

Nobel in Literature 2002 Imre Kertész's Aesthetics of the Holocaust

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### Recommended Citation

Molnár, Sára. "Nobel in Literature 2002 Imre Kertész's Aesthetics of the Holocaust." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.1 (2003): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1182>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1182)

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**Volume 5 Issue 1 (March 2003) Article 5**  
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**"Nobel in Literature 2002 Imre Kertész's Aesthetics of the Holocaust"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1/5>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.1 (2003)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1>>

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**Abstract:** In her paper, "Nobel in Literature 2002 Imre Kertész's Aesthetics of the Holocaust," Sára Molnár discusses aspects of Nobel Laureate Imre Kertész's reception in Hungary. In her analysis, Molnár discusses aesthetic features of the author's use of language. Molnár's study illuminates the problem of authorship and questions relating to intersections of fiction and autobiography in Kertész's oeuvre. Molnár's argument is that although the author's personal history is indeed important in his texts, this "author" should not be identified with Kertész himself and that although Kertész's themes and subjects appear to be autobiographical, not even his diaries should or can be interpreted as autobiographical documents. As it appears in discussions about Kertész's texts in Hungarian media and scholarship -- the latter very limited to date -- an autobiographical interpretation represents a simplification and neglect of the fictional characters called into life in the author's narratives. Further, Molnár suggests that Kertész, influenced by other texts in holocaust literature such as texts by Tadeusz Borowski, Primo Levi, Jean Améry, or Paul Celan, has found a language and an aesthetic to present holocaust literature authentically where his writing is also relevant to issues and problems of our time.

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**Sára Molnár**

### **Nobel in Literature 2002 Imre Kertész's Aesthetics of the Holocaust**

In his fiction, Kertész sets himself the task of (re)presenting aesthetically both Nazi and Soviet and communist totalitarianism and often comments on the fact that for him, as compared with other Auschwitz survivors such as Celan or Améry who committed suicide, the notion preventing him from committing suicide was in fact his experience of disillusion with "freedom" and democracy in the communist Hungary. After surviving the concentration camp, Kertész faced an other totalitarianism, a fact which helped him get rid of his humanistic illusions if any remained after Auschwitz. As he declared in his Nobel address, "If I look back now and size up honestly the situation I was in at the time, I have to conclude that in the West, in a free society, I probably would not have been able to write the novel known by readers today as *Fateless*, the novel singled out by the Swedish Academy for the highest honour" (Kertész <<http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/index.html>>). When reading Kertész, it is important to realise that he is writing from the specificities of the Central European context, a context of particular relevance to the history of the Jewry and the culture of the region (on the Central European context of Kertész's work, see Totosy <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1/6/>>). In Hungary, Soviet and communist rule followed Nazism and these historical events forced Kertész to recognize totalitarianism as a general social and human condition. For Kertész, Auschwitz was not a coincidence but a logical and unavoidable consequence of modern European culture and Auschwitz -- in a reversal of morals -- came to represent the power of "god" and the "father," in turn symbolizing the collapse of Greek-Christian culture.

