

# TRADITION AND SUBVERSION IN IMRE KERTÉSZ'S WORK

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This article offers a complement to previous readings of Kertész's Nobel-Prize winning novel *Fateless* and his other significant fiction *The Failure*. While previous critics of these key texts often read Kertész's representation of the Holocaust experience in the context of twentieth century European history or that of his personal biography, and *The Failure* in the context of the author's own experience of authorship in Hungary in the 1970s and 1980s, this essay argues for his indebtedness to the classic nineteenth century topos and genre of the *Bildungsroman* and to the genre of *Künstlerroman*. While in *Fateless*, the structural elements of the plot redeploy the elements of the *Bildungsroman*, its fundamental indebtedness to the modernist concept of the contingency of plot, action and character, and the essentially post-modernist contention about the futility of knowledge display a degree of tension in the text. *The Failure* also explores the well-known late-nineteenth century topos of the *Künstlerroman* and the representation of literary authorship. Studies about Kertész's work, the article suggests, could be further expanded by exploring the relationship between Kertész's work and different Hungarian literary traditions.

**Keywords:** *Fateless*, *The Failure*, *Bildungsroman*, *Künstlerroman*, subjectivity, contingency

When Imre Kertész was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 2002, it was not only European and American readers who received the news with tumultuous interest. Although twelve of his books had already been published, Kertész's name was unfamiliar to many Hungarian readers as well, and it was even rumoured that he lived in, or had moved to, Germany. Since then his work and his life have both received considerable attention. His personal experience paralleled his particular interest in the Holocaust as a historical and metaphysical fact, as well as a statement on history. This process of reading a life and its letters as mutually revelatory sets of information have often led readers to think that finding the man – the historically situated subject – behind the work is of paramount significance.

Indeed, if one considers Kertész's three most important works, *Fateless* (1975), *Khaddish for a Child Not Born* (1990), and *The Failure* (1998), it is more than tempting to read them as autobiographical fiction, and the correspondence between well-known biographical details and the fiction of life is striking. The author was born into a secular Jewish family just as his main hero Köves; he was just as much the survivor of the Holocaust as Köves and similar protagonists; and Imre Kertész was just as much attempting to survive on the most meagre benefits of literary authorship as the Old Man, the hero of *The Failure*.<sup>1</sup> Yet, at the same time, it is worth considering the advice of Nancy K. Miller, who warns us of the dangers of the direct and uncomplicated identification between autobiographical hero and fictional character. "Despite the identity between the 'I' of the authorship and the 'I' of narrative, and the pacts of sincerity, reading these lives (of literary authors) is like shaking hands with gloves on."<sup>2</sup> If this warning is particularly appropriate for authors of autobiographies, then the same warning should be applied to reading fiction that draws upon autobiographical elements and models.

*Fateless*, Kertész's first work to attract serious critical attention, written in 1973, and not published for another two years, can be considered as a fictionalised autobiography. Yet, at the same time, it is also rooted in the *Bildungsroman* tradition since it very self-consciously deploys the narrative paradigm and plot devices invented in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, while simultaneously sharing the modern concepts of subjectivity and contingency, testing whether and how the *Bildungsroman* can be deployed to reflect the twentieth-century historical experience and modernist notions of causality and the self. *The failure*, a novel written in 1988 on the other hand provides another generic experiment, the deployment of the European tradition of the *Künstlerroman*. Both of these experiments allow Kertész to engage with Hungarian literary traditions, although neither of these genres have a long history in Hungarian prose. The novel of development is practically non-existent, while the *Künstlerroman* kind of narratives occur in twentieth-century literary autobiographies. But the very interest in those genres, and the experimentation of inventing them and testing their applicability, singles out Kertész as an innovator of Hungarian fiction.

