

Sisyphus in Kertész's *Fatelessness*

Eric Beck Rubin
University of Toronto

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Beck Rubin, Eric. "Sisyphus in Kertész's *Fatelessness*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16.1 (2014): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2174>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 760 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 16 Issue 1 (March 2014) Article 4
Eric Beck Rubin, "Sisyphus in Kertész's *Fatelessness*"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss1/4>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 16.1 (2014)**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss1/>>

Abstract: In his article "Sisyphus in Kertész's *Fatelessness*" Eric Beck Rubin discusses Imre Kertész's novel in relation to the philosophy of eternal recurrence, namely the notion that an individual inhabits a universe made of finite possibilities experienced and re-experienced without variation or end. Early explorations of eternal recurrence by Friedrich Nietzsche were taken up by Albert Camus, and Beck Rubin argues that certain works by both authors are fundamental to any reading of *Fatelessness*. Further, Beck Rubin argues that Kertész's contribution to the debate can be viewed from two perspectives: one sees Kertész as an author in conversation with fellow authors writing his own allegory of Sisyphus, the character who embodies eternal recurrence, and the other looks at Kertész as a writer who turns Sisyphus into a symbol subject to ironic reinterpretation. Through such a process, Kertész turns the world of the concentration camps into the original Tartarus.

Erick Beck RUBIN

Sisyphus in Kertész's *Fatelessness*

In 2004 Imre Kertész said of his novel *Fatelessness*, "I never wanted to write about the Holocaust. I wanted to write about the feeling, the sensation of fatelessness, the loss of a personality" (Kertész and Sanders <http://harriman.columbia.edu/files/harriman/00220_11.pdf>). If the reader follows this logic and removes *Fatelessness* from its seemingly unique position in Holocaust literature — a story told exclusively from the point of its adolescent narrator who is willing to disturb readers' assumptions about life in the camps by looking back on it as a golden period of youth and views the text as an illustration of a set of ideas (a "sensation of fatelessness"), he/she will find a ready place for it in the context of European letters (see Theil <<http://isurvived.org/KerteszINTERVIEW.html>>). For all of Gyuri's ingenuousness and his plausibility as an adolescent and traumatized narrator in a unique historical period, he is, in the context of this remark, a character created first and foremost to correspond with literary predecessors a character in an allegory of ideas. I define allegory as a coherent narrative created to signify a second, higher, or previous narrative. In an allegory of ideas, characters represent abstract concepts and the plot serves to communicate an existing doctrine or thesis. Although the sensation of fatelessness and loss of personality, Kertész makes it clear in subsequent writings and interviews and in his quasi-autobiography *Dossier K* that Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche, whose writing Kertész translated into Hungarian, were significant influences on his thinking (173-74). For these reasons, I draw a line between Kertész, Camus, and Nietzsche to explain how Kertész treats Nietzsche and Camus as interlocutors in developing an overarching thesis.

In *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche explored one of his most powerful ideas: eternal recurrence. Taking up the Newtonian proposition that energy and time are finite, Nietzsche concluded that the same limited set of acts would at some point begin to repeat over time. The notion of "time circling within itself" led Nietzsche to Shiva, Dionysius, the pre-Socratics (Nietzsche's academic area of expertise), and the works of Nietzsche's philosophical mentor, Arthur Schopenhauer, who proposed the idea of an "eternal man" who lived in a world of the eternal present (see Safranski 223). Nietzsche alluded to Schopenhauer in an early essay, "Fate and History," wherein he describes the universe as a cosmic clock whose the hands repeat the same "new day" over and over again, running through the same series of events (see Safranski 223-4). After establishing what he regarded as the physical basis of "eternal recurrence," the idea that all possible events have occurred and are destined to recur with time, Nietzsche immersed himself in the moral dimension of the idea. Such a world, Nietzsche theorized, would demand the individual's "loss of personality" (as Kertész put it in the 2004 interview), only Nietzsche does not see this as a loss, but an opportunity to exceed the limitations of individual perspective. The cosmos in which Nietzsche's ego-less person resides is a cold, dead place: "We must picture [our universe] as far removed from the organic as possible!" and feelings are nothing but an "oversight of existence"; the truth of things is to be found in the stone — cold, hard, dead (Safranski 226-27). In this recurring, dead world, the individual's challenge is to bear what Nietzsche calls "the greatest burden" ("das größte Schwergewicht," *The Gay Science* 273). To Nietzsche, this burden is knowing "life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it ... every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence" (*The Gay* 273). In other words, existence is a concentration of "eternal damnation" (Safranski 231).

