact, like Plato’s denizens of the cave who think of the outside world as shadow, their reflected world as real. Chance, furthermore, is illiterate, a blank page on which television images can make their imprint.

As an antihero, Chance is expected to carry a good deal of freight. With *Being There*, Kosinski uses his fiction for the first time as direct social commentary, what he had already done in his two earliest books on collective behavior: *The Future Is Ours* (1960) and *No Third Path* (1962). Here his critique is not of socialist states but of America and American culture. Chance is his vehicle: a *tabula rasa*, a man without any sense of life except gardening, an illiterate who views everything in terms of television modes and pastoral images. As an orphan, he has floated free of everything that connects a person to society or a body politic. Here is an Adamic man, and he is a blithering idiot.

Kosinski’s conceit is to turn Chance into a man of significance. By way of an accident, he comes into contact with Rand, the ailing chairman of the board of the First American Financial Corporation, one of whose programs is to assist businesses harassed by riots, inflation, high taxes. Rand’s wife, a young and frisky thing, renames Chance Chauncey Gardiner, and once he has a suitable name and connections to high

places, he is taken seriously. His words, with their repeated analogy between country and garden, are pondered, dissected, examined for wisdom.

Chance meets the President and impresses him; he meets heads of states, ambassadors, UN officials, and all come away convinced his is a new spirit at large in the world. Yet everything is a variation of what he tells a television audience: 'I know the garden very well.... I have worked in it all of my life. It's a good garden and a healthy one, its trees are healthy and so are its shrubs and flowers, as long as they are trimmed and watered in the right seasons. The garden needs a lot of care. I do agree with the President: everything in it will grow in due course. And there is still plenty of room in it for new trees and new flowers of all kinds.'

Kosinski is moving alone some very gripping 1960s ideas. Yet while the novella is an attempt at a social/political critique, it is curiously exhausted. The brevity, the repetition of situation and comment suggest the course his work would take after *Steps*. Minimalism in execution becomes a reflection of authorial exhaustion, not an artistic statement. Chance is a short-story character, and *Being There* is not even a novella in its development. It is an extended single metaphor, so that even repeating episodes do not bring additional insight. Each gullible person, from the President to the Soviet ambassador, is an image of the same person. Once Kosinski establishes his situation, he brings no variations to it. Chance is a modern-day *Candide*, but without the witty context of Voltaire. He is an imitation of *Candide*. Kosinski has not given us the parable of being, or of being there, but a television script, slight, singular, exhausted before it begins."

Frederick R. Karl
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