Critical discussions of the long tradition of the *Bildungsroman* abound, yet most critics agree about the textbook characteristics of the genre. As Peterson summarises the features of the characteristically *male Bildungsroman* in the nineteenth-century realistic tradition, *Bildungsromane* commonly centre around a young hero's attempt at finding a place in the world, whether "that be through accommodation, rebellion, or withdrawal".<sup>3</sup> This "symbolic form of modernity", as Moretti points out, focuses upon the individual hero's social mobility (5); "apprenticeship". It is an "uncertain exploration of social space" (4) through travel, adventure, and labour, finally, and most commonly arriving at the motive of homecoming, thereby indicating the hero's reintegration into their larger or

smaller society.<sup>4</sup> Most often the hero's homecoming allows the refashioning of a social structure, which now accommodates the hero. This structure is different from the original one; nevertheless, its firmness is unquestioned.

Thematically and structurally Kertész's indebtedness to this tradition is obvious. The novel follows the life of a fourteen-year old hero, Köves for a year in a diachronic way. The protagonist faithfully follows the prescribed learning process of gradual socialisation and accommodation to external conditions, and the process is enabled by journey and labour. Köves' life follows the characteristic spatial trajectory of moving out of the family of origin and into the larger community. The boy, having grown up in a secular Jewish family in the early 1940s, is taken to forced labour in a factory, and then to a number of concentration camps, including Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Zeitz, where he subsequently experiences all the conditions and humiliations well-known from Holocaust narratives: inhuman and physically torturing labour, hunger, lack of sleep and lice. These physical circumstances provide both the impetus and the site for *Bildung*.

The trial and opportunity motives, normally taken to test the hero's development, become more pronounced in the second half of the narrative, when Köves's interaction with his environment becomes even more intensive. Already made aware of the existence of the gas chambers and the terrible purpose of the concentration camp, Köves becomes gradually drawn into the plot of the concentration camp. He no longer remains a distant observer of suffering, and his physical survival is increasingly threatened. He becomes the victim of atrocities: he is slapped on the face (165) for no apparent reason and subsequently becomes ill with a disease that could be considered as life-threatening under his circumstances.

Simultaneously with the increase of trial and opportunity, the process of acquiring knowledge also becomes more intensive, and he learns of survival skills. Indeed, as Köves declares, "I can state that certain things can be understood in a concentration camp only" (207). In this process his encounters with other "subjectivities" are crucial: learning is mainly enabled by his patron figure Bandi, Köves's companion in interpretation. Bandi teaches him a set of practical, physical and mental survival skills such as the rules of keeping clean, queuing up for food, as well as the mental and psychological habits of regularity (200). Nonetheless important, Köves considers his own position in relation to Hungarians as well as to Jews. Bandi Citrom thinks of the times spent in the Hungarian army with nostalgia, while his reservations are rooted primarily in his encounter with a Hungarian policeman (178), while Köves's reservations increase with time.

Not less significantly, he gains familiarity with his own Jewishness, a fact that is also facilitated by the help of other "subjectivities." Having been brought up in a secular Jewish family, he first learns about his own Jewishness through his father's deportation and from Uncle Lajos's monologues about the need for "sticking together." Nevertheless, his ambivalence concerning Jews is well-established.

In the camp the rabbi's monologues leave him with dissatisfaction because "he was unable to advise us on what to do" (85). This is also blatantly made clear in his encounter with the 'fins', or Orthodox Jews, in the camp (99), whom he regards not with personal affinity but with a sense of difference from himself. This is due not only to their loudly expressed communality and religious practices, which were alien to his secular upbringing, but also because of their different language. Indeed, once the beard of the rabbi is shaven off, he appears less "unusual" (124); and his second encounter with Orthodox Jews from Riga also suggests a distinct sense of difference from them (175). Nevertheless, he feels an increasing affinity with being a Jew, as he comes close to regretting his inability to say the Khaddish (204).

The return to Budapest, indeed, is not any different from the motives of return in traditional *Bildungsroman* narratives. "Rootless heroes" and "inhospitable environments" (231) are crucial sites of the later *Bildungsroman*, and the very motive of homecoming is commonly a point of disappointment for the *Bildungsroman* hero, and certainly a point of closure for the English one because it indicates the point of closure and the restructuring of social, or rather domestic relations, along with the assertion of the importance of structures. For Kertész's protagonist the homecoming equals disappointment: not only because of his own inability to communicate his experience, and therefore to tame it into ready-made narratives, but also because of the vast difference between his cognitive structure and that of his environment.