If Nietzsche has set the parameters of a universe without god or human feeling made of finite possibilities and eternal recurrence, Camus dramatized the role of the individual in it and the model of this character is Sisyphus. Sisyphus scorned the gods (that is, scorned fate) and as punishment he was given an "unspeakable penalty" whereby "the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing" (*The Myth* 107):

And I saw Sisyphus too, [Odysseus says,] bound to his own torture,
grappling with his monstrous boulder with both arms working,
heaving, hands struggling, legs driving, he kept on
thrusting the rock uphill toward the brink, but just
as it teetered, set to topple —

time and again
the immense weight of the thing would wheel it back and
the ruthless boulder would bound and tumble down to the plain again —
so once again he would heave, would struggle to thrust it up,
sweat drenching his body, dust swirling about his head. (*The Odyssey* 269)

Whereas Odysseus's Sisyphus exists in a richly peopled part of the Greek underworld, Camus puts his Sisyphus alone on a mountain. Like Zarathustra in Nietzsche's work, Camus's Sisyphus is above and away from the living. Camus describes his version of Nietzsche's un-sentient, inorganic world where Sisyphus lives, as a "waterless desert," an "unreasonable silence," then asks a question whose answer Nietzsche takes for granted, namely why would an individual want to live in such a place (13, 26)? Why continue to live and therefore suffer the "insane character of daily agitation" when all effort adds up to nothing — nothing greater or more, or *other*, than the existence we lead, which we repeat *ad infinitum* (13)? Camus writes that when confronted with this reality our responses have been to give up or ignore it — end life or cover the abyss with religion, faith, greater meaning, or afterlife. Most will choose the latter, satisfying a desire for answers even if they require willful blindness or suspension of disbelief. To Camus, however, such answers or comforts, no matter how well-devised their logic, are merely "supernatural consolations" (123). What *The Myth of Sisyphus* proposes is a separate response: recognizing the absurd gulf between yourself and the world that pays you no heed, and living in that world "absurdly." That is, to be at once conscious of our desires for an overarching meaning, for the cohesion and purpose of ethics or religion, and at the same time reject all efforts to forge one. Not an easy task, Camus admits. The absurd struggle is one that demands "a total absence of hope, a continual rejection, and a conscious dissatisfaction." Living absurdly, he concludes, is achieved "only in so far as it is not agreed to" — a meeting of permanent un-fulfillability and permanent disagreement (34).

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "permanent revolt" takes on two dimensions: the first is a vigilant lucidity, an unflinching awareness of the absurd nature of the world. In this form of revolt we are conscious of ourselves and our struggles at all times, never thinking of the future, experiencing time only as a "succession of presents" (60-62) and the second dimension is a sense of emotional indifference to accompany our lucidity. Life is "not a matter of explaining and solving ... but of experiencing and describing" (*The Myth* 87). That is why the heart of the Sisyphus tale, for Camus, is in the pause when Sisyphus sees the stone fall over the peak to the far side of the mountain, "tumbling down to the plain again." In this time, which Camus calls the "hour of consciousness," "Sisyphus [grasps] the whole extent of his wretched condition ... The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory ... If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy" (109).