The fact that Kertész is the first Hungarian to win the Nobel Prize in Literature generate(d) much debate in the Hungarian media about the reasons of the neglect of Hungarian literature in Western literature and why his work did not attract much attention in Hungary as it did in some other countries such as in Sweden and Germany. There were some good and illuminating observations in the Hungarian media about the rationale for this double neglect including the incapability of Hungarian society to confront its proto-Nazi and fascist history, Hungarians' roles in the genocide of Hungarian Jews in 1944, and the existence and continuous re-occurrence of anti-Semitism. Kertész has inconvenient subjects indeed: the holocaust, the distortion of human integrity, the loss of language and identity during communist dictatorship (see, e.g., *Failure* 1988), the unresolved problems and hatred in Hungarian society after the end of Soviet and communist rule in 1989 (see, e.g., *Someone Else* 1997), the illusion of freedom, the old structures which survived totalitarianism, the persistence of unlawful laws, and defencelessness (see, e.g., *Notebook* 1993), the "system" of authority, as Kertész mentions in one of his interviews and its impact on people of the post-communist countries (see Szilágyi). While these themes are relatively common in Central European culture and literature, in Kertész's oeuvre we find a unique language and narrative position. In *Fateless*, for example, there is no retrospective point of view, no explanation of what happened, and no release even for the so-called "victims" (Hungarians under German occupation in 1944), a technique suggesting that the phase is not over, the holocaust is a continuum and part of our present time. In his Nobel address, Kertész declares this mentality vehemently: "nothing has happened since Auschwitz that could reverse or refute Auschwitz" (Kertész <<http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/index.html>>). In his writing, at the end of the stories the past tense narrative is exchanged with the present tense suggesting a continuation of the plot even in our present days (e.g., *Fateless*, *Kaddish*, *Notebook*, *The British Flag*).

The lack of responsibility towards the holocaust in Hungarian society could be one reason why many readers and critics did not/do not understand or did not/do not want to understand the irony and self-irony in Kertész's prose, one of the important poetical features of his fictional narrative and took offence at this irony. Failing to realize the self-irony and self-reflexivity of the narrator, critics are also unable to differentiate between the text types and narratives of the documentary (autobiography)

and fiction. Although *Fateless* was declared a novel, many critics were more interested in the life story of its author instead of the poetical and narrative characteristics of the novel. In fact, this mentality was extended to the literary reception of *Failure*, Kertész's second novel. The tendency of reducing this oeuvre to the author's biography is even more curious as can be seen in the case of round table conversation about *Someone Else* published in the journal *Beszélő*. *Someone Else*, a text on the boundaries of essay, diary, and fiction, experienced an ambivalent literary reception: some critics say that the writer is vague or possibly wrong with respect to his description of "paranoid" and "apocalyptic" reality, and did not describe Hungary faithfully. This book, as do most of Kertész's books, has strong emotional impact on both readers and critics who seem to forget that this is not a documentary, on the one hand, and on the other, that the narrator speaks ironically of his own role as a "prophet" of the truth while presenting the apocalypses of our days, and thus showing that this is only one, though a valid and very personal point of view. Most curious is to me why Kertész's irony would not be understood when irony has been for a long time and still is one of the main features of Hungarian -- and Central European in general -- literature as well as public discourse.

Another frequent manner of interpreting Kertész's books in Hungarian literary reception is that the commentators identify with one of the author's heroes or with the author himself and "correct" what is being said or argue with their views as if the work were a philosophical study instead of fiction. One example is the discussion of *Kaddish*: the critic Sándor Radnóti in his otherwise competent review of the novel criticizes the narrator's "inconsequent" and "pathological" pride, that he does not let anyone, not even his wife, interrupt him in his monologue. Péter Szirák, another reviewer, also objects to the unavoidable veracity of the narrator's voice and points out that the author never lets himself to be interrupted, thus claiming truth without allowing the other characters to agree or disagree. For this reason, Szirák considers *Kaddish* a failure in a sense that the confessional and theoretical voice cannot find its own adequate form. In my opinion, this kind of literary criticism shows a surprising lack of sophistication even among the most competent critics because they do not argue from a neutral point of view. Instead of poetic and aesthetic points of view and appreciation, they assert their own resentment and incomprehension regarding Kertész's subject and language, claiming that they have had enough of his pessimism, or as one reviewer, Sándor Bazsányi, calls it, a "rhetoric of unhappiness" (1744). Moreover, Péter Dávidházi, another prominent critic, writing about *The Galley Diaries*, asks for a happier and untroubled work after the gloomy ones (351) and Sándor Radnóti calls Kertész's book "monomaniacal" (12). These critics appear to be profoundly uneasy being confronted by the voice of the single narrator on the novel and, surprisingly, are unable to evaluate the novel as a text of that particular type of fictional narration.