While the novel's emplotment recalls the nineteenth-century pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, Imre Kertész's novel is simultaneously strongly rooted in modernist or existentialist concepts of subjectivity, of isolation and contingency. The very difference of Kertész's narrative from the realistic literary tradition that created and accommodated the *Bildungsroman* was pointed out by contemporary critics, who although acknowledging the unique nature of Kertész's work, often objected to the non-mimetic representation of the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> Köves personally does not experience the gas chambers and only knows about them. Due to his lack of personal familiarity with that most potent symbol of the concentration camps, he is left as a somewhat unreliable witness in the eyes of the survivors of the siege of Budapest. His exchange with a complete stranger underlines the dilemma.

"Nevertheless", he continued with an expression indicating a desire to set the world right and to clarify things, "you nevertheless, did not see any evidence of them." And I had to acknowledge that I had not. To which he remarked, "I see" (307).

One of the aspects of the modern self can be inferred from its difference from the traditional nineteenth-century concept of subjectivity. Moretti defines the subjectivity of the *Bildungsroman* hero as the pre-Freudian, unfragmented self, which is "the undisputable centre of its own structure" (11). The two driving forces be-

hind the self's development are the two equally important, yet conflicting cultural imperatives: the impetus of self-determination and the "equally imperious demands of socialisation" (15), implying that *Bildung* is not only a reactive process of accommodation, but it is an active negotiation between two, simultaneous and conflicting cultural imperatives, and this negotiation is performed by human agency. For a modernist subject, the very efficacy of human agency is more questionable. In Köves's position, the problem is not only the absence of what Radnoti terms as "quintessential European values", or rather liberal humanist values, in the concentration camp – to which it would be both futile and detrimental to acculturate himself – but the very fact that human agency in the inhuman world of the camp is minimal.<sup>6</sup> The nature and limits of his agency are indeed discussed at great length by young Köves on pages 196–205. Escape from the situation, as he suggests, can be threefold: a withdrawal into the world of imagination, which draws him into the realm of exotic trips and to domestic peace at home; an escape into hiding within the concentration camp by sleeping; and finally the most dangerous method of which he saw only one example: running away from the concentration camp. The only occurrence of which leads to the fugitive's execution, and so the concentration camp can be interpreted as the paradigmatic site of the modern condition.

Contingency of plot, action and character are also characteristics of modernism, and the contingency of Kertész's plot has been noted by critics who emphasised the essentially picaresque nature of action, where the temporal coincidence of characters being at the wrong place at the wrong time move the action forward.<sup>7</sup> This applies to Köves, who falls captive after leaving for work "as usual" (46) and to some of the supporting characters such as the "funny little man", who also experienced the same coincidence. In order to keep to the prescribed rules of staying in his own house the man gets on a bus, which eventually takes him to the toll office. This will become the starting point of his journey to Auschwitz; and the captives' release from imprisonment also seems unforeseen and unpredictable to the denizens of the camp. Not only events coincide but also, at least initially, Köves's Jewish identification appears to be more coincidence rather than fate. As it transpires from the conversation with the girl next door, who understands her Jewishness as given, Köves at length argues that his Jewishness is just a question of accident and uses the example of Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* to prove the concept of uncertainty.

Concomitant with the above condition is an essentially isolated concept of the self, which is also rooted in modernist concerns. Unlike in traditional realistic narratives, where social relations appear as relations between individuals, "in the late *Bildungsroman* social institutions began to appear as the business bureaucracy of America, the Church of Portrait, and above the School of Mann and Musil".<sup>8</sup> In Kertész's world Köves appears significantly to spend his life in a way that lacks

essential relatedness. In all of his communities, whether family or camp, he remains an isolated subjectivity. Köves's starting point is that of the emotional outsider in his family of origin, whose sincere yet cold response to his father's deportation is something most resembling reassured satisfaction of having given him a nice time, and Uncle Vili's efforts to draw him into a community of Jewishness are also met with scepticism. During the second, the concentration camp based, period of his life, although appreciating individual kindness and sharing anecdotes about home and prisoners (186), Köves does not show any sense of any communality with others. The sense of dissociation is also made apparent by the fact that very few characters have proper names, and most of these proper names are misunderstood by him. Isolation rather increases than decreases, and his only mate Bandi's efforts at looking after him meet with disapproval. "I told him on a hundred occasions that his patronising is unacceptable to me; I want to be left alone" (218). And his only desire is to reject solidarity, only to maintain his isolation, leading to an escape into illness.

