

The Acknowledgement of Helplessness: the Helplessness of Acknowledgement, Imre Kertész: *Fatelessness*

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“And exactly this, the aporia, must be maintained
in memory. Metaphorically speaking, every step leads to
the door of the gas-chamber, but no step leads inside.”
Reinhart Koselleck¹

“And they do not stop explaining things,
to acknowledge their meaning even when they are
closed in ghettos, herded together and deported.”
Randolph L. Braham²

The following study analyzes Imre Kertész’s novel *Fatelessness* in the context of the theories of Berel Lang on the ideological language of genocide in Nazi Germany and Hannah Arendt on the impact of linguistic particularities of dictatorship on individuals; it develops the concept of steps according to which dictatorship makes people get used to its measures gradually so as to prevent them from acknowledging the possible consequences of what they experience. The novel, for which Imre Kertész was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 2002, presents this gradual process in the identity development of the teenage protagonist showing how he — step by step — gets used to being in a concentration camp and begins even to like it by taking everything for granted. According to the appraisal of the Swedish Academy, Imre Kertész’s novel explores the possibility of living in eras in which the individual is almost totally subjugated to authority and in which “Auschwitz is not an exceptional occurrence that like an alien body subsists outside the normal history of Western Europe. It is the ultimate truth about human degradation in modern existence.”³ In this sense, the Holocaust — owing to the those authors and theoreticians who, similarly to Kertész, construe and conceive the Holocaust experience as a linguistic experience⁴ — is not merely a topic in

literature, humanities and culture in general but a paradigmatic linguistic approach. Not only does the Holocaust determine the language that is used to write about it, but it has an impact on writings that are thematically not related to it.

Holocaust research from a linguistic or partially linguistic aspect examines, on the one hand, the diaries of the victims, the memoirs of the survivors and interviews recorded with them, and, on the other hand, the official language of the Third Reich, the linguistic manifestations of Nazi ideology and their effect on the individuals and their language use. Even though studies progressing on similar paths and having similar findings — differ in their hypotheses and conclusions,⁵ some of their elements can still be integrated in the following train of thought.

Hannah Arendt's highly debated book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*⁶ is very instructive in this respect, primarily because it demonstrates how the language of the Third Reich, a totalitarian state, can overwhelm an individual without secure cultural background and an own language, how language becomes decisive in one's actions, and how the individual language user animates the power that "stands behind" the language, embodied in it, by accepting and applying its linguistic rules. In Arendt's interpretation, Eichmann was the "déclassé son of a solid middle-class family," was unable to finish high school, or even to graduate from the vocational school" as he preferred "being a member of something or other" and eventually joined the SS in 1932 by mistake instead of a freemasons' association. In 1934 he got a job in the Himmler-led Security Service Main Office (*Sicherheitsdienst [SD] Hauptamt*) in the department responsible for Jewish affairs, and as his strongest skills were organising and negotiating, he became the logistics coordinator and later chief organiser of Jewish emigration and then deportations.⁷

According to Arendt, Eichmann's "great susceptibility to catch words and stock phrases, combined with his incapacity for ordinary speech, made him, of course, an ideal subject for 'language rules'."⁸ He also admitted that "officialese [*Amtssprache*]" is the only language he spoke. During the court hearings Arendt saw that Eichmann "was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché." "His inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else;" and he "always thought within the narrow limits of whatever laws and decrees were valid at a given moment."⁹

Arendt goes into great detail in studying Nazi language regulation (*Sprachregelung*) along similar lines as Berel Lang in his book: *Act and*

Idea in the Nazi Genocide.¹⁰ According to Lang, language regulation — the rules on what words and phrases are allowed and which are prohibited in the official documents and texts that reach the public in the Third Reich — creates a new, previously undefined rhetorical formula: the figurative lie, in which lies work differently from their usual moral aspect. In the case of figurative lies it is not the given speaker who is a liar but the expression itself (of course, he adds, those using figurative lies often lie themselves).¹¹

Lang bases his argument on the analysis of the most important expression regarding the extermination of Jews: *Endlösung* (the Final Solution). However he believes that the same applies to almost everything in the dictionary of language regulation — i.e. as Arendt mentioned in regard of “officialese” used by Eichmann — the expressions *Sonderbehandlung* (special treatment), *Aussiedlung* (evacuation), and *Auflockerung* (thinning out — in practice moving people from the ghetto) mean murder and *Umsiedlung* (resettlement) and *Arbeitseinsatz im Osten* (labour in the East) refer to deportation.¹² Lang explains that in traditional rhetoric the expression *Endlösung* may seem ironic, a euphemism or an oxymoron, however the totalitarian thought is unable to adopt a double viewpoint, which would be essential in the case of irony. In euphemisms — in Lang’s example the frequent use of “gone to sleep” instead of “died” — the fields of reference of the expressions overlap (in the given case the motionless and unconscious state, which is only temporary when it refers to sleeping) and the oxymoron does not hide but emphasise the tension between the contrasting meanings of the references.

Thus, it seems that genocide, and the series of unprecedented crimes committed by the Third Reich required and formed a new language with new rhetoric devices.¹³ Lang’s definition of figurative lie is the following: regarding the expression *Endlösung*, “the denotation of the term, although logically consistent with it (in principle, *any* act might be called a solution), substantively contradicts it; that the term itself is abstract and general but designates an event or object that is concrete and specific (...) and is meant to draw attention away from both this change and from the individual aspects of its referent, thus concealing what is denoted (and attempting to conceal the fact of concealment as well)”; it “links two contradictory literal references, it also attempts, in asserting the connection, both to deny the contradiction and to conceal the denial.”¹⁴

Lang believes that genocide elevates lie “to a principle of discourse.”¹⁵ This phenomenon had an effect on the language of “everyday” life as well,¹⁶ the symptoms of which can be tracked down in expressions

of monumentality, exaggeration, the normalisation of hyperboles, the rewiring of archaic words and the adaptation of certain foreign words. The latter two were introduced to mystify the German past and, at first sight quite contradictory to the previous, to represent the irrefutability of technology.¹⁷ Dim slogans building on puns and alliterations are also characteristic of the era. (“Das Leben des Führers bleibt nicht eine Wirklichkeit sondern wird zu einer Wahrheit” [The life of the Führer does not remain a reality but becomes a truth].) According to Lang, the aim and meaning of the above is “to rationalize language and to subordinate to authority, that is, to make it into a political instrument which in its own structure would incorporate the features of moral violation that otherwise constitute the lie,”¹⁸ but the language of genocide “(...) reveals the intention to turn language itself into an instrument of domination and deceit.”¹⁹

In a similar interpretation by Arendt, language regulation — as the phrase itself describes a lie — actually means the systematisation of lies and thus created a brainwashing mechanism: “The net effect of this language system was not to keep these people ignorant of what they were doing, but to prevent them from equating it with their old, “normal” knowledge of murder and lies.”²⁰ The Nazi regime could manage this on the one hand by using catch phrases invented by Himmler, which Eichmann called “winged words” and the judges “empty talk”, for example: “These are battles which future generations will not have to fight again.”²¹ The principle behind this was to ensure that those participating in the murders, being normal people by nature, could direct the feeling of remorse from their victims to somewhere else, namely themselves as heroes dealing with tasks fit for super-humans.²² On the other hand, in the Third Reich the command of the Führer was the centre of legal order and experts transcribed his spoken orders into regulations,²³ which resulted in that finally “evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it — the quality of temptation.”²⁴ This idea of Arendt together with her view on the banality of evil is widely debated.²⁵ In the given context — from a linguistic and cultural aspect instead of a moral one — it can be interpreted in a way that the reason why evil was hard to detect in its usual or “normal” way of being different was that it appeared in the form of legality (and although consequences following from this view would lead far from the discussed topic, it may be added that appearing camouflaged is not far from the traditional nature of evil). Arendt uses the above reasoning to explain how Eichmann — a person who is narrow-minded, has difficulty in speaking, tends to boast but is unable to recontextualize, i.e. incapable of abstraction — turns into a mass murderer:

“The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. (...) this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together for it implied (...) that this new type of criminal, who is in actual act *hostis generis humani*, commits his crime — under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.²⁶ Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to identify himself with Richard III and “to prove a villain...” It was sheer thoughtlessness — something by no means identical with stupidity — that predisposed him to become “one of the greatest criminals of that period.”²⁷

Imre Kertész in his novel *The Fiasco* — also reflecting on Richard III and arguing the point of view Semprun’s *Long Voyage* represents by presenting Ilse Koch, the wife of the commander of Buchenwald concentration camp as a perverted murderer, i. e. creating an image of her as a unique villain — takes a standpoint similar to Arendt’s: “Richard III vows to be a villain, however, the mass murderers of a totalitarian system take an oath to serve public good.”²⁸

According to the parabolic hypothesis about the relationship of murderer and victim as presented in *The Fiasco*, murderer and victim are the two sides of the same mechanism, however there is no sharp border between the two sides: it is by pure chance which takes which role. Thus the question of the tangibility and representability of evil — i. e. its literary and linguistic mediation — will be of most importance to the author. If evil does not appear as a unique and bloody murderer in a society that created the Holocaust, if it steps out from the paradigm of “blood, lust and demon”²⁹ and is a simple assiduous citizen who kills out of diligence,³⁰ then the most important question is how this new paradigm can be mediated.

According to the harsh judgement of Hannah Arendt the eighty million citizens of Germany lied to themselves the same way that Eichmann did.³¹ Self-deception, hiding from the facts, not acknowledging knowledge can all be interpreted as linguistic phenomena and can be compared to the behaviour — which is regarded similar by many — of the Jewish victims who self-deceptively became used to the incomprehensible. The novel *Fatelessness* arrives at a similar picture.

At the end of *Fatelessness* the speaking and thinking style of the teenage boy protagonist returning from Buchenwald changes, his linguistic competence increases. He is now able to produce individual, evaluating

and contextualising streams of thought, interpret his own actions and the situation he is in, as well as locate himself in the world. This ability of self-definition becomes visible in the meaningful conversation at the end of the novel when he is trying to explain to his old neighbours back at home what he means by “steps”:

Everyone took steps as long as he was able to take a step; I too took my own steps, and not just in the queue at Birkenau, but even before that, here, at home (...). I would now be able to tell her what it means to be “Jewish”: nothing, nothing to me at least, at the beginning, until those steps start to be taken. None of it is true, there is no different blood, nothing else, only (...) I too had lived through a given fate. It had not been my own fate, but I had lived through it, and I simply couldn't understand why they couldn't get it into their heads that I now needed to start doing something with that fate, needed to connect it to somewhere or something; after all, I could no longer be satisfied with the notion that it had all been a mistake, blind fortune, some kind of blunder, let alone that it had not even happened. (...) I made it clear to them that we can never start a new life, only ever carry on the old one. I took the steps, no one else, and I declared that I had been true to my given fate throughout. The sole blot, or one might say fly in the ointment, the sole accident with which they might reproach me was the fact that we should be sitting there talking now — but then I couldn't help that. Did they want this whole honesty and all the previous steps I had taken to lose all meaning? Why this sudden about-face, this refusal to accept? (...) They too had taken their own steps. They too had known, foreseen, everything beforehand, they too had said farewell to my father as if we had already buried him, and even later on all they had squabbled about was whether I should take the suburban train or the bus to Auschwitz... At this point not only Uncle Steiner but old Fleischmann as well jumped to his feet. Even now he was still striving to restrain himself, but was no longer capable of doing so: “What!” he bawled, his face red as a beetroot and beating his chest with his fist: “So it's us who're the guilty ones, is it? Us, the victims!” I tried explaining that it wasn't a crime; all that was needed was to admit it, meekly, simply, merely as a matter of reason, a point of honor, if I might put it that way.³²

This scene, through re-reading the whole story of the novel retrospectively, raises several issues essential for the interpretation of the novel and help cast light on the pictures of the Holocaust it draws. It is a significant fact that the first interpretations of the novel did notice the

importance and complexity of the notion of steps mentioned by Gyurka Köves. However, eventually, as with the characters of Steiner and Fleischmann who think that past and future can be separated,³³ the notion of steps was taken out of its context within the novel, its potential social implications became neglected (as becomes apparent from the reactions of the participants of the above cited dialogue) and finally the focus of interpretation shifted onto teleological determinism, i.e. understanding survival, the conscious behaviour of slowly approaching a positive future and the faith in keeping up the value of life under all circumstances as the main aim.³⁴

In contrast to the traditional way of relating the idea of steps to determination and destination, Gyurka Köves rather speaks about the fact that each individual is responsible for their steps even if they do not know where they will lead them; and that steps define one's fate even if they do not know where they are heading or if they take no notice of having stepped at all; and that people continue their steps even if they would rather forget about them. Throughout the novel, Köves's steps are unreflected means of adaptation and learning as he gradually gets used to the given life conditions he faces. Köves explains this theory of "graduality" in a conversation with a journalist:

I tried to explain how different it was, for example, to arrive in a not exactly opulent but still, on the whole, agreeable, neat, and clean station where everything becomes clear only gradually, sequentially over time, step-by-step. By the time one has passed a given step, put it behind one, the next one is already there. By the time one knows everything, one has already understood it all. And while one is coming to understand everything, a person does not remain idle: he is already attending to his new business, living, acting, moving, carrying out each new demand at each new stage. Were it not for that sequencing in time, and were the entire knowledge to crash in upon a person on the spot, at one fell swoop, it might well be that neither one's brain nor one's heart would cope with it.³⁵

This passage may cast light on how the book could mislead the reader regarding the interpretation of steps, how it can make the impression that the gradualness of steps — in harmony with the reading strategies of the interpretative paradigm³⁶ dominant in communist Hungary at the time of the first publication of the book — indicate an ambitious and determined behaviour. The absurd irony of this reasoning is given by the fact that it seems that gradualness serves the survival of the victim, while in

reality it is not life but death it helps getting used to. The cooperation of the victims, their reliance on the ease of graduality is a way of participating in their own murder in pre-measured doses. The deportation experts of the Nazi regime used graduality — i.e. a series of lies — to make their extermination mechanism more successful and to break the opposition of the deported and in a wider context to gradually dismantle the public's opposition to deportations. The preparation of the acceptance by the public of anti-Jewish actions started in Germany with the 1935 anti-Semitic Nuremberg laws, while in Hungary with the introduction of the First anti-Jewish laws in 1938, and later by ordering the Jews to wear a yellow badge (in Hungary introduced through the Prime Ministerial Decree of 30 March 1944) — which signified the last phase before the deportations began.³⁷

The journalist's reaction to Gyurka Köves's reasoning, especially his gestures indicate that, to some extent, he has understood how the former prisoner's way of thinking has been affected by the concentration camp and such a turn in their conversation may serve as an answer for both of them:

“That, roughly, is the way you have imagined it.” At this, still in the same position as earlier, only now instead of holding the cigarette, which he had meanwhile discarded, with his head between his hands and in an even duller, even more choking voice, he said: “No, it's impossible to imagine it.” For my part, I could see that, and I even thought to myself: so, that must be why they prefer to talk about hell instead.³⁸

On the one hand, the above paragraph explains Köves's problem with interpreting allegorisation, the fact that he does not understand why the journalist calls the concentration camp hell.³⁹ Although this problem already appears at the very beginning of the conversation, when the journalist's use of the word is put in quotation marks in the text, similarly to other phrases that are said by Köves but appear in citation marks — phrases he cannot identify himself with: “Have you come from Germany, son?” “Yes.” “From the concentration camps?” “Naturally.” “Which one?” “Buchenwald.” Yes, he had heard of it; he knew it was “one of the pits of the Nazi hell,” “as he put it”⁴⁰ — and thus he finds himself facing the insharebility of the act of “imagining”, and, realizing it, he goes into explaining himself until finally the journalist poses the question “Can we imagine a concentration camp as anything but a hell?” and admitting the impossibility of comparison or allegorisation, he answers it himself: “No, it's impossible to imagine it.”