In Kertész's novels, most characteristically in *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, polyphony appears in the language of one narrator which is not only confessional or theoretical, but also ironic towards his own truth as we can read in the so-called "monologue" in the text, a prayer of a potential father commenting on the impossibility of having a child after surviving Auschwitz. Considering the fact that Jacques Derrida, for instance, compares in *Envois* the desire for a child to the desire for universal truths in a sense that both of them represent a chance to avoid death and finitude, makes it easier to understand why the narrator of the *Kaddish* says no to a child and, at the same time, no to the language of power and authoritative statements by means of irony towards his own truths. The polyphony of the narrator's statements and the discontinuity of his stream of consciousness can be followed in the following passage from *Kaddish*: "And if in the final analysis survival isn't achieved, which of course can only be achieved at a higher level (Dr. Oblath), then (we both together) there are not only the slightest indicators for this idea but its opposite appears to be the case, namely the collapse into ignorance... And so on, and so on we blew the false notes of the English horn" (10). The other voices in the narration, the hero's wife and the character Dr. Oblath, accomplish only what the ironic voice of the narrator has already started: the decomposition of his own truth and thus the use of any authoritative and totalitarian language. The "I"-narrator has the faculties of a comic or fool who,

in Baudelaire's terms, is able to be both himself and somebody else at the same time. If we consider Kertész's essays and lectures as a context and intertexture of his novels -- and this interpretation seems to be correct because of the mutual and continuous connotations of the texts -- "the false notes of the English horn" could be interpreted as the self-irony of the essayist Kertész, the irony of a static and moralizing attitude towards the holocaust. In *Kaddish*, Kertész creates a language which displays the fragility and sometimes the impossibility of talking generally and without responsibility about the holocaust.

Another reason for the dismissal of Kertész's work could be that literary theorists were focused on the so-called "turn of the '80-s" in Hungarian literature and on how the contemporary Western European forms of literary expression and post-modernity appear in Hungarian literature. In my view, it can be construed that it might not have been fashionable to write about an author whose plots and heroes do not encompass the movement toward modernity by his refusal to banish the coverage of reality, personal confession, and ethical relations from his prose. For example, this view could be one reason for the fact that Ernő Kulcsár-Szabó did not mention Kertész in his *History of Hungarian Literature between 1945-1991*. While the personality of the author is very important in Kertész's work, this "author" cannot be identified with Kertész himself: such an identification is a gross simplification and neglect of the fictional character called into life by the narrative. In fact, when one considers the autobiographical aspects of Kertész's prose, the interpretation of his oeuvre becomes even more complicated and multi-layered. In *The British Flag*, the narrator of Kertész himself talks about the insufficiency of literary formulation when describing the experience of totalitarianism and its destructive impact on personality. He declares that the only acceptable form of expressing the experience of the holocaust would be the evidence given by the witness, the testimony as a form of literary expression. Although Kertész is not a moralist and he never judges, his description of Nazism and communism conveys the concept of a testimony in a literary form with both aesthetic and strong ethical connotations

Kertész, of course, is not the only one who struggles with the incommunicability of the holocaust on one hand, and the fear of forgetting on the other, by urging a new language and a new way of thinking. Others such as Yerushalmi in his book *Zachor*, talking about the relation between Jewish history and memory, declares that historiography cannot replace collective retrospection. Furthermore, Yerushalmi claims that despite considerable historical research about the Holocaust, it was not the historian, but the writers who could form a real notion of the concept because of the fact that with the holocaust, history became incommunicable. Hayden White, examining Nazism and the *Endlösung*, tries to find an answer to the question of whether historical realities or the form of narrative determine their own genre, which would mean that even the holocaust could be interpreted in many different ways without any restriction. White takes the notion of "intransitive writing" from Roland Barthes, a discourse in which the subject (the author) is not independent from its object: as the writer writes about himself, and thus, he transforms writing into a means of seeing and self-understanding. This style of writing is, in White's opinion, the only possible way to write about the holocaust, where giving up all our previous ideas about realistic description is necessary in order to be able to confront the experiences of the twentieth century. White goes even further and suggests that all the Jews should tell about the genocide of their own people in the same way as they were commanded by God to tell the exodus from Egypt to their children, as if it happened to themselves. This is one reason the traditional distinction between autobiography and fiction should be at this experience suspended, or at least in view of Kertész's and other holocaust writers' prose needs to be reinterpreted.