Where Camus's Sisyphus puts flesh and blood on the idea of a person who lives in the "waterless desert" of Nietzsche's dead and unfeeling universe, Camus's *The Stranger* sets the whole within novelistic style and structure. In doing so, Camus develops themes which appeared in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and these themes are found in Kertész's *Fatelessness*: references to Nietzsche's work appear in Kertész's *Galeerentagebuch* and Kertész translated Nietzsche's and Schopenhauer's work from German to Hungarian. Kertész's interest in and identification with Camus is mentioned in Kertész's *Dossier K* and throughout *Galeerentagebuch*, where Kertész ruminates on Camus's ideas and use of language placing Camus in a pantheon of greats and likening the plot of his *Fiasco* to that of Camus's *The Stranger*. After the war and his return to Budapest from the concentration camps, according to György Spiró, Kertész brought a number of texts to his circle of friends and first among these were those by Camus (for more on the Kertész and Nietzsche and Camus connection, see Földényi; Koltai; Schreiber; Vasvári).

The protagonist of Camus's *The Stranger* is Meursault, a character who is detached from the events around him. The resemblance to Kertész's Gyuri is striking, especially in the opening passages describing Meursault's indifference to news of his mother's death: "Maman has died today ... Or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: 'Mother deceased. Burial tomorrow. Sincerely yours.' That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday" (3). The reader of *Fatelessness* notices the use of first-person tense that combines present "today" and "has died," as well as the loss of a parent that is met with a lesser reaction than one might have anticipated. We also note that loss

gives the protagonists license for pride in lieu of bereavement. When Meursault approaches his boss with a request to take two days off for his mother's funeral, he is confident "there was no way [the boss] was going to refuse me with an excuse like that," just as when Gyuri tells his teacher he'll be missing school because his father's been called up, he remarks with satisfaction the teacher "didn't raise a further peep about it" (3). And when Meursault arrives at his mother's nursing home to visit the body, he pays more mind to the director, nurse, caretaker and others that appear at the funeral than to the remains of his mother, over whose body he is supposedly keeping a vigil, reminding the reader of how Gyuri devotes more time to his uncles than to his soon-to-be-departed father, to whom Gyuri barely wishes farewell. Then, when the funeral is over, Meursault occupies himself with a former typist at his office, Marie, which is paralleled in Gyuri's growing interest in his upstairs neighbor, Annamarie. In both cases, Louise O. Vasvári notes that the death of the parent freed the protagonist of personal responsibility (260).

In the second half of *The Stranger*, Meursault is put on trial for murder. It is here Camus takes the opportunity to reason through the implications of his protagonist's actions and the protagonist's attitude towards the world, which allowed him to undertake these actions. Indeed it is not so much what Meursault does as how he does it that is the subject of his trial, which would have been of particular interest to Kertész, whose protagonist Gyuri faced a similar opprobrium. Meursault accustoms himself quickly to incarceration and punishment: he is passive in his own defense to the point of aiding in his own conviction and rejects the comfort of the chaplain, with whom he argues about the existence of god. More than for his act of murder, Meursault is convicted for having smoked a cigarette at his mother's funeral, flirting with the nurses, and not crying. He is convicted for behavior outside the norm. The story ends with Meursault going to the gallows happy and proud of his happiness: "I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution ... and that they greet me with cries of hate" (117). And just as the opening lines of *The Stranger* are critical to understand *Fatelessness*, so are the closing lines: Vasvári points out one of Meursault's last lines, "I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again" (171) and this recalls Gyuri's final reflections about his happiness in the camps (261). Despite describing experiences which are terrible and upsetting — murder, a death sentence, the prospect of public execution — readers could easily say Camus does not transmit either sensation to the reader largely on account of the attitude of the hero, a person who does not grasp the events which surround him the way the reader does, and whose responses to the world fall somewhere between bumptious and repellent (qualities which are replicated to varying degrees by Kertész's protagonist, Gyuri).