On the other hand what Gyuri Köves says serves also as an answer to the journalist's previous question, which in fact coincides with the puzzling phenomenon readers and interpreters of the book are most preoccupied with: why does Köves keep answering "naturally" to all questions?

"Did you have to endure many horrors?" to which I replied that it all depended what he considered to be a horror. No doubt, he declared, his expression now somewhat uneasy, I had undergone a lot of deprivation, hunger, and more than likely they had beaten me, to which I said: naturally. "Why, my dear boy," he exclaimed, though now, so it seemed to me, on the verge of losing his patience, "do you keep on saying 'naturally,' and always about things that are not at all natural?" I told him that in a concentration camp they *were* natural. "Yes, of course, of course," he says, "they were *there*, but ...," and he broke off, hesitating slightly, "but ... I mean, a concentration camp in itself is *unnatural*," finally hitting on the right word as it were. I didn't even bother saying anything to this, as I was beginning slowly to realize that it seems there are some things you just can't argue about with strangers, the ignorant, with those who, in a certain sense, are mere children so to say.⁴¹

The journalist embodies the reader who tries to "imagine", metaphorise, compare, translate into their own language or build into stories what they hear or read. Köves/the book keeps refusing or denying all such commonly used methods of interpretation. The failure of shareability in all of the previously known ways raises the question of how it is possible for those who did not experience the Holocaust or were not witnesses to it, i.e. how could future generations read about the Holocaust and read its literature if the traditional ways of reading do not work here any more? The fact that the book treats the journalist's solution of writing an article cooperating with Gyuri Köves as well-meant but unsatisfactory suggests that the reader is expected to do something else.

Seeing the large number of alienating quotation marks in the excerpt, and deriving from this the fact that Gyurka Köves is primarily dissatisfied with the journalist's phrasing, and that the disagreement is focused on interpreting "natural" we can conclude that a change in the language used for describing the Holocaust is expected. The Reformulation of public disclosure is to provide both the witness and the non-witness with access to the experience of the Holocaust to enable them to talk about it, and enable us to understand that concentration camps and the Holocaust

are in our past and, even if considered unnatural in the 20th century, are — unfortunately — natural as part of our history.

The interpretation which assumes that readers can be made familiar with the idea of the Holocaust or, in a broader sense, the destructive mechanisms of the totalitarian state with the help of language, or more precisely, that these ideas are primarily observed as linguistic experience (as this type of interpretation appeared in interviews with Kertész commenting on *Fatelessness* and, in the reception of the novel shortly after the Nobel-prize)⁴² all involve the idea that the Holocaust is a linguistic paradigm. Imre Kertész was asked in an interview whether the fact that the protagonist feels homesick when he thinks about the camp had personal connotations, too; he answered: “I cannot talk about that” and continues: “this novel might be about language, about how we related or relate to the totalitarian mechanism. (...) life in the lager can only be imagined as a literary text. One simply cannot think about its reality.”⁴³

Similar manifestations — on the possibilities of literary and aesthetic mediation of the Holocaust and its exclusiveness — are presented in the novel *Gályanapló* [Galley Boat Log] (1992), other Imre Kertész-essays,⁴⁴ and the above-cited excerpt of *Fatelessness* as well: they deal with the fact that the primary mediating approach to the Holocaust is a linguistic one because it can be (even if at least partially) tracked down in the linguistic mechanisms of both the victims and the murderers and, deriving from the above, it can be understood primarily as a linguistic and cultural experience by future generations. This idea is also dominant in some of the approaches to the literature on the Holocaust.⁴⁵ James E. Young in his research on Holocaust literature — diaries, memoirs, films on the testimonials of eye-witnesses, video recordings, monuments and secondary Holocaust-literature (by authors like Sylvia Plath who identify with the victims in their imagination) — reckons that the Holocaust, from the nonsensical and incomparably unique has turned into a trope or even an archetype⁴⁶ and its sole chance of surviving in memory is its literary-cultural representation.⁴⁷ Hayden White,⁴⁸ arguing with the previously mentioned Berel Lang, claims that literary pieces about genocide lack the chronicler’s authenticity that would be required in a topic like the Holocaust; on the contrary, through metaphorical language and the person of the author, they add something redundant to true historical facts. He reckons that Lang’s reasoning is not only valid for literature but also for all types of descriptive history, i.e. any attempt at presenting the Holocaust as a narrative.⁴⁹ White makes a contrasting concept according to which we have to take into account that our ideas regarding history have changed

and intransitive writing, mediality, the concept of the simultaneous with the act of writing creation of the subject of writing enable us to describe particularly 20th century experiences which seemed intangible in previous modes of representation. *Fatelessness*, similarly to the way in which Hannah Arendt describes Eichmann, reveal the effects of the totalitarian state on human behaviour as linguistic experience⁵⁰ in the phases of language change the protagonist goes through, like the steps (as the expression is used by Gyurka) that lead to Auschwitz. In the previously cited excerpt describing the principle of graduality, readers who take irony into account may see that Gyurka Köves treats the viewpoint of those who aim at destroying him as his own viewpoint. This loss of viewpoint happens in the novel gradually, the first significant — and at the same time terrifying in the eyes of the reader — occurrence is the scene where he sees himself and the other prisoners through the eyes of the Birkenau camp doctor. The change of perspective at this point is only momentary and explicitly reflected, although, unlike the reader the boy does not see either his own lack of prospects in the situation he is in or the grotesque nature of identifying himself with the doctor.

The flood of people rolled along in an unbroken stream, was constrained in a narrower channel, accelerated, then branched in two in front of the doctor. (...) Everything was in motion, everything functioning, everyone in their place and doing what they had to do, precisely, cheerfully, in a well-oiled fashion. (...) I soon figured out the essence of the doctor's job. An old man would have his turn — obvious, that one: the other side. A younger man — over here, to our side. Here's another one: paunchy but shoulders pulled stiffly back nonetheless — pointless, but no, the doctor still dispatched him this way, which I was not entirely happy about as I, for my part, was disposed to find him a shade elderly. (...) Thus, I was also driven to perceive through the doctor's eyes how many old or otherwise unusable people there were among them.⁵¹

However, Gyurka Köves “realizes” or finds too many things “natural” even previously in the novel from the point his father is taken to Labour Service. At the beginning of the novel he has a totally different connection to “realization”: in the first chapter he doesn't take things for granted, he emphasises the difference between his own viewpoint and others', and, using a special reporting tool, he reflects on the text — in a way looking out from it — and indicates the source of the reported information: “My father fiddled around a long time with the two gray

padlocks — to the point that I had a feeling he was doing it deliberately. He then handed over the keys to my stepmother, given that he would no longer have any use for them. *I know that, because he said as much.*⁵²

On the other hand, he does not always understand the implications of these pieces of information — in this case the fact that the expression refers to the likelihood of his father's death. He does not understand, for example, the conflicts indicated in flashes between his father and stepmother, he does not see that his father hides his not-unfounded fear that while he is away he will lose his wife (by the time the boy arrives home, his stepmother is married to Mr. Sütő). He cannot read underlying meanings, or the emotional-sexual components of situations: in chapter two Mr. Sütő nominally takes over their business due to the legal restrictions on ownership. In the absence of Gyurka's father, Mr. Sütő starts bringing food for his stepmother. The woman asks the boy what he thinks about this because she can sense that Mr. Sütő is courting her, however, the boy does not see this.