From the perspective of isolation, it is particularly useful to consider two further factors. One is his very concept of his own Jewishness. Initially, he appears to regard this aspect of identity as essentially external. This sense of difference is further reinforced by his own sporadic comments on Orthodox Jews he encounters in the camps. Initially, he finds them "unusual", and the very difference between secular Jews such as himself and Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Jewry is keenly felt by both him and the Yiddish speakers. Although there is a slight identification of himself and Jewish identity towards the end of the novel, when he regrets not being able to say the Khaddish for the captured and hanged fugitives, this self-identification remains problematic. His Jewish credentials become questioned by people at home, who, on hearing that he did not actually see the gas chambers, respond to his experiences with doubts.

For Kertész, therefore, the question of writing a *Bildungsroman* is fraught with difficulty. The traditional *Bildungsroman* plot is driven by assumptions about the linearity of "historical", "out there" history, as well as about the linear progression of individual development which is served by work. This linear plot also generates meanings about the value of *Bildung*. In Kertész's work the progressivity of individual development is questioned, and this is not only because of the lack of inherent values in the "school of life" (the concentration camp) but also by the essential lack of belief in the coherence of the character. Contingency and alienation are the fundamental characteristics of character and human condition, and the index of the failure of the process of *Bildung* is all the more obvious in the closure of the novel. Not only adjustment is impossible, but the question is whether and how Köves, returning home, can apply the skills and identities acquired in the camp, or how indeed, psychological survival is possible for him? For Köves, the problem

is not so much a postmodern contention about the impossibility of knowledge, but the very futility of knowledge – knowledge of skills and knowledge of self.

While the genre and the narratives of the *Bildungsroman* undoubtedly influence the narrative models of Kertész's work, another, arguably similarly autobiographical novel, *The Failure* provides a tentative analysis of literary authorship. Indeed, just about all of Kertész's male heroes are men of letters. The hero of *Fateless*, although not a professional writer, does in effect provide a detailed, though undated, diary of his experience. The hero of *The Khaddish* is a lecturer and writer, who also discusses the genesis of his authorship. Most characters of *The Failure* (1988) are also situated at the different segments of the literary profession. It is a twin-novel in the modernist tradition. Its first section describes and ageing writer and translator, struggling with the very labour of writing as well as with the limited material circumstances forced upon literary workers by the late Kádár-regime, while he is rereading his own texts and critical reflections about his literary submissions of some twenty years before. The second half of the novel concerns the return of a literary author into "normal" and "literary" life after what might be presumed as internal deportation within Hungary in the 1950s. Indeed, if one reads Kertész's work through in its entirety, one discovers that just about all the periods of post-1940 Hungarian history are represented, often anecdotically, in his work.

While the concern with authorship is a relatively underrepresented theme in Hungarian writing, its development in other nineteenth-century literatures is well known. As Mary Poovey points out, the standard romantic image of literary authorship derives from the eighteenth-century representations of the gentleman scholar, and its apotheosis is Carlyle's discussion of "The Hero as Poet" (1840).<sup>9</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century the whole range of the economies of literary authorship and its generic and social implications gained further exposure. This was best exemplified by Gissing's sustained analysis of the world of letters in *New Grub Street*; and in Gissing's world the *par excellence* artist is an autonomous creator. Here we find Reardon, a novelist who is physically and economically defeated by an increasingly commercialised literary marketplace. This character is sharply contrasted with Milvain, the materialistic tradesman of letters and striver, who self-consciously chooses the vulgar market for his literary commodity and who ends up victorious both in personal terms and in terms of finance.