Having established the positions of Nietzsche and Camus on the individual's response to eternal recurrence, I now look at how Kertész's work corresponds. Specifically, I focus on how Gyuri is a literary allegory of Meursault burdened by the knowledge of "the greatest weight" illustrated in *Fatelessness* as the awareness of the eternal recurrence of life in the concentration camps. When Gyuri arrives at Auschwitz in chapter four, his immediate response is to note the appearance of the prisoners in charge of evacuating the railway car: "After all, this was the first time in my life that I had seen, up close at any rate, real convicts, in the striped duds of criminals, and with shaven skulls in round caps" (77). During the selection process, he observes the doctor examining him noticing his "studied, serious, and attentive glance," "very fine figure," "longish features, rather narrow lips, and kind-looking blue or gray — at any rate pale — eyes" (85-86). As he enters the extermination camp, Gyuri is captivated by the "gleaming body" of a dirigible. A couple of weeks on, during his transfer to Buchenwald, he is captivated by the ridge on which the new camp lies, "with the red-tiled roofs of the village houses in the valleys down below delightful to the eye" (83).

Devoid of emotion, Gyuri's account is a demonstration of the lucidity and indifference of the individual in constant revolt. As Gyuri describes life in Buchenwald, his experiences are measured in number, not quality, and comprised of description, not explanation. And as the gulf widens between Gyuri's starved, beaten self and the inscrutable and often arbitrary mechanisms that direct his path — becoming ever more absurd — Gyuri maintains the prescribed response, so close to the stone that, as Camus writes and Kertész reiterates, he is already stone himself (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 108; *Galeerentagebuch* 52). Throughout his imprisonment Gyuri rejects overarching explanations, comparisons, solutions, narratives, and storylines tempting as they may be. He neither falls back on the scraps of religion that cling to him nor joins in the dreams of his friend Bandi Citrom, who turns

the concentration camp into a way station on his odyssey back to "the lights of Budapest" (141).

As if this were not enough, Kertész reifies the connection to his predecessors in the choice of his protagonist's last name, Köves, which is Hungarian for "stony" (in German *Steinig*, see Földényi 285). The connection to stones is also made apparent in the duty assigned to Gyuri in the concentration camp, which is to move sacs of crushed stone for little apparent purpose and with no sense of progress. Even Sisyphus himself makes an appearance as the mascot that meets every inmate arriving at Buchenwald. A statue of him stands at a clearing between the emerging forks of a road, "head thrust forward and one leg kicked out high behind in imitation of running, while the two hands, in a cramped grip, clasp an incredibly massive cube of stone to the abdomen" (123). Understood as an allegory, Gyuri can be seen as a defiant and triumphal hero, an unblinking observer aware of his every action. Understanding the Sisyphus story that underlies Gyuri's attitudes and actions also eases the reader through one of the more perplexing passages in the story, at the end of chapter seven.

At this point, Gyuri, who has deteriorated to the state of a *Muselman*, is being transported amidst a pile of corpses from the labor camp Tröglitz back to Buchenwald (on the *Muselman* in concentration camps see, e.g., Friedland). Upon arrival he is dumped on the ground, and both reader and protagonist presume the end is near: "Only one thing preoccupied me," Gyuri says, "one thought ... how they did it here: was it with gas, as at Auschwitz, or maybe by means of some medicine, which I had also heard about" (186). Next to Gyuri, a man is plucked from the pile and about to be tossed onto a handcart when "a snatch of speech that I was barely able to make out came to my attention ... 'I p...pro...test'" (187). The man's fate is unknown. Gyuri, however, finds himself spared. His unlikely rescue is not owing to any action or expression of will to live, but follows from his observation of the world around him. In looking over the camp, Gyuri sees a dense landscape of barracks, bare trees, naked *Muselmänner*, tangles of barbed-wire, *Kommando*-s carrying out everyday duties, "suspect" plumes of smoke, a procession of bearers groaning under the weight of a steaming cauldron, and he says to the reader that, despite "all deliberation, sense, insight, and sober reason," he "would like to live a little bit longer in this beautiful concentration camp" (189). This returns the reader to the two bases upon which Nietzsche's and Camus's philosophy is built: that no matter how hopeless, brutal, and pointless Sisyphus's life may be, we must imagine him happy — Nietzsche had long linked physical pain to mental triumph (Safranski 178) — and that voluntary death is not possible for the person living absurdly in an absurd world because such a death would put an end to "the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe" (Camus, *The Rebel* 6). Gyuri's protest in the form of observation continues his encounter and thereby prolongs his life.