He is at the age when he is learning in what ways secondary meanings and allegorical narratives are usually related to the physical and emotional experiences and behaviour of people in a given society. That is how he realises that a kiss — that happened just by chance during an air-raid — has secondary meanings and according to the actualised interpretation of Annamarie, it is a sign of a love affair: "Later on, while we were talking, I learned one or two interesting things as to her thoughts about me: she said she would never have imagined "a time would come when I might mean something else" to her other than merely "a good friend."⁵³

Although Gyurka Köves does not possess the adequate experience in social contacts at the beginning of the story, he is aware of the fact that there are things that he does not know and thus he can differentiate between societal demands and his own opinion and he realises the extent to which he actually adjusts himself to the demands of society:

My stepmother made no response, but I heard a noise, and when I looked up I saw what it was: she was crying. It was again highly embarrassing, so I tried to keep my eyes fixed just on my plate. All the same, I noticed the movement as my father reached for her hand. A minute later I could hear they were very quiet, and when I again took a cautious glimpse at them, they were sitting hand in hand, looking intently at one another, the way men and women do. I have never cared for that, and this time too it made me feel awkward. Though the thing is basically quite natural, I suppose, I still don't

like it, I couldn't say why. It was immediately easier when they started to talk.⁵⁴

The fact that an instance of adaptation has occurred is indicated by the use of the word "natural": things that are natural to others are not necessarily natural to him. The word "natural" appears at yet another instance in the chapter and thus forecasts the meaning of the word in later chapters: the second instance also proves that the word is used by people to convince others by presenting ideas not as convictions thus not openly requiring agreement: "My stepmother had spoken about them just beforehand: only close family, was how she put it. Seeing my father make a gesture of some kind, she added, "Look, they just want to say good-bye. That's only natural!"⁵⁵

Gyurka Köves's limited distance-creating ability is still apparent when he is confronted by lots of new information; at this point he can still see the limits of his own ability to interpret things: the text indicates this with the use of quotation marks, the separation of voices, the keeping up of the limits between his own and others' speech. In this respect the father's farewell dinner in chapter one is an important episode, especially for the self-deceptive conversations taking place about the probable events of the war and the "common Jewish fate". Here, the boy — guided by the behaviour of his father and following the patterns he learnt from his stepmother — uses the word "naturally" as a part of the — pretentious — societal rules. The chapter prepares the later attitude to the word "naturally" (and all the other synonymous expressions that are still not present at this point but later become frequent: "of course", "I realize", "I suppose", "needless to say", "quite naturally") this is the knowledge he can take with him to the concentration camp.

The last person to arrive was my stepmother's oldest brother, Uncle Lajos. He fulfils some terribly important function in our family, though I'd be hard put to define exactly what that was. (...) Uncle Lajos then unexpectedly drew me into service. He said he would like "a little word" with me. He hauled me off to a secluded corner of the room and pinned me up against a cupboard, face-to-face with him. He started off by saying that, as I knew, my father would "be leaving us" tomorrow. I said I knew that. Next he wanted to know whether I was going to miss his being here. Though a bit annoyed by the question, I answered, "Naturally." Feeling this was in some way not quite enough, I immediately supplemented it with, "A lot." With that he merely nodded profusely for a while, a pained expression on his face."⁵⁶

It becomes evident at the beginning of chapter two that during the two months that have passed after his father left — and together with this the loss of the secure linguistic guidance provided by his father previously and after his own world became totally upset — Gyurka Köves has lost the ability to reflect on his language. His voice in the reported speech of the narration has almost completely become subordinated to the voice of others. In the following passage, words heard from his stepmother appear as the boy's opinion — the first person singular narrator gives opinion and background information about a third person singular character and later it is easy to notice the shift, in the third sentence the two voices merge. At this point, the subject of the text is the narrator himself, however instead of the “I say what they say about me” reporting technique, he eliminates the third person from the previous position and uses a structure of “I talk about myself” — a kind of self-quoting, while the source of the words is clearly a third person:

My stepmother, though, was thrilled most of all about the identity papers, because up till then every time I set off on any journey, she always got herself worked up about how I was going to vouch for myself should the need arise. Now, though, she has no reason to fret as the ID testifies that I am not alive on my own account but am benefiting the war effort in the manufacturing industry, and that, naturally, puts it in an entirely different light. The family, moreover, shares that opinion.⁵⁷

The problem becomes even more complicated by the fact that the stepmother's voice is not her own, nor reflected; it contains popular belief regarding the given question, which is mediated this way towards the boy. Thus, the type of discourse that can be learnt from adults in this world is not reflected or thoughtful but a discourse of pretension where the voices of self and other are blurred.⁵⁸ Imre Kertész recalls this in his essay: “The Exiled Language”:

A specific experience left a mark on my childhood, which made me suffer a lot but I still could not understand, grasp, find or name it. I had the feeling that I was taking part in a huge general lie, but this lie is the truth and it is only my fault that I feel that it is a lie. I did not know that this experience is language-related and in reality it is an unconscious protest against the society surrounding me, against the pre- and pro-fascist society of Budapest in the 20s and 30s, which wanted me to accept the lurking danger as my normal fate.⁵⁹

The “big lie” — the behaviour of the Hungarian Jewry who have assimilated to assimilation and clung onto law, or the lack of it, to its pretence; who have not changed their former life strategies and who adjusted their current life circumstances exclusively to previously valid self-interpretative narratives — appears in the novel through the merging of voices, told by Uncle Willie and Uncle Lajos. Phrases quoted from the opinion of Willie and Lajos are satisfactory even without the boy’s logical linkers to compile the theory of international pacts and procrastinating attitude supported by boasting insiderness: “from a confidential source”, “absolutely reliable”, “a decisive shift in our position is to be anticipated”, “secret negotiations”, “between the Germans and the Allied powers, through neutral intermediaries”, “had by now come to recognize that their position on the battlefronts is hopeless”, “the Jews of Budapest”, “coming in handy”, “to wring advantages, at our expense, out of the Allies”, “an important factor”, “world opinion”, “shocked”, “the bigger game, in which we are actually pawns in an international blackmailing gambit of breath-taking scale”, “what goes on behind the scenes”, “a spectacular bluff”, “events unfold”.⁶⁰ The quoted utterances also make it clear that through the character of Uncle Lajos the general idea according to which the present situation is directly related to the persecution of Jews over the millennia is conveyed. That is why he suggests to Gyuri Köves that adulthood is to be interpreted as participating in the common fate and common suffering: “the happy, carefree years of childhood”, “would keep an eye on us”, “what worry and self-denial are”, “man-to-man”, “unbroken persecution that has lasted for millennia”, “have to accept with fortitude and self-sacrificing forbearance”, “in accordance with our strengths and abilities”, “profound feelings and a deep sense of responsibility”.⁶¹ It cannot be a coincidence that here, in chapter two, under continuous pressure and in the given context, the expression: “realized” appears for the very first time in the boy’s speech: “Uncle Lajos then drew me aside to exchange a few words of a more serious nature, among which he exhorted me not to forget that when I was at the workplace I was not representing myself alone but “the entire Jewish community,” so I must mind my behaviour for their sake too, because on that basis judgments would be formed with regard to all of them collectively. That would truly never have occurred to me; still, I realized that he might well be right, of course.”⁶²