It is not seldom that holocaust writers choose the first person singular. For instance, Tadeusz Borowski, like Kertész, has an 'I'-narrator while writing about the concentration camp. While Borowski's text might have the illusion of an autobiography or a simple diary and while his readers identify the author with his hero -- and Borowski was accused of murders -- in fact his stories show how impossible is the concept of identity of the 'I' in the concentration camp. In his short stories such

as in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentleman*, Borowski simply describes the loss of identity, the total assimilation of the 'I' -- the hero of autobiographies -- to the conditions of the camp. Through this process to shock we can see only a lucky survivor without any moral problems, who is absolutely loyal to the rules of the camp of annihilation. And the camp appears as not unnatural and where it seems easy to get accustomed to its rules. And there is no big difference between the prisoners' lives before and after the camp. This is the most realistic, yet the most shocking way of describing the camp and the only true remembering of the millions of victims. In the case of Kertész and before him with Borowski, the first person singular narrative was obviously intentional: it helps to lay bare all kinds of ideologies and myths about the narrative of the holocaust. One good example of this is that they both describe the football field in Auschwitz as an important aspect of the camp, for example, an aspect that seems to downgrade conventional narrative patterns about Auschwitz. It is just as unconventional as the nostalgia of Kertész's heron in *Fateless*, Köves, for the evenings of the concentration camp and his longing to be back in the camp again. At the end of *Fateless* he plans to talk about the happiness of the concentration camps, a happiness which understood as a trap by him, an absurdity that makes Köves continue his life even if it is not possible.

Kertész, who regards Borowski a true witness of the holocaust, writes in his essays about the necessity of a new language which could describe this new experience of reality which overwrites our moral and ethical categories and cultural concepts. Paul Celan, one of the most representative holocaust poets also tried to find an answer for this experience by rethinking of poetry and poetic language (on this, see, e.g., Ozsváth). Kertész calls this new way of speaking the "language of exile," the language of atonality, which also means the impossibility of identifying with the existing conditions in a dictatorship. In his texts, this atonality, or the lack of harmony, is presented by irony, a clear linguistically formulated distance and objectivity together with the nearness of the witness. This double tone and point of view can be observed in *Fateless* and in *Kaddish* particularly well, where the touching monologue of the narrator is often interrupted by his own doubt and scepticism giving no place to sentimentalism. One good example is the last passage of *Fateless*, a typical Kertész sentence of irony and contingency which makes any moral lesson impossible: Köves plans to talk about the happiness of the camp if anybody asks him at all and if he does not forget it himself.

In comparison to Jorge Semprun's *The Long Journey*, a representative work of holocaust literature, one difference is quite clear. While the Semprun's hero talks much about love, solidarity, and friendship which helps him bear the tortures and accept even the death of his friends, in *Fateless* there is no presence of such human assets. The initialisation of Köves takes place in a totalitarianism that transforms not only the outside world, but also the inner and most personal world of people around him. This is why the description of even the deepest feelings in this novel seems to be a deeply ironic farce: the holocaust did not have any heroes. As Kertész declares in a conversation about *Schindler's List*, Spielberg's film presents only a rare exception of solidarity, of people who had the chance to do something good (Mihancsik 24). In Kertész's opinion, Spielberg hardly knew anything about the real nature of the holocaust, least of all that it meant the collapse of European culture (Mihancsik 24). Semprun knows much more about it than Spielberg, but he is still creating myths of friendship and solidarity, as if he was trying to avoid total hopelessness.