By modeling Gyuri's world on one envisioned by Nietzsche, Gyuri's punishments on those suffered by Sisyphus and Gyuri himself on Meursault, Kertész's novel joins a lineage of ideas without dates, birth or death — Indic myths, Homeric poetry, pre-Socratic philosophy, the works of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Camus — thereby achieving his professed aim of writing not about a time and place (Europe during the Holocaust), but about an idea (the sensation of fatelessness) that is closed to the vicissitudes of history played out century after century. Writing in from this temporally defined perspective means unifying the present work with its transcendental source, which exists outside the passage of time. In this "time of writing," *Fatelessness* enters the repeating cycle of time it describes and puts the Kertész's subsequent works as revisions of this initial allegory within the same closed circle. Eternal recurrence, then, is both the content and the form of Kertész's authorial investigations.

What if, however, we were to temporarily put the above argument to the side and go into the head of the person pushing the rock (or writing the novel)? Regard this person not from Apollonian heights as an object in an elaborate philosophical argument, but from ground level as an individual defying an argument? What if we were to read *Fatelessness* not from the ends of teleology, but through the medium of experience and shift our perspective from the person who knows how the story goes to the person who does not and thereby keeps the story going? To side with Gyuri against eternal recurrence, continuing his work even as it adds up to nothing? This is how Kertész describes life in the opening section of *Fiasco*, a novel about the attempt to write *Fatelessness*. It is ten o'clock in the morning, the appointed time for the "old man" to resume writing his story, except each time he reviews the current draft he fixates on a detail that needs to be added, modified or removed, and as a result the work is stalled. The next day the scene recurs. The old man returns to his study at ten, changes a few details, never gets further ahead. The next day, the same thing happens. And yet, the

writer does not stop. He always returns, keeps working, still hopeful of finding his way along a path he imagines stretching out in front of him. Sisyphus is the model for the writer and it would be tempting to interpret the scene through the paradigm of allegory. But seeing the world through the eyes of Sisyphus, rather than looking down on him, leads us to reverse the previous interpretation.

At the moral heart of the individual existing in a universe of eternal recurrence is the idea that failure is guaranteed, but one battles on nonetheless. This is the self-conflicted logic that motivates the actions of Sisyphus and the concentration camp inmate and it is the theme that animates almost all Kertész's texts. It is a philosophical and ethical position that can be traced to Heraclitus, whose fragments on the necessarily elusive past are not denials of the possibility of capturing history so much as challenges to do so more effectively, and Plato, who views it as the goal of the changing and imperfect real to achieve the status of the unchanging perfect ideal, even if it never can (*Timaeus* 67). The Sisyphian struggle reappears in the words of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who urges his followers to see any recognition of self-satisfaction as a sure sign of failure — "What is the greatest thing you can experience?" Zarathustra asks. "It is the hour of the greatest contempt" (42). For Kertész, Zarathustra's decree is an incitement to further questions and renewed self-criticism, which produce further responses and more work. How have I failed and what could I do differently? Where have I destroyed what I sought to create?