Previously, Gyurka Köves’s gradual language and identity loss halts when, as a result of an emotional shock he thinks about the things said by the “elder sister” from next door. The girl actualises the public-

identity-forming narrative of Jewish sufferings, relates it to everyday experiences of exclusion, and as a result of this Gyurka Köves comes to the flash-like realisation of how he could be affected by this narrative and what possible consequences could follow if he tried to resist this common narrative. As it turned out before — for example on commenting how his father, stepmother and Mr. Sütő say good-bye to each other or during his conversation with Uncle Lajos when reading body language was a certain type of guidance for him to read the situation and to unconsciously express his disapproval⁶³ — the boy is receptive to the signs of the body: at the beginning of the story he perceives them but does not match their conventional interpretations to them. In contrast, at the end of the novel he is partially capable of integrating knowledge deriving from emotional intelligence⁶⁴ into his behaviour when he is able to react to the sorrow of Bandi Citrom's sister (Bandi is a boy he met in the Zeitz who never returned home) in a socially accepted way and he is able to interpret a dialogue of gestures going on between mother and sister — which is not necessarily a positive change.⁶⁵

The text at this point, and at several others, informs the reader, that, compared to the characters of the novel, it possesses a follow-up perspective and excess knowledge. One of the most important means to achieve this aim is the quasi-present tense of the narrative, the transferring of events to the present again through remembering them up to the last chapter, the homecoming, where narration turns to past tense. On the other hand, in chapters three and four, during the captivity in the brickyard, the train journey and the arrival in Auschwitz, the naive and infantile perspective of the narrator constantly clashes with the perspective of the reader, who continuously notices that Gyurka Köves does not draw the right self-defensive consequences from the things that happen to him: he could escape during the march to the brickyard but he does not do so out of “honor”.⁶⁶ In the sequence of events he is unable to prioritise the significant over the insignificant⁶⁷ and even though certain situations resemble a black comedy (an example is when the boy misunderstands the conversation when a gendarme calls on the deported on the train to hand over their valuables saying: “Where you're going,” (...) “you won't be needing valuables anymore.” Anything that we might still have the Germans would take off us anyway, he assured us. “Wouldn't it be better, then,” (...) “for them to pass into Hungarian hands?” (...) “After all, you're Hungarians too when it comes down to it!”⁶⁸ — as a result somebody, in exchange for water is willing to hand over the valuables but finally the transaction falls through). The reader suspecting or, having read

the book already, being exactly aware of what comes next becomes more and more desperate as he sees that, even though the boy already knows that he is a prisoner in a concentration camp, this does not change his attitudes for a long time. “At all events, in any place, even a concentration camp, one gets stuck into a new thing with good intentions, at least that was my experience; for the time being, it was sufficient to become a good prisoner, the rest was in the hands of the future — that, by and large, was how I grasped it, what I based my conduct on...”⁶⁹

In the concentration camp (chapters 5–8), Gyurka Köves accepts and acknowledges everything and understands everybody: why the doctors are selecting them for life and death, the people who shaved them, why the sadist soldier who was appointed as their supervisor and tormented them was all right, why it is righteous of the lice to feed on his wound and why the worms’ affirmation of life is more appropriate than his. He acknowledges that his former friend cannot help him any more and also that another prisoner can righteously take away his benefactor, the medical assistant who brought him extra portions of food. While he reaches a point at which he can understand his own total exploitation from the others’ point of view and he does not regard the phases of this exploitation as aggression, it slowly turns out that his knowledge brought from home is not suitable to interpret the concentration camp. The only thing that he brought from home and can make use of is the acknowledgment of identifying with others’ viewpoint, finding it natural, and his ability to adjust gradually to new conditions.

Gyurka Köves finds the stages leading to helplessness and death natural, however on the contrary, he does not find it natural that he survives the complete exhaustion that comes with an idea of giving up his life — he finds it strange that such a thing can happen in a concentration camp. After this incident, his attitude changes: he is not unsuspecting any more, he becomes careful, he does not hurry with his assessment of things, he does not believe himself, he is always alert. In the hospital he identifies a lemon and an egg step-by-step, he makes sure that what he sees is in line with the reality of a lemon and an egg according to his background knowledge:

when all of a sudden I saw a glint of yellow, then a knife and, with Pyetchka’s assistance, a metal mug materialized, a crunchy rasping — and even had I not believed my own eyes, my nose was now able to give irrefutable proof that the object I had just seen was, no two ways about it, truly a lemon⁷⁰ (...) “on another occasion, notice the distinctive light clunk and sudden surge of sizzling caused (it was

caught by my eyes just as I averted them again, though they long remained near-dazzled in total stupefaction) by a yellow-centred, white-fringed object — an egg⁷¹

This process of identification is just the opposite of the unsuspecting and hurried assessment that is typical at the beginning of the novel, for example, in the case of mistaking a whip for a walking stick:

yet I saw many also had a stick in their hand, like a regular hooked cane, which slightly surprised me, since they were, after all, men without any problems walking, and manifestly in prime condition. But then I was able to take a closer look at the object, for I observed that one of them, up ahead with his back half-turned toward me, all at once placed the stick horizontally behind his hips and, gripping it at both ends, began flexing it with apparent boredom. Along with the row, I came ever-closer to him, and only then did I see that it was not made of wood but of leather, and was no stick but a whip.⁷²

Thus, it seems that in a certain respect *Fatelessness* is a traditional education novel.⁷³ Gyurka Köves learns something: routine skills and experience gained in one thing — the world — cannot be applied to another one without modifications. The continuity he built his life on previously is upset and a different continuity takes its place, which consists of steps that do not follow each other in a natural way and lack consequential logic accompanied by reflection and continuous doubt regarding previous expectations.

In view of the above outlined process, the change after the conversation with Uncle Steiner and Uncle Fleischmann is not as surprising as it first seems. Through this change the difference between the viewpoints of the reader and the protagonist gains a new meaning, the excess tips the balance to the other side: up to this point the reader “knew more”. During the course of the novel up to the last chapter the reader represents the viewpoint that possesses historical knowledge and additional information, and later — clashed with the protagonist’s lack of knowledge and preparation — they themselves become continuity and historical remembrance. Gyurka Köves’s experiences, his unpreparedness, his naive ‘good boy’ behaviour and his complete exploitation, which is totally incompatible with the above, triggers a number of reactions from the reader: sorrow, sympathy and later remorse and the feeling of shame and responsibility.

Such reactions from readers primarily are the result of the book's special narration technique that enables the readers to evoke what was the new and unknown element of the events they recall at the time of their occurrence. This technique is unusual and unique because normally, due to the characteristics of the process of remembering, apart from some scarce impressions or glimpses of the past, we are not able to recall the onetime new element in the memory, as we will have already built the onetime experience in by the time of remembering. It has become part of our remembering self that defines our viewpoint looking at the past. In this case, however, the recalling of past events happens in a way that even though, as a consequence of the events the person who remembers also changes and integrates memories, it still appears that in the process of remembering he can find himself in the present tense of the past events without the experiences gained through recalling and thus events can be presented as a fictively brought back past in the present.

The strangeness of the past shown from the present, the quasi-memory nature of memories contribute to the book's harshness and enables the people who remember to have the possibility to undergo self-inflicted cruelty themselves. The rememberer is not tactful towards himself, he does what most narrators — especially in case of an admittedly autobiographical novel — are not able to do: he does not show his recalled self in a good light, he does not embellish the past. Kertész uses this method in other works as well; the protagonists of *The Fiasco* and *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* are also fallible.