Another important holocaust text of memory is Zvi Kolitz's *Joszl Rakover Talks to God*, an intensely confessional text in the first person singular. The narrator is supposed to be one of the last fighters of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, writing his diary and praying to God on the last afternoon before he dies. The text of Kolitz was often taken by his readers as a real testimony, a documentary from the ghetto, although the author in fact was not in Warsaw during the war. His touching story presents a rabbi who lost everything he had, his properties, his large family, and his friends but not his faith and loyalty to God. And this why Joszl Rakover's personal integrity and dignity was not annihilated. In Kertész's oeuvre things are different: he presents a totalitarian world where nothing remained untouched and stable, not even the human soul. If there is no fate, there is no worthy death. Köves does his best to



adapt to this world, which seems to be the most natural and acceptable world known to him and he even tries to understand his murderers. Good, on the contrary, has the most irrational effects in the concentration camp. The narrator of the *Kaddish* tells a story about a teacher in the sense of a traditional rabbi who is also a teacher in the context of service to a community who holds the food portion of ten prisoners and risks his own life in order to bring the food ratio to the boy (the narrator himself) laying on a stretcher. However, he is not presented as a hero, but as a prisoner who has other rules to obey than the rules of the camp, but, for this reason, precious little chance to survive: "I wanted to say something, and it seems that my total surprise screamed unabashedly from my face, because as he quickly headed back -- if they didn't find him in his place they'd kill him -- he replied with recognizable disgust on his moribund face: 'Well, what did you expect!'" (33). In each of his books, Kertész creates a special linguistic expression and context of irony, either of confession such as in *Kaddish* or the impersonal as in *Fateless*, strategies of narration which oppose pathos or self-pity. Thus, the results of his narrative strategies give us a more realistic and extensive picture of the holocaust, a disclosure of this "negative revelation" with all its consequences than either Semprun or Kolitz (see Szántó 35).

László Márton, a contemporary Hungarian writer, in his novel, *Árnyas főutca (Main Street with Shadows)*, attempts to give an account of the Hungarian holocaust, and like Kertész, comes to the conclusion that something irreparable had happened, and the evident signs for that are the loss of identity and the language of all those who survived, victims, the offenders, and unconcerned spectators. His omnipotent narrator makes up a story about the imaginary persons of a photographic collection, the only records which remained of the Jews who had lived in a small Hungarian village and were deported in 1944. The narrator is trying continuously to find a chance to save the lives of his heroes, but is unable to find rescue. There were no people around helping the Jews, not even their own neighbours in the village. There is only one heroine who survives 1944 and tries to live in the same society which had let her family die. Márton's Jewish heroine surviving the loss of her family can find no continuity in her identity before and after the war, she is not the same person, although the world around her tries to be the same again as if nothing has happened. The narrator also comes to the conclusion that for those who survived the discrimination and mass murder of the Jews, there is no continuity of the 'I' before and after the holocaust. The world is irrevocably different and this is why people who want to relate this experience have to find a new and authentic language.

In sum, my argument is that Kertész's oeuvre is best analysed in the specific context of Central European history and culture by attention to the region's political, social, and cultural conditions resulting from several types of totalitarianism and conditions of post-totalitarianism, as well as within the context of European holocaust literature in toto, represented by such authors such as Tadeusz Borowski, Primo Levi, Jean Améry, Paul Celan, etc. At the same time, I contend that Kertész is not a "regional" writer as per his minority status based on the limited appeal of Hungarian literature and culture nor should he be categorized as "holocaust writer," a label that would imprint his texts emanating from a subject matter rather than emanating from his skills as a writer of fiction. In my view, such localizations of Kertész's work result precisely in the simplifications which generated misunderstandings and problems around the reception of his work in his "home" culture, Hungary. Kertész has found the language to express authentically the most horrific catastrophe of the twentieth century, and thus, he succeeds to speak to us about many of the important subjects and problems of our time.

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