Despite sharing almost nothing stylistically with Kertész's subsequent novels which make self-criticizing struggle an overt part of the narrative, *Fatelessness* is nevertheless saturated by the writer's self-conflicted spirit. Once attuned, the reader sees evidence of it everywhere. Look, for example, at the first sentence of the novel, "I didn't go to school today," and see how it is undercut by the double-qualifying second sentence, "Or rather, I did go, but only to ask my class teacher's permission to take the day off" (3). It is present in Gyuri's double-edged experience of trauma as well as in every "but then," "although I no longer remember," "after all," "not to speak of," "and if I wish to be strictly accurate," dispersed throughout the narrative. Insofar as the writer is unable to fulfill his task and constantly returns himself to square one, one can say he resembles Kertész, who is on a similarly unfulfillable path. However there is a distinction. In the "time of the author," this outcome is a result of an external imposition that dictates "impossibility" is a necessary condition of existence. In the "time of the writer," the impossibility of fulfillment is self-imposed — a result of the mind working against itself. Where the author accepts and recognizes the iron-clad parameters of eternal recurrence, the writer denies them. Whether it is Sisyphus, Gyuri, or the writer Kertész, each continues to face his insurmountable circumstances only because he imagines them surmountable. Kertész has Gyuri call this "continuing my uncontinuable life" (261) and we see the same determination in Sisyphus's undimmed will to push the rock up the mountainside, which is echoed in Gyuri's eagerness to transport a double load of cement bags while on duty (170). Inside Sisyphus is the thought this might be the last boulder he pushes and inside Gyuri is the thought if he catches the guard's eye with the double load on his back, he will endear himself to the guard, and his burden will be alleviated if just for a moment. In other words, each performs his task because he sees the possibility of breaking free of eternal recurrence. Kertész discusses this liberation in "Eureka!," wherein he focuses on the possibilities of linear progress, where the future is not inscribed by the past. This is the hope of entry into history, change, discontinuation, newness.

Imagination is part of what makes struggle possible. At times Gyuri's will to live is founded on it. Inside the camps he imagines himself at home in Budapest, imagines sleeping in through *Appell*, imagines escaping over the fence (155-62). At the same time, Gyuri knows imagination cannot be allowed to take over. This is another function of his favored expressions, "naturally" and "of course." Rather than denoting the natural or the logical, these words act as curbs on Gyuri's thoughts, almost self-remonstrations against a narrator (or reader) who thinks Gyuri's story could have unfolded differently from the way it did. Which, in a backhanded way, belies a world of alternatives existing within the storyteller's mind (it may be worth noting the character introduced alongside Sisyphus in *The Odyssey* is Tantalus. Being "tantalized" is a major aspect of Sisyphus's punishment [*The Odyssey* 268]). Rather than blocking progress, then, vacillation between what is and what could be sustains the work. For Sisyphus and Gyuri, this is the work of pushing boulders and surviving in a concentration camp. For the writer, the work, parallel but not comparable, comprises the attempt to write a novel about the Holocaust and to write it in a country hostile towards its memory while toiling in obscurity

and inviting rejection by trying to create something of enduring originality. It is to persist despite this in hopes of success and to not allow the "guarantee" of failure to stop him, as surely as it will. Writing a novel is always a reality-defying endeavor and in the case of *Fatelessness* where the stakes are at their highest because of the novel's subject and its meaning for the author, the defiance of reality is amplified. Rather than seeking to resolve the tension between what is and what could be, Kertész the writer incorporates it into his work on a number of levels. As a result, evidence of the divided self appears in everything from words to images to archetypes — all symbols, in one form or another. Whereas an allegory unifies original (Sisyphus) and iteration (Gyuri), symbols are "richly — even infinitely — suggestive in reference" and the writer Kertész harnesses symbolism's potential for self-contradiction. The result is a profusion of irony, defined in simplest terms as a difference between what is asserted and what is meant.