By way of comparison, in Péter Esterházy's book *Javított kiadás* [Revised Edition] (2002) the author who learns that his father was an agent of the communist secret service chooses a completely different method for exploring the past; by rewriting the process of learning and exploring he avoids the type of facing with facts so typical of Kertész, he is searching for an explanation retrospectively. Except for the emotionally driven introductory part he does not allow himself — his recalled self — to be "bare", he does not provide the reader with the glasses of history. Thus the reader is not ashamed and may only suspect that the rememberer is ashamed as he does not mention this: he is tactful towards himself and his reader. He does not make his palpable remorse explicit because he feels that he should have known something that he did not know.

Kertész's narrator is not tactful, neither with himself nor with the reader. Gyuri Köves lacks the feeling of shame, which is self-critical and predisposes remorse and self-deceit. His attitude of accepting everything "naturally" triggers — instead of the rememberer's reaction of "I should

have known” — a reaction from the reader towards the protagonist, “he should have known”, which serves as a way of “encouragement”. (An interesting manifestation of this type of cheering is Ágnes Heller’s account of referring to her own life and experience when reading *Fatelessness*: when Gyuri Köves is on his way to the brickyard, she would have liked to encourage him to escape as she did in a similar situation.⁷⁴) On seeing the futility of “encouragement” — i.e. after the bitter acknowledgement that our reading strategies feeding on the schematic adventurous-heroic-escaping themed literary and cinematic interpretations of the Second World War fail here — the feeling of shame stemming from the victim’s lack of knowledge puts pressure not on the narrator but the reader; it puts pressure on a culture that allowed it to happen and on the reader embodying history.

In an interview titled significantly “I want to hurt my reader” Imre Kertész says: “...it would be a shame to write a novel about Auschwitz that does not hurt the reader.”⁷⁵ The above cited conversation analysing the steps can be the moment when the time of writing, the present of remembering, can meet the story, the present of the memories. At this point this special education novel, similarly to *The Fiasco*, reaches its unexpected climax — the sudden revelation of the protagonist.

The impossibility of the humanistic education novel was shown previously in a multifaceted manner, in its grotesque twist: as follows from the clash resulting from the sharp contrast between the quoted word use and its field of reference: Gyurka Köves prepares for deportation as for a new life, he expects “orderliness, employment, new impressions, and a bit of fun” from labour in Germany and he also hopes it “might also be a way of getting to see a bit of the world,”⁷⁶ on arriving in Auschwitz he regrets that he is not glad enough because of having waited for too long,⁷⁷ he sees the sadist labour supervisor as his educator, and he calls the apathy preceding his total breakdown “peace, tranquillity, and relief.”⁷⁸ However at this point the novel’s grotesque tone suddenly switches to its direct opposite thus easing the reader’s suffering a result of excess knowledge, while also alleviating the bitter comedy during the reading of which the reader is looking forward to the moment when the protagonist realises his own situation, which everybody else is aware of except for him.

Delaying is not an end in itself, neither is it non-functional for the reader even though it can be sensed as such for a long time due to the reader’s outsidership and excess knowledge. There is also something at stake for the reader, namely his own linguistic viewpoint aimed at interpreting the Holocaust, which turns out to be non-functional at the moment

when Gyurka Köves realises that the “steps” were his own steps. That is how the protagonist and reader meet at the end of the novel, in a way restarting the reading, learning from the previous experience that new situations need — would have needed — new attitudes, new norms. This new situation — for the writer, the reader and European culture in general — is the one of post-Auschwitz, the struggle for defining the experience of the Holocaust directly or indirectly, the situation of education, awareness and development that occurs after a knowledge of Auschwitz.

In the contemplation that follows the last conversation Gyurka Köves’s tone changes. He feels homesick for the concentration camp and he is able to reflect on this feeling by interpreting the frequently mentioned “naturalness”: “there is nothing impossible that we do not live through naturally.”⁷⁹ He observes that instead of the “hardships”, people should rather talk about the “happiness of concentration camps”, thus considering the mediation of the Holocaust experience.

At this point the narrator steps forward as the conscious user of literary language, not as filtered through the eyes of the rememberer, but for the first time dominant and the protagonist’s own. Instead of the previously characteristic irony we experience pathos here as if the narrator captured the moment of finding his language, his aim thus himself. Irony appeared as the clash of forms and voice as the narrator in the role of the writer, the recalling self and the first reader reads his own recalled “languageless” self thus forcing the reader of the novel to follow through these clashes, depriving them of the possibility of creating a unified form and voice and identifying with the speaker.

The dichotomy of the clashed form and voice of the recaller and the recalled may also suggest that if, according to the novel, the Holocaust experience can only be understood linguistically, than the mediation of this understanding can only be done through and embodied in traditional literary language. The fact that Gyurka cannot access what he experiences is due to the lack of a suitable language. The language — the languagelessness — of his experience can be sensed as a limitation in access to literary language, which appears in the novel as the lack of the ability to speak literary language in a situation where that is the only way. Thus if we wonder what answers *Fatelessness* gives to questions regarding the language of the Holocaust, we can claim that linguistically it presumes a continuity between pre- and post-holocaust language. The unsharability of the Holocaust in the pre-holocaust language can only be told in a language, which is the result of the breakage in which the unsuitability of pre-holocaust language comes to the surface.

This type of continuity also differs from the pre-holocaust one owing to the fact that the Holocaust and totalitarian dictatorship create a paradigm which, through camouflage and brainwash, operates as a lie both in a moral sense and as a trope operating as a linguistic component and through the gradual dismantling of resistance, habituation and the institutionalisation of violence it eventually succeeds in engulfing the individual and making him recognise the ideology that nurtures him as his own.

The language of the Holocaust marks the other as if it was its own thus depriving the individual of creating an identity and the community of building narratives valid for its members. In Arendt's book *Eichmann* is locked up in a language of lies up to the end of his life; even before his execution he is only capable of saying clichés that seem grotesque in the given situation.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, even if the perpetrator of the dualistic system of totalitarian dictatorship could not change, the victim could. *Fatelessness* does not end on a negative note; Gyurka Köves survives concentration camp with the help of those who did not apply those schemes that were natural to him by that time and on returning home he interprets phrases which he used previously without reflecting on them (e.g. speaking about the impossibility of "starting a new life.")⁸¹ Thus the book acknowledges resistance against linguistic influence, which Gyurka Köves calls stubbornness,⁸² and through the example of which he can learn that it is necessary to question our preconceptions continuously. Arendt shares this point of view: "...under conditions of terror most people will comply but some people will not, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that "it could happen" in most places but it did not happen everywhere".⁸³ *Fatelessness* finds hope in the ability for self-reflection and doubt suggesting that post-holocaust language is not naïve or unsuspecting anymore, it rather builds on doubt or even reservations, suspicion and distrust as the experience of interruption and breaking is dominant in it: the urge to reinterpret, the acknowledgement of the relative nature of acknowledgment and the constraint of keeping the memory of helplessness. In this sense, *Fatelessness* is striving to find an intermediary field where impersonal and personal may intersect, where the alienation of the recalling and the recalled self can be presented and what is at stake is to find a personal language the speakers of which know that they cannot rely on as they are aware of its simultaneous alien and impersonal nature. These features are not far from those that are said to characterise European literature in the second half of the 20th century in general and the fact that these particular features are attributed to the given literary era shows the impact of the Holocaust as well. It seems that the

Holocaust did not only build in the thinking of the second half of the 20th century thematically but also as an experience of the break in language, which enables the Holocaust to keep up — the otherwise claimed as its own particular — alienation as a cultural border-experience. When paraphrasing Adorno's famous sentence ("to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,")⁸⁴ Imre Kertész says: "after Auschwitz one may only write poetry about Auschwitz."⁸⁵ In the above described context, Kertész's words may be modified: one may write not about Auschwitz as a topic but only together with the cultural experience.⁸⁶

NOTES

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¹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Az emlékezet diszkontinuitása* [The Discontinuity of Memory], trans. Gábor Schein, in *2000*, 1999/11, 3–9, especially p. 6.