Kertész's *Failure* is blatantly indebted to an essentially post-romantic tradition of representing the artist and also questions the potential of professionalizing authorship, which looms large in the work. The hero of its first, "metafictional", part is a translator, unofficial literary critic, and novelist, attempting to write a novel, while the second part of the novel also concerns the career of another literary author, Köves, who is not only a novelist and author of comedies but also a paid scribe for a senior civil servant as well as the author of political communications.

The head of personnel at Köves's ministry is a secret poet (306). Although it is difficult to decide how many novels *The Failure* contains (it is the title of the old man's story in the first novel, and it is also the title of the novel written by the main character of the second novel), these narratives share the same concern with the nature of authorship. Indeed, they analyse the nature of authorship from precisely the same ground.

Many of the characteristics of authorship in the novel share the well-known late nineteenth-century formulations on its nature. This is true in terms of the social and sociological prerequisites of writing novels, as well as the meaning of the act of publication. At the same time, it also shares modernist assumptions about the complicated relationship between the subject of the writing and the act of writing. The romantic image of literary authorship remained resilient. It defined authorship as an essentially individualistic act, whose product emanates from the author's genius, and whose primary condition is isolation. It also provided a very set hierarchy of literary genres, privileging the novel and poetry and appreciating popular genres to a lesser degree.

This vision is particularly effectively portrayed, carried on, and tested by Kertész's work. The old man and the hero of the second narrative share a consensus about the inherent, essentially modernist, hierarchy of literary genres. Journalism "is a lie, or at least silly irresponsibility" (180), and the moral meaning of journalism is made explicit by the fact that Köves embarks upon this trade after his release from internal deportation. Translation is despised and only seen as a commercial activity, and writing comedies is similarly a question of earning a livelihood. The old man could have written "more useful things, for instance, comedies" (86), and comedies are also targeted as the chief literary means for monetary gain by Sziklai and Köves, two characters in the second part. Most obviously the literary genre privileged by all of them is poetry (306) and even more importantly fiction.

The practice of writing the novel appears an essentially isolated and highly individualistic and expressive act. This process requires solitude, "the old man stood in front of the filing cabinet and stood there thinking" (14), while for Köves the sociability of the café provides the right venue for light comedies (366). The very process of writing is slow and painful. As the old man recollects, "I started to write a novel. I wrote and then I tore it up, I rewrote it and then I tore it up again" (30) and subsequently, "authorship becomes 'slavery' and 'captivity'" (62). The nature of this slow, painful and halting process, is summarised in the following quotation:

He has already written many books; first and foremost, his first book he worked on that book for a good decade (then, writing books was not his profession, therefore he wrote that book out of caprice). The book was then published under rather adverse circumstances, after

two years, for his second book, four years were already sufficient, and subsequently, he spent writing his books the time that was absolutely necessary (18).

Not only is the process of writing painful and halting but it is also an essentially self-oriented act. Its origins are located in nature rather than in culture, "I could possibly not have imagined any activity for myself" (78). It does draw upon personal experience, as is demonstrated by the correlation between the old man's experience of writing and rejection and the subject matter of the second novel as well as the "poem in prose" written by the chief of staff at the ministry, which narrates a real event in the history of the ministry.

The ultimate purpose of the writing of the novel is also defined in the spirit of high modernism. Although its original purpose is publication – "I would have written my novels in order to get them into editorial offices" (65) –, this purpose of publication gradually erodes in the novel. At some places, the idea of writing a novel "the original purpose of my enterprise (...) has been lost"; and Köves elsewhere suggests that "he wrote his novel the same way as he would have cast himself out of an aeroplane as though it had been the only way to survive" (141), indicating that the objective of writing is essentially an act of understanding and interpretation of the self.