The first chapters of *Fatelessness* are written in a subset of dramatic irony that I define following Clare Colebrook as "cosmic irony." This is where human events and intentions "exist alongside another order of fate beyond our predictions" although here one might take "beyond our predictions" to mean "beyond the character's or his contemporary's predictions" (Colebrook 14). With every unknowing step Gyuri takes, the reader cringes. Off the bus, into the barracks, on the train, into the showers. The reader knows where Gyuri's going; the writer knows where he is going; in fact, it strains credulity to think Gyuri himself does not have some inkling that leaving eastward from Budapest meant quite likely not coming back, something generally understood by a Budapest Jew of that time. After initiation in Auschwitz, when Gyuri stops regarding himself as a "guest in captivity...in full accordance with the propensity to delusion," cosmic irony gives way to verbal irony, where what is said and what is meant are directly opposed (101). There is the example of Gyuri's recollection of his headmaster's instruction, "we learn from life, not school" (113; where "life" could easily be substituted with "death"), Gyuri's observation that "even in Auschwitz, it seems, it is possible to be bored — assuming one is privileged" (119; "boredom" itself being a privilege and "privilege" is a description of what many would regard as a right to life), and most notably, there is Gyuri's pile-up of "naturallys" and "of courses" that, in addition to acting as curbs on Gyuri forked consciousness, all mean exactly the opposite of what they say. As the disturbed journalist points out, there is nothing "natural" about a concentration camp, in fact just the opposite (247). Irony also extends to other characters in *Fatelessness*, one example being the "luckless man" who appears shortly after Gyuri arrives at the police station (49). The luckless man, as it turns out, has a fair bit of luck. After suffering through a beating at the barracks — "I was left to the last," he says, "and that may have been my good fortune" (61) — he later appears, against all odds, at Tröglitz concentration camp, joking with Gyuri that the "U" on their uniform stands for "not guilty" (142). By comparison, the "expert" who arrives at the barracks and impresses Gyuri with his bearing and apparent knowledge of the situation (and aloof attitude towards the luckless man) does not survive selection at Auschwitz, much to his own astonishment (49, 88).

So far I looked at extrapolations of irony in its initial sense, as a dissembler, saying what it does not mean. Kertész, however, has taken the form one step further, into what I term "hyperbolic irony," wherein words mean both their original definitions and their opposites at the same time (see Wiljer). Hyperbolic irony reaches into what Colebrook calls the heart of the "problem of irony," the constantly changing location of meaning in an ironic work (21). Does meaning rest on the surface or in the depths of a message? In the current or historical usage of a term? In an agreed or contested meaning of a word? To all of the above, hyperbolic irony answers yes. The luckless man, for example, is lucky to survive until Tröglitz, although of course he was just as unlucky for ending up in Tröglitz. He is lucky for slipping through the concentrationary universe, but unlucky to be there in the first place. So what is luck? It's a word that, like all others, has two edges that cut against each other. Neither ends up the victor; neither is struck down; the duel continues without resolution. "Naturally" and "of course" take on the same self-conflicted quality of hyperbolic irony. As the journalist points out, there is nothing natural about a concentration camp, although for a person like Gyuri, for whom all experience is natural in the absence of an alternative experience, the word is perfectly appropriate to this situation. For a Jew born at his time and place, not going to a concentration camp would have been unnatural. The word *fatelessness*, among its many meanings, describes both the state of a person unencumbered by predestination and one who's unalterable destiny is nothingness, it means

free will and it means the opposite. In hyperbolic irony, no particular interpretation has the final word: the tension within its divided self goes on *ad infinitum*.

It is easy enough to imagine Kertész's forked consciousness in schematic terms and to say that when he writes he means two things at the same time, but carrying both meanings within oneself simultaneously is another matter. This is not an exercise in relativism, arguing between one and the other, but of absolutism and it means that for Kertész the beautiful concentration camp is horrible and hideous and also beautiful: the dusk hour in the concentration camp is happiness, which is terrible sadness and also "happiness." Opposites do not cancel each other out as logically they would, but amplify each other. In temporal terms, Kertész's irony reintroduces history and all it implies — contingency, possibility, multiplicity, ambiguity, change — into the lapidary, fixed, allegorical framework used by the author. While from above we can see the work as a to-and-fro between one extreme and another — beauty and hideousness, happiness and tragedy — which amounts to a kind of closed loop, an eternal recurrence, from ground level the field seems infinitely open in character, plot, idea. Every ironic bifurcation leads the writer deeper into the meaning of those words, demanding further engagement with their implications and potentials. For every conclusion we reach, we must accept the opposite conclusion. The writer may acknowledge that on an abstract level a greater circle surrounds him, that he lives in a world of limited possibilities, but from his own vantage point, in his own time, he disregards that circle and its constrictions and progresses in something like a linear fashion, on an as yet undiscovered path.