² Randolph L. Braham, *A magyar Holocaust* [The Hungarian Holocaust.] (Budapest–Wilmington: Gondolat–Blackburn International Inc., 1988), I. 85.

³ <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2002/press-h.html>

⁴ About the ontological dimensions of this literary and linguistic experience see Karl Vajda, *Das ungewisse Etwas. Das literarische Kunstwerk und seine Überwindung nach Heidegger* (Hamburg: Kovac, 2014), 260–265.

⁵ Arendt and Lang reach very different conclusions through their linguistic studies regarding the nature of evil and the role of the Jewish Councils. In contrast to Arendt's highly debated hypothesis on the banality of evil, Lang — while studying the moral philosophical aspects of the Nazi genocide — reckons that (at one point in agreement with Arendt) there might be banality in the appearance and manifestation of evil, genocide is the consequence of the intentional and conscious choice of evil and selfish volition. Regarding the Jewish Councils, Arendt makes a sharp note of their leaders' individual responsibility and questions the necessity of cooperation with the Germans by stating that those who ignored the Jewish leaders' advice had better chances for survival. On the other hand, Lang in his book devotes a chapter titled: "The decision is not to decide" to claim that for the twentieth century the previously dominant communal self-image was replaced by an individual self-image resulting in the consequence that the leaders of the Jewish Councils did everything to save (at least) some members of their com-

munity. Regarding Lang and Arendt see: Róbert Braun, *Holocaust, elbeszélés, történelem* [Holocaust, Narratives, History] (Budapest: Osiris, 1995), 160–204, especially 181–182. For the famous debate and correspondence between Arendt and Gerschom Scholem see: Gerschom Scholem – Hannah Arendt: “Eichmann Jeruzsálemben.” Gerschom Scholem és Hannah Arendt levélváltása [Eichmann in Jerusalem. Correspondence of Gerschom Scholem and Hannah Arendt]. Trans. Beáta Markó, *Szombat* 6 1994. 4. 15–19. A heated debate followed the Hungarian publication of Arendt’s book (twenty years after the original publication) regarding the above mentioned two topics: Ágnes Böhm, “A holokauszt tabutémái” [Taboo Topics of the Holocaust], *Élet és Irodalom*, 2001/20, 2001/32; Péter Mesés, “Arendtről, Eichmannról, tényekről” [On Arendt, Eichmann and Facts], *Élet és Irodalom*, 2001/29; László Karsai, “Arendt, Eichmann és a történelmi tények” [Arendt, Eichmann and Historical Facts], *Élet és Irodalom*, 2001/31; Judit Molnár, “Arendt és a Magyar Zsidó Tanács [Arendt and the Hungarian Jewish Council], *Élet és Irodalom*, 2001/32; Péter Mesés, “Arendtről, még egyszer [On Arendt, Once More], *Élet és Irodalom*, 2001/34; Ágnes Erdélyi, “Az akarat csele. Hannah Arendt: Eichmann Jeruzsálemben” [The Trick of Will: Hannah Arendt: Eichmann in Jerusalem], *Holmi*, 2002/1, 117–126.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann Jeruzsálemben. Tudósítás a gonosz banalitásáról*. [Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil]. Trans. Péter Mesés (Budapest: Osiris, 2000).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41, 44–45, 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61–62., 181.

¹⁰ Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹² Cf.: Lang. op. cit., 92; Arendt, op. cit., 102.

¹³ Lang, op. cit., 89, 92, 96.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 91, 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁰ Arendt, op. cit., 103

²¹ Ibid., 123.

²² Ibid., 214.

²³ Ibid., 172.

²⁴ Ibid., 173.

²⁵ Regarding the topic of temptation, see: Ágnes Heller, “Elmélkedések Arendtről, avagy a gonosztevőről és a gonoszlól” [Thoughts on Arendt, that is, on the Evil-Doer and Evil], *Ex Symposion*. 1999/26–27. Regarding the topic of evil, see: Mihály Vajda, “A rabszolgamorál gondolatatlansága, avagy hogyan működik a totális rendszer?” [The Thoughtlessness of Slave Morals, or How Do Totalitarian Regimes Work?] *Ex Symposion*, 1999/ 26–27.

²⁶ Arendt, op. cit., 304.

²⁷ Ibid., 315.

²⁸ Imre Kertész, *A kudarc* (Budapest: Magvető, 2000), 53.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 59.

³¹ Arendt, op. cit., 65.

³² Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness*. Trans. Tim Wilkinson (New York: Vintage–Random House, 2004), e-pub edition, 443–444.

³³ “At some point they fell silent, then, after a pause, old Fleischmann suddenly asked: “And what are your plans for the future?” I was mildly astonished, telling him I had not given it much thought. (...) “Before all else,” he declared, “you must put the horrors behind you.” Increasingly amazed, I asked, “Why should I?” “In order,” he replied, “to be able to live,” at which Uncle Fleischmann nodded and added, “Live freely,” at which the other old boy nodded and added, “One cannot start a new life under such a burden,” and I had to admit he did have a point. Except I didn’t quite understand how they could wish for something that was impossible, and indeed I made the comment that what had happened had happened, and anyway, when it came down to it, I could not give orders to my memory. I would only be able to start a new life, I ventured, if I were to be reborn or if some affliction, disease, or something of the sort were to affect my mind, which they surely didn’t wish on me, I hoped.” Ibid., 440.

³⁴ See the following contemporary reviews: Erzsébet Sinka, “Rémszürke napok. Kertész Imre: Sorstalanság [Frightful Grey Days. Imre Kertész: Fatelessness],” *Élet és Irodalom*, 1975/28. 10.: “(...) one of the main thoughts of the novel is the steps. The steps that somehow helped him through it all. Always one

step — just one more from morning till evening and then the next day. To avoid thinking of the unreachable only the next step — this is how — maybe — it was possible to survive it all. A rule? Not. Only the individual realisation that this “step” was something to hold onto, the minimum that always had to be done again and again.” And: Júlia Lenkei, “Kertész Imre: Sorstalanság,” *Kritika*, 1975/8, 30.: “He rejects to be seen as a victim, he emphasises the importance of individual steps contrasted to the type of remembering of his acquaintances. He refuses to see his fate as merely accidental but also denies that it is destined and “fate-like”, thus the title of the book. (...) Through the denial of being merely a victim and realising the importance of self-reliance and activity, he becomes an adult — an individual — and that is how the novel ends, too.”

³⁵ Kertész. *Fatelessness*, op. cit., 427.

³⁶ See Péter Szirák’s overview of the contemporary reception of *Fatelessness* and the analysis of the background that the novel preceded its era. In: Szirák, op. cit., 10.

³⁷ See also the op. cit. study by István Bibó’s with special focus on the chapter: “The reasons for Hungary’s moral failure” regarding the fact that the Hungarian population gradually got used to the persecution of Jews. In: Bibó, op. cit., 406–410., and: Gyurgyák, op. cit., 135–188.

³⁸ Kertész. *Fatelessness*, op. cit., 430.