Literary genius, as it appears, therefore, is a condition rather than the question of training and effect or action. Training, in fact, is openly rejected by the author. Oddly, although self-reflexivity and self-analysis are central issues, the text contains no information about the intellectual or literary formation of the author. While his career as a translator of fiction explicitly forces him to examine the nature of the trade by other authors, he flatly refuses to appreciate the piece of work that was written driven by the self-conscious mastery of prose. He also regards the professionalization with a high degree of ambivalence. Indeed, in order to consider professionalization in literature, it is necessary to consider Harold Perkin's definition of professionalism in *The Rise of Professional Society*. As he argues, a professional society is "one structured around career hierarchies rather than classes, one in which people find their place according to trained expertise and the service they provide rather than possession or lack of inherited wealth or acquired capital".<sup>10</sup> The definition of professionalism in contrast with "inherited wealth" for authors in the Kádár regime is obviously problematic. Yet the very notion of professionalism as training and effect – the professional's work is to a social end – is eminently applicable. Nevertheless, Kertész's hero blatantly refuses any self-conscious identification with professionalism, "After all, I have written a novel. Although I could possibly not have imagined any other activity for myself, I never considered it to be my profession" (78).

Kertész's definition of writing locates the process in the self, originating from the self, and targeting the self. After gradually diminishing the process of publica-

tion, along with this process, there is one particularly important perspective that allows for the application of the notion of romantic genius. Partly, this difference consists in an essential redefinition of art. For most nineteenth-century narratives the notions of modernist theories of writing – the very concept of a writing that complicates the uncomplicated relationship between the author as the origin of meaning and that emphasises the autonomous nature of literary creation, “My labour, of writing novels, in reality consists of nothing else than the consistent deliberate shrinking of my own experience” (84) – only hindered the process of work

I wanted to transmit experience – otherwise, I would not have written a novel. To transmit, in my own way, according to my own ideas, to transmit the material possible for myself, my material, myself, ...  
But I did not think of one thing: that we cannot mediate ourselves to ourselves (85).

Yet this exploration – the ability of language to represent reality – is not systematically explored by any of his characters.

The novel *The Failure*, indeed, can be considered as one example of a specular autobiography, to adapt Janice Carlisle’s phrase, which creates an autobiographical self by mirroring the life of another. Kertész, indeed, has never written his own autobiography. One might argue that this would be entirely unnecessary, given the deeply autobiographical nature of his fiction, and in any event the succession of novels reveals everything that there is to know about Kertész, his life, and his ideas on writing. Yet, this interest in life and in ideas on writing also raises pertinent questions about Kertész and literary traditions. While now at least two generations of critics have been interested in establishing Kertész’s position on the holocaust and the nature of language and representation, oddly limited attention has been paid to Kertész the artist rather than Kertész the thinker, and even less attention has been paid to him as the reader and explorer of current and past Hungarian literary tradition – a task unlikely to be resolved by critics unfamiliar with this literature. The Kertész studies, indeed, have yielded at least three recent volumes – one a monograph and two volumes of studies – yet a literary historical reading, critical narratives that focus upon Kertész’s engagement with Hungarian and European literary traditions, as well as the influence of his work in the translation industry still remain tasks for the future.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kertész, Imre. *Sorstalanság*. Budapest: Magvető, n.d. 17th edition; Kertész, Imre: *A kudarc*. Budapest: Magvető, n.d. 8th edition. The translations are mine.
- <sup>2</sup> Cited by Joanne Shattock, in Vincent Newey and Philip Shaw (eds), *Mortal Pages, Literary Lives: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Autobiography*. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996, 141.
- <sup>3</sup> Linda Peterson. "The Female Bildungsroman: Tradition and Subversion in Oliphant's fiction", in D. J. Trela, *Margaret Oliphant: The Gentle Subversive*. Cranbury–London: Associated University Press, 1995, 66.
- <sup>4</sup> Franco Moretti. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987.
- <sup>5</sup> Molnár, Tamás. "Fikcióalkotás és történelemszemlélet. Kertész Imre: *Sorstalanság*". *Alföld*, 1996/8, 57–71. Cited by Péter Szirák. *Kertész Imre*. Bratislava: Kalligram, 2003, 14.
- <sup>6</sup> Szirák, *op. cit.* 25.
- <sup>7</sup> Szirák, *op. cit.* 20.
- <sup>8</sup> Moretti, *op. cit.* 230.
- <sup>9</sup> Mary Poovey. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender*. London: Virago Press, 1989, 102–103.
- <sup>10</sup> Harold Perkin. *The Rise of Professional Society*. New York: Routledge, 1990, 35.