In conclusion, ironizing allegory — which is what Kertész accomplishes — means destroying the unification of time implied by allegory. Irony unspools time, but according to its own logic, which is not necessarily linear. Sisyphus remains a key component of *Fatelessness* to the degree that the novel could not have been written as it was without him, but, for Kertész, Sisyphus is not a Greek myth that serves as the basis for Gyuri. Rather it is Gyuri who serves as the basis for Sisyphus. In Kertész's ironic construction, the reader thinks of Sisyphus as coming from the concentration camps and Tartarus as only a small part of the concentrationary universe.

Note: The above article is a revised excerpt from Rubin, Eric Beck. *Then Cover the Abyss with Trance: An Exploration of the Novelistic Representation of the Holocaust*. Ph.D. Dissertation. London: Goldsmiths College University of London, 2013. Copyright release to the author.

Works Cited

- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000.
- Camus, Albert. *The Rebel*. Trans. Anthony Bower. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Matthew Ward. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- Colebrook, Clare. *Irony*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Földényi, László F. Schicksallosigkeit. *Ein Imre-Kertész-Wörterbuch*. Trans. Ákos Doma. Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2009.
- Friedland, Amos. "Imre Kertész, Hegel, and the Philosophy of Reconciliation." *Imre Kertész and Holocaust Literature*. Ed. Louise O. Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2005. 51-64.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.
- Kertész, Imre. "Eureka! The 2002 Nobel Lecture." Trans. Ivan Sanders. *World Literature Today* 77.1 (2003): 4-8.
- Kertész, Imre. *Fatelessness*. Trans. Tim Wilkinson. New York: Random House, 2004.
- Kertész, Imre. *Fiasco*. Trans. Tim Wilkinson. London: Melville House, 2011.
- Kertész, Imre. *Galeerentagebuch*. Trans. Kristin Schwamm. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2002.
- Kertész, Imre, and Zoltán Hafner. *Dossier K*. Trans. Tim Wilkinson. London: Melville House, 2013.
- Kertész, Imre, and Ivan Sanders. "Imre Kertész: Excerpts from the Harriman Lecture October 21, 2004." [harriman.columbia.edu](http://harriman.columbia.edu/files/harriman/00220_11.pdf) (21 October 2004): <http://harriman.columbia.edu/files/harriman/00220_11.pdf>.
- Koltai, Kornélia. "Imre Kertész's *Fatelessness* and the Myth about Auschwitz in Hungary." *Imre Kertész and Holocaust Literature*. Ed. Louise O. Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2005. 125-37.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1974.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
- Plato. *Timaeus and Critias*. Trans. Desmond Lee. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.
- Safranski, Rüdiger. *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*. Trans. Shelley Frisch. New York: Norton, 2002.
- Scheibner, Tamás. "Imre Kertész's *Jegyzőkönyv* (*Sworn Statement*) and the Self Deprives of Itself." *Imre Kertész and Holocaust Literature*, edited by Louise O. Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2005. 205-19.
- Spiró, György. "In Art Only the Radical Exists: Imre Kertész." *The New Hungarian Quarterly* 43 (2002): 29-37.
- Theil, Stefan. "The Last Word: An Interview with Imre Kertész." *isurvived.org* (2002): <<http://isurvived.org/KerteszINTERVIEW.html>>.

Vasvári, Louise O. "The Novelness of Imre Kertész' *Sorstalanság (Fatelessness)*." *Imre Kertész and Holocaust Literature*. Ed. Louise O. Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2005. 258-70.
Wiljer, Robert. Personal interview with Eric Beck Rubin. Toronto, 2005.

Author's profile: Eric Beck Rubin teaches history and theory of architecture at the University of Toronto. His interests in scholarship include the representation of history and memory in architecture and literature, the representation of traumatic events in public monuments and memorials, and the novels of Imre Kertész and Georges Perec. His publications include "Dresden/Dresden," *Descant Magazine* (2013) and "Georges Perec, Lost and Found in the Void: *The Memoirs of an Indirect Witness* " *Journal of Modern Literature* (2014). E-mail: <eric.beckrubin@utoronto.ca>