³⁹ “Would you care to give an account of your experiences, young fellow?” I was somewhat dumbfounded, and replied that there was not a whole lot I could tell him that would be of much interest. He smiled a little and said, “Not me — the whole world.” Even more amazed, I asked, “But what about?” “The hell of the camps,” he replied, to which I remarked that I had nothing at all to say about that as I was not acquainted with hell and couldn’t even imagine what that was like. He assured me, however, that it was just a manner of speaking: “Can we imagine a concentration camp as anything but a hell?” he asked, and I replied, as I scratched a few circles with my heel in the dust under my feet, that everyone could think what they liked about it, but as far as I was concerned I could only imagine a concentration camp, since I was somewhat acquainted with what that was, but not hell.” *Ibid.*, 425–426.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 424.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 425–426.

⁴² See: Szirák, op. cit., 54, 41–42, and György Vári, “Esztétikum, Auschwitz, történefilozófia. Értelmezések az elmúlt századból” [Aesthetics, Auschwitz, Philosophy of History], *Sensus Füzetek* (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2002), 153–182.

⁴³ “Sors és sorstalanság. Csáki Judit beszélgetése Kertész Imrével” [Fate

and Fatelessness. Judit Csáki Interviewing Imre Kertész], *Kritika*, 1992/3, 25.

⁴⁴ “Concentration camp can exclusively be imagined as a literary text not as reality; not even — or maybe then the least — when we live in it.” In: Imre Kertész, *Gályanapló* [Galley Diary] (Budapest: Magvető, n. d.), 286. “The Holocaust may only be imagined through the power of aesthetical imagination.” In: Kertész, “Hosszú, sötét árnyék” [Long, Dark Shadow], *A száműzött nyelv* [The Language in Exile], op. cit., 62.

⁴⁵ Representatives of the other position — like Lang — claim that that the Holocaust cannot be mediated aesthetically solely with historical authenticity.

⁴⁶ “It is ironic that once an event is perceived without precedent, without adequate analogy, it would in itself become a kind of precedent for all that follows: a new figure against which subsequent experiences are measured and grasped.” In: James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust. Narrative and Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 99.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 132–133.

⁴⁸ Hayden White, “A történelmi cselekményesítés és az igazság problémája” [Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation], trans. Éva John, in *A történelem terhe* [The Burden of History], ed. Róbert Braun (Budapest: Osiris: 1997), 251–278.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁵⁰ See the following excerpt from an interview: “*Fatelessness* may even be called a linguistic critical work. It is not so much about the lager, rather than linguistic exclusion.” In: “Kertész Imrével beszélget Budai Katalin” [Imre Kertész Interviewed by Katalin Budai], *Magyar Napló*, 1991/14. 16.

⁵¹ Kertész, *Fatelessness*, op. cit., 149.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 17–18., highlights in italics by Anna Menyhért.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 28–29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵⁸ This is how the boy describes the shopkeeper from whom they buy the necessary equipment for the labour service: “On the whole, he was very tactful

and sympathetic in the way he spoke to us, always doing his best to avoid having to employ the term ‘labour service.’” Ibid., 20–21.

⁵⁹ Kertész, “A száműzött nyelv” [The Language in Exile], op. cit., 278.

⁶⁰ Kertész, *Fatelessness*, op. cit., 33.

⁶¹ Ibid., 38.

⁶² Ibid., 50.

⁶³ “Grasping my chin with his fingers, the uppers of which were covered in tufts of hair and the undersides slightly moist with sweat, he now tipped my face upward, and in a quiet, slightly trembling voice said the following: ‘Your father is preparing to set off on a long journey. Have you prayed for him?’” Ibid., 38.

⁶⁴ In an interesting way, several interpreters find Gyuri Köves emotionless, like György Spiró in his exploratory study of the novel in 1983. Cf. György Spiró, “Non habent sua fata” [Have Their Own Fate], *Magániktató* [Private Filing] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1985), 383. However, the excerpt below suggests that the boy is able to recognise real (without an ideological background and motivation) feelings: “What stayed with me as maybe the strangest experience of that entire evening was Grandfather’s sole act to draw attention to himself when he pressed his tiny, sharply defined bird’s head for no more than an instant, but really fiercely, almost crazily, to the breast of my father’s jacket. His entire body was racked by a spasm.” In: Kertész, *Fatelessness*, op. cit., 44.

⁶⁵ “‘I’m looking for Bandi Citrom,’ to which she too said, ‘He’s not home.’ She, though, took the line “Come back some other time; maybe in a few days,” but I noticed that the younger woman responded to that by slightly averting her head, in an odd, defensive, and yet somehow feeble movement, meanwhile raising the back of a hand to her mouth, as if she were seeking, perhaps, to suppress, stifle as it were, some remark or sound she was anxious to make.” Ibid., 421.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁶⁷ At the beginning of chapter three, Gyurka and the boys are made to get off the bus by the policeman and they are waiting in a customs post along the main road. The reader learns that the situation is worse than Gyurka imagines when it turns out that adults had also been taken to the building. However, the narrator does not supply this as a piece of information, he talks about what types of games the boys invent to spend the time and later incidentally mentions the adults: “After that I took a look at each of the grown-ups as they came in. They too had been rounded up by the policemen from the buses in just the same way as us. That, in fact, is how I realized that when he was not with us, he was out on the highway, engaged in the same pursuit as in the morning. One by one, there must have been seven or eight of them who were collected that way, all men.” Ibid., 81.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 128.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 233.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 376.

⁷¹ Ibid., 371.

⁷² Ibid., 146.

⁷³ Cf.: “*Fatelessness* is actually a coming of age novel, the story of a child-adult socialising to concentration camp as a normality...” In Sándor Radnóti, “Auschwitz mint szellemi életforma. Kertész Imre Kaddisáról” [Auschwitz as a Spiritual Mode of Life], *Holmi*, 1991/3. 373.

⁷⁴ Ágnes Heller, “A holocaust mint kultúra. Kertész Imre könyveiről” [The Holocaust as Culture. On Imre Kertész’s Books], in *Az idegen* [The Alien] (New York–Budapest–Jeruzsálem: Múlt és Jövő, 1970), 93.

⁷⁵ “Bántani akarom az olvasómat” [I Want to Hurt My Reader], Spiegel interview. Trans. Judit Tarnói. *Élet és Irodalom*, 24 May 1996. 5.

⁷⁶ Kertész. *Fatelessness*, op. cit., 110.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 205.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 294.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 450.

⁸⁰ Arendt, op. cit., 278.

⁸¹ See the quotation in note 38.

⁸² Bohoosh, the nurse does not let himself — for reasons of belonging to a common language and community — be taken away from the boy: he is fair and supports those in need equally: “I was all the more astonished when scarcely a minute later Bohoosh bustled in through the door, this time heading straight for me. From then on, his visits were meant for both of us. On one occasion he would bring a ration for each of us separately, on another just one in total, depending on what he could manage, I suppose, but in the latter case he never omitted a hand gesture to indicate that it was to be shared fraternally. (...) I think I came to understand these people, at least by and large. In light of all my experiences, piecing together the entire chain, yes, there could be no doubt, I knew it all too well myself, even if it was in a different form: in the final analysis, this too was just the selfsame factor, stubbornness.” Kertész. *Fatelessness*, op. cit., 387.

⁸³ Arendt, op. cit., 258.

⁸⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” *Prisms* (Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 19–34.

⁸⁵ Kertész, “Hosszú, sötét árnyék” [Long, Dark Shadow], op. cit., 61.

⁸⁶ Tamás Gábor Molnár’ study of *Fatelessness* interprets the relationship between the text, narrator and the Holocaust similarly: “the text cannot be about Auschwitz as with the withdrawal of the narrating subject, the writer makes Auschwitz speak. Thus, the novel is mainly about talking about and with Auschwitz.” Gábor Tamás Molnár, “Fikcióalkotás és történelemszemlélet. Kertész Imre: Sorstalanság” [Creating Fiction and Approaching History], *Alföld*. 1996/8: 69.